

Education Select Committee: Inquiry into 16–19 Participation London Councils' Response

Discretionary Learner Support Fund

What impact has the Education Maintenance Allowance had on the participation, attendance, achievement and welfare of young people and how effective will the Discretionary Learner Support Fund be in replacing it?

1. London Councils has serious concerns about the impact that ending the education maintenance allowance will have on young Londoners' aspirations. Young people are far more reliant on the EMA in London than in any other part of the country because of higher living costs, and it plays a key role in helping disadvantaged young people remain in education.
2. London Councils is concerned that the Discretionary Learner Support Fund (LSF) will be insufficient to support the significant needs of the capital's most disadvantaged young people to access their post-16 choices. We broadly agree with targeting support for young learners and for providers¹ to have more discretion over this and welcome the trebling of the LSF pot, but we are worried about the impact that the overall reduction in funding available will have on participation and attainment in the capital.
3. At present 54% of young Londoners receive Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) with 89% of these receiving the full £30 a week entitlement (nearly half the young people in learning in London). This means they come from families with a household income of less than £21,817 per year - equating to over 70 hours of work a week paid at the minimum wage, and a particularly low threshold given the increased cost of living in the capital. Many of these students would find it difficult to continue to afford to stay in learning without the support that EMA provides. If a significant proportion of this cohort opts to leave learning, this will inevitably affect London's currently high post-16 participation rate of over 90%. This would in turn have a considerably longer term impact on both individual life chances and the capital's economy. Therefore, we are urging government to increase the LSF pot so that all students living in families with a household income of less than £21,817 per annum have access to it.
4. The high take-up of EMA reflects the profusion of child poverty in London - over 630,000 (two out of five) children in the capital live in families where the household income is below the poverty line.² As referred to earlier, the cost of living in London is also substantially higher than in all other parts of the country - housing costs in particular are extremely high. Young people from poor families can often be under significant pressure from their parents to start contributing to the family income, meaning committing to learning and gaining new skills may become a secondary priority to looking for work and earning money.

¹ Academies, apprenticeships training agencies, colleges, employers, group training associations, independent private providers, schools, voluntary and community sector organisations

² GLA Intelligence Update 10-2010, Poverty figures for London: 2008/09, Summary data from the Households Below Average Income series. May 2010, using the standard definition of a household income of less than 60% of the median national income, after housing costs (AHC)

5. These young people will most often end up in low skill/low pay employment or NEET, substantially reducing both their future opportunities and the city's. Even during the boom times of the last decade nearly a third of Londoners were unemployed - whilst London's employers have been forced to import highly skilled professionals from elsewhere in the country or the wider world. Addressing this perverse situation is a key reason why London Councils is committed to improving the skills of the present generation of young people who can help grow the capital's economy in the coming years. Employment can be a powerful agent to help combat poverty – not just for young people but also their families, some of whom may have experienced generations who have never worked.
6. Post-16 learning is critical in ensuring young people are able to secure sustainable employment. London Councils believes that the support EMA has offered has been a significant factor in not only helping many poorer students stay in learning post-16, but also in increasing the attainment of these students within learning.³ We would therefore urge the committee to closely monitor the effects of the switch to LSF and urge the government to act should participation or achievement begin to slide.
7. London Councils supports the notion that individual learning institutions should have discretion on how to distribute LSF fairly. However, we nevertheless would wish to encourage London providers to sign up to a set of regional criteria determining which students are most in need. This would help ensure that young people in the capital are able to choose the education and training best suited to their needs, not on the basis of which provider makes them the 'best offer' of LSF. London Councils would be in a position to help facilitate this through its strategic 14-19 group: Young People Education and Skills, which embraces representation from local authorities, providers, employers and other key stakeholders.
8. However, there also needs to be equitable access for poorer students to other sources of support across all forms of provision. At present disadvantaged students in school 6th forms are eligible for Free School Meals whereas those on courses at other further education providers, such as General Further Education and Sixth Form Colleges, are not. It is important that this imbalance is addressed at the same time as introducing LSF to ensure students do not restrict their post-16 choices on this basis, particularly given students ill-suited to their provision are far more likely to drop out without completing their course. Providing poorer students in colleges with the same benefits, such as Free School Meals, as their counterparts in schools, would help provide some way of mitigating against the loss of EMA for these students.

Raising of participation age to 18 years

What preparations are necessary, for providers and local authorities, for the gradual raising of the participation age to 18 years and what is their current state of readiness?

9. Although significant steps towards full participation have been taken in London, there are features of the education and training system that militate against it. We have identified the following four areas where we feel that change is needed:

Funding opportunities for diverse and innovative provision:

10. London's councils and providers have worked hard to achieve the highest participation rates in the country (93% of 16 year-olds and 89% of 17 year olds), but are far from

³ Based on the findings of research by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) which can be found online at www.ifs.org.uk/publications/5370

complacent about this comparative success as full participation has long been our goal. The *right* participation is however crucial; young Londoners need to choose their options from the best provision that will help them, their families and the community as a whole to move ahead. Those who do not currently participate post-16 are frequently at the outer margins of society, encounter multiple barriers to participation and are not attracted by what is regarded as mainstream education.

