

PART II

**Young People's
Transitions—Policies and
New Forms of Governing**

CHAPTER 6

Young People and Transitions in Upper Secondary Education in England

The Influence of Policy on the ‘Local Opportunity Landscape’

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English upper secondary education: a system in transition

The English upper secondary education (USE)¹ system is in a process of transition. From September 2015, young people have been expected to remain in some form of education and training up to the age of 18 as a result of the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA). Previously, compulsory education ended at 16. Since the early 1990s the majority of young people have chosen to stay on in education or training beyond 16, but with sharp declines in participation at the ages of 17 and 18. However, despite RPA, English USE still operates as if 16 were an end point rather than a progression marker of a longer phase. These ‘internal’ difficulties suggest that USE in England has yet to develop into a mature and universal phase.

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It is for this reason that we focus primarily on the transitions of young people *within* the English USE system. Much of the literature on transitions has examined what happens to young people after they leave education and wish to enter higher education or the workplace (e.g. Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009; de Graaf & van Zenderen, 2013), but our argument here is that, unless young people manage to negotiate the transition hurdles that lie within the English USE system, they are unlikely to make a successful final transition to employment or further study. This chapter examines, in particular, the effects of national government policy on what we term ‘middle attainers’—a diverse group, which is defined in the next section, constitutes just over half of the 16-year-old cohort and has been strongly affected by policy as it makes its way through the four stages of transition in USE.

The chapter begins by describing the English USE system and how international trends and national policies have influenced its development into what we term a ‘pure Anglo-Saxon model’. The main section analyses how policy impacts on the transitions of middle attainers and notes the importance of the ‘local opportunity landscape’ for these young people. We conclude with a discussion of different approaches towards the organization of localities that might positively affect learner transitions.

USE in England has been subjected to constant reform for over 30 years, in terms of curriculum and qualifications, institutional arrangements, governance and the relationship between the education system and employment, all of which affect learner transitions. This phase is thus still ‘emergent’ and there is no settled will about its future trajectory. Nevertheless, there are traditional features that have remained constant. English USE is relatively broad between the ages of 14 to 16, with elective specialist study post 16, and is largely ‘education-based’, with a small work-based learning route. Currently, students are examined in a wide range of subjects at the age of 16. These qualifications are known as General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs). Beyond age 16, however, the curriculum narrows considerably and divides into three broad groupings at level 3 (advanced level)—general education taken by just under half of the 16-year-old cohort (typically three or four A level subjects and including those on ‘applied or mixed’ programmes of A levels and vocational subjects) and full-time vocational programmes at foundation (level 1), intermediate (level 2) and level 3 taken by 39% of the cohort (DfE, 2017a). At age 16 the work-based route is very small, with only 5% participating in an apprenticeship, traineeship or schemes such as Entry to Employment. For the remainder who do not fit into these groupings, there is a variety of alternative or individually tailored programmes. It is, therefore, possible to leave the school system at 16 and to pursue further study in a variety of institutions and through a variety of routes and levels.

Middle attainers—an important but overlooked group

It has always been the case and continues to be that progression for some young people has been more straightforward than for others. Higher attainers tak-

ing a 'royal route' via GCE A level programmes to university have had a more well understood and direct form of transition from school to further study and then later into employment. As USE has expanded in England, however, so it has drawn in learners with a wide range of prior attainment profiles for whom progression pathways beyond the age of 16 have proven to be more complex, less well understood and subject to constant reform.

Considerable research has already taken place on the most vulnerable learners, who are often described as NEETs—those not engaged in employment, education or training (e.g. Spielhofer et al., 2009; Hayward & Williams, 2011). Less attention, however, has been given to the progression patterns of a significant group of young people who lie between 'vulnerable learners' and 'high attainers'. In the context of a focus on transitions we classify 'middle attainers' as a diverse group sitting between confident A level students taking three or more subjects and with the prospects of attaining good grades and more vulnerable learners who post 16 will normally participate in foundation learning (level 1) or be classified as NEET. At 16, therefore, middle attainers can be seen to comprise those currently on the margins of A level participation and attainment or taking a mixed general and vocational programme (estimated at about 10% of the cohort); those following broad vocational programmes such as vocational qualifications at levels 2 and 3 (about 34%) and those involved in apprenticeship and traineeship (about 5%). We estimate, therefore, that in 2017 this 'middle attainer' group accounted for just under 50% of the 16-year-old cohort (DfE, 2017a). We suggest that the progression and transition patterns of these particular learners provide an interesting barometer of the overall effectiveness of USE because they represent the ability of the education and training system to produce high rates of level 3 outcomes at age 18/19, a notional benchmark for higher education or supervisory roles within the workplace.

