

SKILLS IN ENGLAND SEMINAR
THE TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO WORK

Commonwealth Club, London
16 January 2008

The seminar

For many young people the choices they make at the end of their compulsory schooling will shape their future life-course. The options available to young people are essentially those of entering into: (a) employment; (b) a training course; (c) continuing in education. These are not mutually exclusive options and within each there are a wide range of choices available. Hence the importance accorded to information, advice and guidance in national skills policy. There is also the danger that young people will not enter into employment, education, or training - the so-called NEETs – and so begin a possible descent into social exclusion. These issues are all addressed in *Skills in England 2007*, the Learning and Skills Council's (LSC) flagship publication that summarises the latest research evidence on the country's skill needs.

Given the vital importance, both to the individual and the economy as a whole, of the decisions young people make at this formative point in their lives, the LSC hosted a seminar to explore the options available to young people and the role of policy in encouraging positive outcomes. The emphasis was very much upon the vocational pathway and the importance of ensuring that young people do not fail to make, eventually, a successful transition from school into work.

A number of speakers addressed these issues. Professor Ewart Keep (SKOPE, University of Cardiff), chaired the seminar and gave a presentation on the value of apprenticeship training, and Professor Paul Ryan (Kings College, University of London) provided an international perspective to the discussion of apprenticeship training. Terence Hogarth (IER, University of Warwick) gave a synopsis of *Skills in England's* evidence on the transition from school to work. Tim Mitchell (Chief Executive, Positive Steps Oldham) and Jon Coles (Department for Children, Families, and Schools), respectively, gave presentations on recent successes in getting young people at risk of social exclusion into employment, education, or training, while David Scott (Principal of All Saints College) identified successful approaches to ensuring young people are equipped with the skills and attitudes to work that will serve them well in disadvantaged areas. Jo Robbins (VT Group plc) summarised the attributes employers look for in young people if they are to provide them with training and employment. Finally, Ruth Bullen (Director of Young People's Learning, LSC), provided a review of the discussion.

The transition from school to work

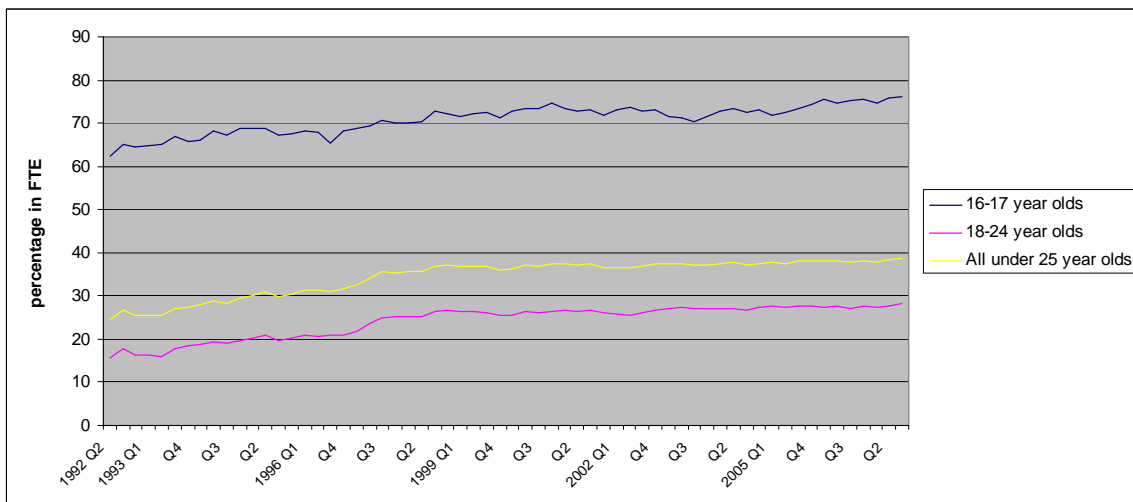
The transition from school to work has been elongated. Whereas many pupils once entered the labour market upon completion of their compulsory education, for the majority of pupils this has now been deferred until after they have completed a period of further education or training. *Figure 1* shows the percentage of young people continuing in full-time education which suggests increased investments being made in the stock of human capital over time.

Whilst deferring the transition from education to school, or mediating it through various training programmes such as Apprenticeship, is potentially beneficial to the economy in that, other things being equal, young people are becoming more skilled, there are two major issues with which policy makers are currently grappling:

- i. the relative lack of attractiveness of vocational education and training to young people; and
- ii. the number of young people neither in employment, education or training.

Each of these was addressed in detail in the seminar.

Figure 1: Percentage of young people in full-time education (1992-2007)



The vocational pathway

In many countries across the EU the vocational pathway at the end of compulsory schooling is a relatively unattractive one to young people. This is true of the UK where young people much prefer to study towards academic rather than vocational qualifications in their post-compulsory education. The challenge is to raise the status of the vocational pathway – including programmes such as Apprenticeship - nearer to that of the academic one so that its attractiveness to young people is increased.

