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How do we engage reluctant post-16 learners? Some lessons for the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA)

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Background

The policy commitment to ensuring that all young people remain in some form of accredited education or training to the age of 17 by 2013, and to the age of 18 by 2015, brings with it the responsibility to tackle barriers to participation and restriction on choice, which currently inhibit some young people's participation and retention in post-16 learning/training. In particular, there is a need to put in place strategies which ensure that education and training options are available, accessible and attractive to two groups of young people who do not currently participate in any formally recognised post-16 education and training provision: namely young people who are classified as not in education, employment or training (NEET) and young people in jobs without training (JWT). In essence, identifying and eradicating recognised barriers to learning, through initiatives such as offering financial incentives and support, flexible, diverse and accessible learning options, and assistance with transport and equipment costs, as well as offering adequate levels of mentoring and guidance to specific groups of learners, underpin the successful delivery of the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) agenda.

Research Questions

This paper will draw on the findings from a large-scale, Department for Schools and Families (DCSF) funded, national evaluation of two policy initiatives aimed at the NEET and JWT groups. Activity Agreements (AA) have been piloted since 2006, with a view to supporting and encouraging disengaged 16-17 year olds back into learning in eight areas of England. Learning Agreement Pilots (LAP) were introduced from April 2006 for a three-year period. They were targeted at 16-17 year olds in jobs without training in eight areas, in order to increase access to training options for this group. Young people (and in some areas, parents) were offered a weekly allowance in return for agreeing to a plan of activities and completing activities to integrate them back into learning. In addition, in some pilot areas, young people received bonus payments in recognition of their achievements, and financial incentives were paid to employers in some LAP areas. A number of variants of AA and LAP were piloted, with a view to identifying the most successful models.

Methods

The evaluation had three strands:

- a quantitative element, using surveys of young people in both pilot and control areas, to measure the impact of the initiatives. The combined sample size comprised 15,500 respondents;
- a programme theory element, focusing on testing some key aspects of the policies, in order to identify what worked, what did not and the reasons for this; and
- a process evaluation, which examined the ways in which the pilots had been set up and delivered and the main issues associated with their implementation.

Frame

To test the importance of financial incentives, individualised learning plans and intensive support packages in re-engaging young people with learning.

Research findings

The research confirmed that the NEET and JWT groups are not homogeneous populations and are difficult to identify, track and engage in research activity. The importance attached to being in receipt of an allowance while learning varied between the NEET and JWT groups. Both groups attached considerable importance to the intensive support that they received as part of their programme. A crucial lesson from the implementation of LAP was the need for continued support to be given to young people in employment. It was recognised that young people who enter the labour market at 16/17 should be entitled to the same level of guidance and support as that which is afforded to young people who remain in full-time learning, undertake Apprenticeships or become NEET.

The evaluation also highlighted that, while the initiatives had developed new ways to access and deliver provision which offered a much greater focus on meeting the needs of individual learners, there is still a long way to go. The existing standard post-16 offer will not meet the needs of the whole population of learners, post-2013, nor will all young people be willing to participate and succeed in existing mainstream education and training provision. When developing RPA plans, consideration needs to be given to providing a greater degree of flexibility within the qualification framework, in order to present a more attractive offer. Furthermore, providers, most notably colleges, should be required to adapt their delivery arrangements to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse cohort of learners.