In this chapter, we have focused on the relationship between attainment and transition opportunities because of the way that qualifications are used as the currency for determining progression through USE in England. The key qualification for access to 16+ education and training is the level 2 GCSE. National statistics indicate clearly that social class, gender and ethnicity all play a role in attainment at 16. Most notably, only 44% of young people classed as disadvantaged (a proxy for social class) gained passes in English and mathematics GCSE, compared with 71% of all other pupils (DfE, 2018). This means that a greater proportion of socially disadvantaged young people are to be found in the middle-attaining cohort.

For middle attainers the 'opportunity landscape' at the local level is very important because this is where their educational (and often their employment) trajectories are played out. The English education system has become highly organisationally diverse, marketized and with strong institutional competition for students, particularly post 16 (Pring et al., 2009; Edge Foundation, 2017). There is now a range of education and training providers in this education market, including 11–18 maintained schools, funded via local authorities; academies, free schools, sixth form colleges (primarily for 16- to

19-year-olds) and general further education colleges that are all autonomous of local government and mainly take young people from the age of 16; and more recently a small number of directly centrally funded studio schools and university technical colleges, both of which take learners from the age of 14. While these institutional arrangements, which vary markedly from locality to locality, offer young people a wide choice of provider, they can limit curriculum choice and compromise the offer of impartial careers advice and guidance because institutional competition is largely focused around higher-attaining students. Institutional competition also makes it more difficult to construct clear progression routes between different education providers (Ofsted, 2013; Edge Foundation, 2017).

Increasing levels of participation—tensions and challenges in USE

England is not alone in reforming education for 14- to 19-year-olds. USE systems globally are going through a process of expansion (Sahlberg, 2007; OECD, 2017). As they expand and become more universal, USE systems experience a number of tensions that flow from shifts in their student populations and wider changes in the economy and society. Here we characterize these tensions in terms of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ challenges. The internal challenges arise primarily from increased demand for USE. More effective primary and lower secondary education, together with rising levels of attainment and social aspiration, have fuelled participation in USE. As a result, these systems are becoming more diverse, having to provide both an end point for those young people who seek entry to the labour market and a preparatory stage for others who are seeking to enter higher education. Universal systems thus have to cater for students with differing levels of prior attainment, interests and degrees of commitment to continuing education. At the same time, there are growing ‘external challenges’ arising from globalization and a greater diversification in society. While internal factors tend to lead to diversity, international literatures suggest external factors create pressures for unification—i.e. for academic and vocational learning coming closer together, for the requirement for more common 21st century competences to be built into the curriculum and for a greater uniformity of experience to support social cohesion (e.g. Le Metais, 2002; Ananiadou & Claro, 2009).

This rapidly changing landscape presents new challenges regarding the management of student transitions—not only how to effectively prepare young people with differing transition aims but crucially how to enable them to successfully complete the phase, thus preventing ‘early school leaving’ (European Commission, 2013). The challenges of an expanded/universal USE and longer youth transitions have been addressed in different ways by various national systems. Often reflecting long-standing national traditions, countries such as Germany, Austria and Switzerland, with large apprenticeship systems, have

responded with what Iannelli and Raffe (2007) refer to as an ‘employment logic’. The majority, however, have responded according to an ‘education logic,’ which has seen an expanded USE based on full-time education participation beyond lower secondary education and involving both general and vocational learning offered in one or more providers. These systems include, for example, the Nordic countries, France and the UK.