11. It is the statutory duty of local authorities to ensure suitable provision for young people and in preparing for the raising of the participation age councils are already enabling the right learning offer to attract and engage all young people through developing the market. It is therefore essential that the processes for the introduction of new providers into the market are sufficiently nimble to respond to demand swiftly and appropriately.
12. There is the potential opportunity for increasing the range of provision through the establishment of free schools and academies. However, current interest in establishing these types of institutions appears academically focused and the process itself does not encourage the diversification needed in post-16 e.g. opportunities for more employers and independent providers to access funding to engage in work-based and Apprenticeship delivery. As central government is promoting a responsive market approach to education, then it needs to ensure that the opportunities for making that market - the responsibility of local government - allow for diversification and innovation and do not simply encourage more of the same.
13. Greater innovation and diversification in the supply of post-16 learning opportunities is critical to achieving full participation. London Councils is committed to ensuring that all young people achieve skills levels to continue further education and have the means to enter higher education and fulfilling and sustainable employment, but suggests that the shape of post-16 education needs to change to be attractive and accessible to *all* young people.

Government policy:

14. Government policy must ensure and support parity of esteem for variety and diversity in post-16 learning e.g. part time academic and vocational training provision that sits alongside work in an increasingly casual labour market should be supported along with more established routes (Apprenticeships) so that there as many options as possible into learning, work and work with learning. The recent Employment Select Committee report on behaviour and discipline in schools⁴ highlights the importance of a differentiated curriculum in meeting the needs of children with different strengths; different and varied delivery is needed to support and enable this differentiation.

Capital funding:

15. The delivery of a richer, more varied curriculum will put extreme pressure on the present learning infrastructure. There are many parts of London where learning accommodation is no longer fit for purpose and cannot guarantee the provision of an education that equips students with the skills necessary for living and working in 21st century society. In particular, the standard and resourcing of vocational learning has to be relevant to the needs of London's modern labour market and to the challenges of post-recession growth. A long-term capital investment programme is needed to deliver a modern educational infrastructure.

Careers advice, information and guidance

⁴ Education Committee - First Report: Behaviour and Discipline in Schools – HMSO 2011

16. London continues to contribute to the important work of the local raising the participation age trials. Work undertaken by colleagues in the London Borough of Ealing has already fed into many of the key findings from the first phase of the trials, particularly the critical importance of securing a full information, advice and guidance offer for young people and promoting the understanding of the choices available post-16.
17. There does not appear to have been sufficient thought into the future delivery of careers education, information, advice and guidance to inform young people and their parents/carers on the choices available to them and the best route to pursue their learning goals post-16. With the duty to secure access to independent and impartial careers guidance passing to schools from September (subject to legislation), there are significant risks to the standards and consistency of delivery without some form of regulation in the new integrated (all-age) careers advice service. Further, legislating impartiality will not guard entirely against the partial self interest of some organisations that themselves deliver post-16 provision.
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Vocational education and training

What impact will raising the participation age have on areas such as academic achievement, access to vocational education and training, student attendance and behaviour, and alternative provision?

18. For many young people, the curriculum they experience up to the age of 16 shapes their perception of the value of post-16 learning. Participation at 17 falls each year, with national evaluations signifying that the greatest drop-out is in the transition from AS to A2. This suggests that an important element of the preparations for full participation lie in developing alternative provision and increased vocational provision prior to 16 year-olds as well as increasing the breadth and range of opportunities post-16. If the emphasis is on attendance rather than achievement, full participation could result in only very minor increases in rates of achievement at either level 2 or level 3 at the age of 19. Unless the curriculum offer is engaging, there could be an increase in disaffection and therefore adverse behaviour.
19. There are currently over 11,000 young Londoners (16-18) not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET). Evidence shows⁵ that young people persistently over-represented in the NEET population (young people with special educational needs and/or mental health challenges, looked after children, teenage mothers, young carers, the young homeless, those with substance misuse problems, young offenders) face multiple issues, not simply barriers to participation.
20. Supporting young people to participate and achieve is a matter for more than just an education provider, but providers need skilled staff to coordinate necessary support. There needs to be recognition that supporting some young people can be expensive – but certainly not as expensive as the life-time costs of NEET. In London, where we already have high participation, activities and learning that engages those young people that we have so far failed to reach, will require good resourcing.
21. There are some signs that the increased number of young people who are NEET is the result of the recession, meaning that fewer young people are gaining employment at the same time as rising numbers in both education and training. Current and forecast labour

⁵ Estimating the life-time cost of NEET: 16-18 year olds not in Education, Employment or Training
Research Undertaken for the Audit Commission - University of York 2010

market demand seems to indicate a switch of demand for well-qualified young people to young entrants into part-time jobs (whilst studying) and fewer jobs for less qualified young people seeking full-time employment. The need for more provision that is delivered alternatively – e.g. to take account of working patterns – and an Apprenticeship programme that is far more portable will provide young people with learning opportunities that do not force them to choose between education or work.

22. Young people who currently leave school at 16 have lower achievement at GCSE than those who choose to stay on. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills establishes that the basic employability standard in high-growth industries will be technician standard (level 3). Currently, just over half of young people in London reach this standard by the age of 19⁶ and increasing the participation age will improve access to level 3 opportunities to young people who presently do not consider this to be a realistic option for them. This can be expected to result in an increase in achievement at level 3.
23. More work focused learning will be essential in ensuring that the raising of the participation age is about raising participation in employment and training, as well as education. Entrepreneurship programmes, careers education and education business partnerships will be crucial components in increasing participation and, through presenting a positive view of vocational learning, particularly for young people who wish to move on from the 'classroom', raising attainment.
24. Even with high participation, the high volumes of young people not participating in education or training mean the relevance of the post-16 curriculum offer will need to be considered carefully in the drive towards full participation. Schools and academies will need to work in closer collaboration with employers, colleges and vocational learning providers to provide non-academic learning routes from the age of 14, fully integrated with coherent 16-18 learning pathways that help young people enter higher education, Apprenticeships and other forms of professional development.

⁶ 14-19 and London: An evidence base – Young People's Learning Agency and London Councils 2010