Historically, Apprenticeships have been appealing to relatively well qualified young people and, for the country as a whole, an important source of intermediate level skills. In industries such as Engineering and Construction, for example, the combination of sound theoretical training with hands-on practical experience meant that Apprenticeships proved popular for young people and employers alike.

But times have moved on. The demand for apprentices in those industries traditionally associated with Apprenticeships has been in decline due to structural changes in the economy, and the expansion of higher education has meant that many young people who have the qualifications necessary to gain entry into one of the more traditional Apprenticeships choose instead the academic pathway with possible entry into university.

From a policy perspective this poses a challenge: how to transfer the concept of Apprenticeship training to industries with which it has not been historically associated – principally the service sector – and achieve, at the same time, buy-in from employers. The solution has been to make Apprenticeship much more flexible such that it more readily suits employer demand. Consequently the structure and content of, say, an Engineering Apprenticeship today is much different to that in, for instance, Retailing (see Table 1).

Table 1: Content of Apprentices' Activities (2005)

Sector	% 'no off-the-job training'	Average hours per week			
		Off-Job-training	On-job-training	Work	Total
Engineering	18	10	16	15	41
Construction	24	8	21	11	40
Business Admin	41	3	5	28	36
Hospitality	58	2	8	29	39
Retailing	79	1	5	28	34

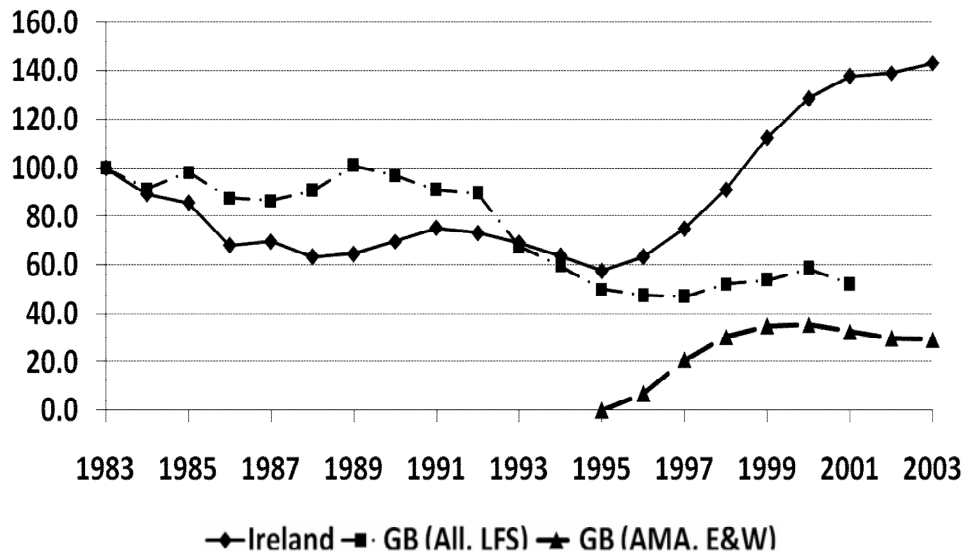
Source: Ullman and Deakin (2005) Figure 3.1

Whilst the flexible approach has been important to securing employer participation especially in new sectors, it does beg questions as to whether the essential properties traditionally associated with Apprenticeship training have been retained. For example, much Apprenticeship training is now at Level 2 whereas in the past it has been associated more with Level 3.

In Europe, Apprenticeship tends to be statutorily defined, affords much less flexibility than the UK system with respect to content and structure, and in countries such as Germany and Denmark has relatively high participation rates. This suggests a paradox. Although employers have much less influence over the content and structure of Apprenticeships in Germany, for example, they are much more willing participate. In this context the example of Ireland is interesting. Until the mid-1990s Ireland operated an Apprenticeship model much like the UK but then decided to move to a more continental based system that statutorily specifies the content and structure of all publicly funded Apprenticeships. Following the change participation in Apprenticeships rose, suggesting that employers prefer a rigorous training regime which they can buy into (*see Figure 2*). That said, the growth in Apprenticeship training in Ireland coincided with a substantial growth in the economy.

Work-based learning lies at the heart of Apprenticeships and persuading employers to participate in Apprenticeships and provide a structured programme of training has proved difficult. There are a number of initiatives that are looking to tackle this issue, such as providing Apprenticeships *via* Train to Gain. Employers, however, are looking for specific qualities in young people, not least their attitude to work and commitment to learning. Young people without these attributes are unlikely to persuade employers providing high quality Apprenticeships to take them on. Hence the importance of schools and colleges in inculcating these values in their students through a range of measures that provide the education, encouragement, and incentives – delivered through, for example, projects that meet the individual needs of students – so that they acquire the personal attributes and skills that will serve them well in the labour market.