In terms of curriculum and qualifications, responses have differed according to whether learning is segregated/tracked or integrated/unified (Raffe et al., 1998). We have argued elsewhere that the English USE system has become increasingly segregated/tracked since 2010 (Hodgson & Spours, 2014a; Spours, Hodgson & Rogers, 2017). In some systems, general education and vocational education and training are institutionally segregated, being offered in different types of schools/colleges (e.g. the Netherlands). England is increasingly following this pattern from the age of 16, with schools and sixth form colleges more often offering general education and further education colleges and work-based learning providers specializing in vocational education and training.

English USE—from an ‘adaptive’ to a ‘pure’ Anglo-Saxon model?

Lying behind these responses to rising participation are broader global models of reform that are designed to raise levels of student attainment in an era of neo-liberalism. Sahlberg (2007) identified three models—the Anglo-Saxon, Pacific and Nordic. He suggests that the Anglo-Saxon model, which is sponsored by powerful global organizations, such as the OECD, and consolidated and codified through international performance measures such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), has been the most influential in terms of constructing a Global Education Reform Model (GERM). We will suggest that the global model of reform adopted has significant effects on transitions within USE.

The English USE system has since 2010 come to represent a more ‘pure’ form of the Anglo-Saxon education and training model with the confluence of several strands of policy that can be associated with both the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition and the subsequent Conservative administrations:

- a more markedly *tracked approach to qualifications*, with a focus on ‘rigour’ in general education (e.g. more external testing in both GCSEs and A levels, a reduction in modular assessment, an emphasis on the study of and examination in traditional academic subjects for 14- to 16-year-olds and the reintroduction of linear A levels that will be examined once at the end of the course);
- further impetus towards the *marketization of schooling* (e.g. the rapid expansion of academies and free schools that are independent of local authorities);

- greater *standardization* of teaching and learning (e.g. a reformed National Curriculum with a greater emphasis on a traditional canon of knowledge, spelling, grammar and punctuation);
- an increased *emphasis on accountability* with publicly available performance tables and a stronger role for Ofsted, the national inspectorate, as the ‘enforcer’ of many of these reforms (Spours, Hodgson & Rogers, 2017).

This recent shift can be contrasted with what might be seen as the ‘adaptive’ Anglo-Saxon model of the earlier New Labour government (1997–2010). By the term adaptive we are referring to the way in which New Labour, while broadly pursuing a neo-liberal approach to governance, tempered this with mild social democratic policies (Hall, 2003). In terms of USE, for example, they created linkages between academic and vocational qualifications that offered new routes to middle attainers, and adopted a mixture of institutional competition and collaboration that saw the rise of a number of ‘weakly collaborative 14–19 partnerships’ at the local level to support new applied routes (Hodgson & Spours, 2006), while still relying on the use of a wide range of national policy levers (e.g. targets, performance measures, inspection and funding) to mould institutional behaviour (Coffield et al., 2008).

In addition to education policy, there is the understated but deeply influential dimension of the labour market. The Anglo-Saxon model could also be seen to depend on a flexible labour market with a culture of employer voluntarism and minimal state regulation. With regard to this dimension of the model, there appears to be little difference between the approaches of the New Labour administration (1997–2010), the subsequent coalition (2010–2015) and the Conservative administrations (2015–). Flexible labour markets represent a deep-seated UK-wide economic policy assumption (Keep & James, 2012) and have considerable support from employers (CBI, 2017).

The research base

The chapter weaves together three sets of research and theoretical contributions published over the last 10 years. The first concerns the 14–19 policy initiatives and their governance arrangements under the New Labour government that left office in 2010. These include the outputs of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) research project ‘The Impact of Policy on Teaching, Learning and Assessment in the Learning and Skills Sector’ (Coffield et al., 2008), the ‘Nuffield Review of 14–19 Education in England and Wales’ (Hodgson & Spours, 2006, 2008; Pring et al., 2009) and a three-year local project tracking 2,400 young people in a ‘flagship’ 14–19 consortium in the south-west of England as they progressed within upper secondary education between 2008 and 2011 (Hodgson & Spours, 2013a). This cluster of research projects focused

in particular on local institutional collaborative arrangements and their effects on middle attainers under New Labour's 'adaptive' Anglo-Saxon model.

The second set of research focuses on the more marketized institutional arrangements promoted by the coalition government (2010–2015). Here we draw on evidence from two further local/regional research projects. The first, undertaken between 2010 and 2012, was situated in a deprived seaside town on the east coast of England and consisted of interviews with the local authority and regeneration agencies, education providers and local employers to gather their views about the locality and the opportunities and barriers it presented for young people. A total of 92 young people were also involved through focus group interviews to capture their perceptions and aspirations in relation to progression and transition in the locality (see Hodgson & Spours, 2013b). The other project concerned London, a global city and England's capital (Hodgson & Spours, 2013b, 2014b). Between 2012 and 2014, research was undertaken on 14–19 collaborative arrangements involving interviews with representatives of 20 of London's 32 local authorities, together with an investigation of the problems of 17+ learner transitions in the capital. The latter involved the analysis of pan-London participation, attainment and progression data and in-depth investigations into three London boroughs, together with interviews in a total of 14 providers of USE. Both sets of research were extensively discussed with local and regional stakeholders.

The third dimension of research is current and concerns an ongoing investigation into the effects of the pure Anglo-Saxon model on the performance of 14–19 education (USE) in England with the emergence of 'system stagnation' represented by the plateauing of attainment and participation rates that could disproportionately affect middle and lower attainers (Rogers & Spours, 2018).

The effects of policy on the transitions of middle attainers

In this section we use the evidence from these studies to illustrate the effects of policy on four key transitions within English USE that affect middle attainers in particular.

- *Transition 1.* How the preparatory phase of upper secondary education (14–16) supports young people for transition at 16+.
- *Transition 2.* How young people choose or are selected for their post-16 route.
- *Transition 3.* How young people perform in their first year of post-16 study and whether they are able successfully to complete upper secondary education within the expected norm of two years.
- *Transition 4.* How young people move into the labour market and higher education.

*Transition 1. Qualifications reform and the attainment
of 14- to 16-year-olds*

There has been considerable policy turbulence in government curriculum and qualification policies for 14- to 16-year-olds under all governments since 2002. The general trend under the former was to provide greater choice for learners by reducing the compulsory elements of the National Curriculum at this point and allowing schools and colleges to offer a broader range of both general and applied/vocational qualifications. Although there was no statutory requirement to change the 14–16 curriculum, schools were strongly incentivized to reform through exhortation, funding steers, inspection and the enhanced points value that applied/vocational qualifications were given in national performance tables. As a result, the proportion of 16-year-olds gaining five A*–C GCSE (or applied/vocational equivalent grades)—a key national benchmark that is often seen as the minimum requirement for entry into level 3 study—rose year on year during the duration of these policies. These results thus potentially allowed more learners, including middle attainers, to make the transition to the next stage of USE at level 3 (the level required for graduation to higher education).

During this period, the schools in our south-west study fully embraced these opportunities and learners were strongly encouraged to take up applied/vocational qualifications alongside or instead of their GCSEs. While the national policy steers undoubtedly provided a major incentive, senior management teams also saw the ‘vocationalization’ and broadening of the curriculum for this stage as a way of engaging and motivating their learners to participate and achieve, as well as providing them with valuable points for progression to post-16 education. This position was strongly supported by the learners, with the middle attainers we interviewed being the most enthusiastic about their courses. Moreover, as a result of their increased engagement with 14–16 study programmes, the majority of middle attainers aspired to continue in full-time education post 16. These study patterns and the positive responses of 14- to 16-year-olds to the broader and more applied curriculum were similar in the east England study. Students indicated that they liked a wider choice of subjects, found vocational and applied programmes helpful, and felt they were learning skills that would assist them in gaining employment or further/higher education. However, many were also aware that post-16 providers valued GCSEs more highly than their equivalent level 2 vocational awards.

Once the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government took office in 2010, there was a sharp reversal of policy. A review was undertaken of applied/vocational qualifications that concluded that many were of little value and should be withdrawn to make way for a stronger focus on academic subjects, particularly English and mathematics (Wolf, 2011) and a new performance measure was introduced—the English Baccalaureate—that judged schools according to the percentage of 16-year-olds gaining high grades in five traditional GCSE subjects.