Figure 2: Participation in Apprenticeship



Apprenticeships may be at a crossroads. With the introduction of Diplomas, and the continued existence of a relatively strong academic pathway, what does the future hold in store for the status and attractiveness of Apprenticeships to young people?

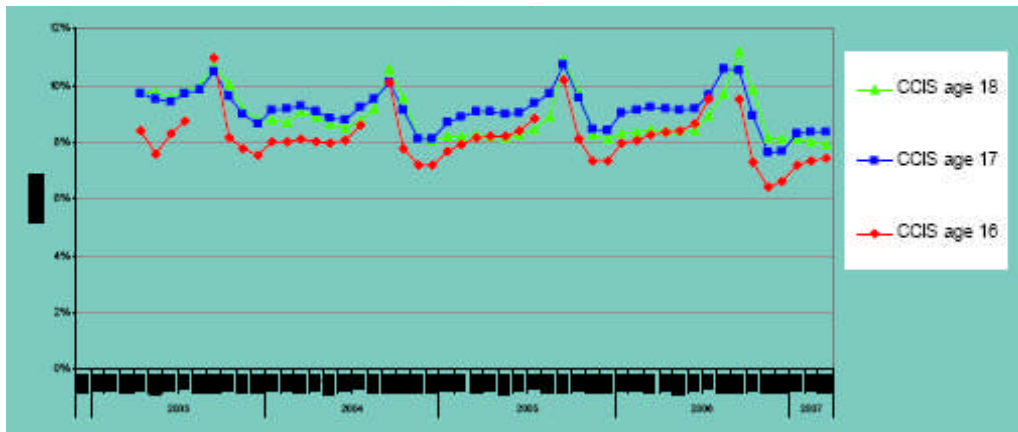
Combating social exclusion amongst young people

For many young people at the end of their compulsory schooling the choice is between education, training, or employment, or some mix of these. As the data in *Figure 1* reveal there has been a growth in the numbers deciding to stay on in full-time education and the unemployment rate amongst young people is now low compared to the rates that prevailed, for example, in the 1970s and 1980s.

Nevertheless, every year there is a relatively large number of young people leaving school who fail to continue in learning or enter employment. Often the roots of this are deep-seated and relate to non-attendance in the final years of schooling, criminal activity, drug or alcohol abuse, and so forth. Their failure to successfully make a transition from school into either continued learning or employment can mark the beginning of a descent into social exclusion or worse. In fact, a relatively large number of young people who fall into the NEET category are dead ten years later because they enter a nefarious lifestyle.

The evidence reveals that public agencies are having a degree of success in tackling this problem. There is a clear pattern in the statistics. Every year, in summer, a large number of 16/17 year olds initially fail to obtain a place in learning or a job but then this falls away in autumn as some find jobs or a learning place, but picks up again only slightly during winter (see *Figure 3*). The long-term trend, however, is downwards in part because of the *September Guarantee* that provides every person completing their compulsory education with an education or training place.

Figure 3: Number of young people neither in employment, education or training
(% 16, 17 and 18 year olds NEET – CCIS)



Combating social exclusion amongst young people has been achieved through a two-pronged approach:

- inculcating the importance of work in school; and
- a multi-faceted approach to tackling social exclusion once it arises.

As noted above, schools, especially in more deprived areas, are often innovative in their approaches to preparing people for work in the local economy by trying to nurture entrepreneurship amongst pupils and instilling in them the values necessary to sustain them in employment. This relates not only to the acquisition of skills but possessing an appropriate attitude towards work – including enthusiasm and commitment - that will impress employers, particularly as they sometimes criticise the work-readiness of young people with respect to their attitude rather than their capability.

If the values instilled in school do not lead to young people entering employment, education, or training, what can be done? The evidence suggests that tackling this problem requires a multi-dimensional approach that tackles each of the multiple problems that might be affecting a young person simultaneously (such as their propensity to engage in criminality, their housing problems, drug abuse issues, *etc.*). Where various agencies have been brought together into one organisation, such as Positive Steps in Oldham, this can show rewarding results.

Conclusion

The transition from school to work has changed markedly over a period of 20 years, with more people staying on in full-time education and then continuing on into higher education, and the system also shows signs of success in tackling social exclusion amongst young people. Vocational education is also in the process of major reform with the introduction of Diplomas designed to improve the attractiveness, and economic value to society, of the vocational pathway. The intention is also to increase the number of people entering and completing Apprenticeships. Achieving this goal is dependent upon ensuring the Apprenticeship pathway is attractive to young people and employers, a task that is most readily achieved by ensuring Apprenticeship provides a high quality training option.