The results of this turnaround in policy clearly proved a dilemma for schools. We only have anecdotal evidence from our research studies of how they responded, but national data suggest that schools have increasingly focused on a more traditional academic curriculum (Henshaw, 2017) and reduced significantly their offer of applied/vocational awards (DfE, 2015). Furthermore, for the first time in 2014, the proportion of students nationally gaining the five A*–C GCSE benchmark declined sharply (DfE, 2017b). Given the results from our earlier studies, we could speculate that it is the middle attainers who are losing out, with fewer able to make the transition to academic post-16 level 3 study.

This position has been compounded recently because GCSEs themselves have also been reformed to make them more demanding through a reduction in coursework, greater emphasis on traditional content, grammar, spelling and punctuation, the removal of the modular design that allowed students to retake parts of the award in order to improve their final grade and the redesign of the grading system. Similar changes have been put into place for A levels too. It could be argued that this will reduce the mismatch between the 14–16 and 16–19 general education pathways, but in doing so it will also reduce curriculum breadth and make entry to, and successful completion of, this track available to a narrower band of students. Others—many of them middle attainers—will be forced into the less prestigious applied/vocational programmes that also often result in a more tortuous transition process and have higher dropout rates (DfE, 2017c).

Transition 2. Choice, selection and ‘transitions tripartism’ in the post-16 market

Age 16 marks an important transition point in the English system in what has until recently been regarded as the school leaving age. In 2015, however, over 90% of young people stayed on in education beyond the age of 16 and overwhelmingly opted to continue in full-time study (DfE, 2017d). At the same time, age 16 is also a point of considerable ‘churn’, with over 60% of this cohort leaving their secondary schools for new institutions (ibid.). These will have been mainly middle attainers who have either elected to leave the school for a new start in a college and for a particular type of course or who have been denied access to their own school sixth form because they do not have the entry requirements for A levels. Age 16 is thus a point of both transition and selection as students attempt to make the leap between pre- and post-16 qualifications in a climate of intense institutional competition.

In the English USE system there are no nationally defined admissions requirements for the transition between pre-16 and post-16 study programmes. Individual institutions decide on their own admissions criteria. These are determined by the type of institution and can vary significantly locally (e.g. selective

11–18 schools are likely to require higher grades than more ‘comprehensive’ schools and sixth form colleges tend to require higher grades than general further education colleges).

Evidence from the three local studies suggests that the policies of recent governments in encouraging an education market have had a significant effect on students’ transitions at 16+ and the processes of choice and selection. Labour’s policies of ‘weakly collaborative’ 14–19 partnerships provided a very limited counterweight to this historical trend. Under the coalition government and subsequent Conservative administrations, the creation of more academies and free schools intensified competition for students at a time of declining demographic trends.

Competition between schools and colleges has been strongest for high-attaining students with selective and high performing institutions often able to ‘cream off’ the ‘top end’ from their neighbouring secondary schools in order to boost their own sixth forms. At the same time, less selective 11–18 schools have had to diversify their provision in order to retain students and remain economically viable. Many have established a few broad level 3 vocational courses to keep middle attainers on roll, although numbers enrolling are often very small. Some institutions, particularly those starting new sixth forms, have also lowered their entry requirements for A level courses, thus exposing less academically prepared students to the rigours of A level study, with all the attendant risks.

Furthermore, access to impartial careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) has proven difficult because of the overwhelming self-interest of schools to retain certain students and to rid themselves of others. The policy encouragement of institutional self-interest has been coupled with the dismantling of the Careers Service as an independent voice for young people because it is now the responsibility of schools to offer CEIAG. The risk is that many young people end up on inappropriate courses (Ofsted, 2013; HoC, 2016). Interviews with groups of 15-year-olds in the south-west research project suggested that some middle-attaining students, and young men in particular, have a tendency to choose ‘safe’ options post 16 in terms of a familiar learning environment, to be close to friends and not to have to travel a distance to specialist provision; 11–18 schools that try to keep their middle-attaining students staying on ‘at all costs’ may thus be colluding with low aspirations through what we have termed ‘comfort zoning’. Parents also play their role in this ‘Faustian pact’. Many will advise their children to take A levels as a traditional and well-established qualification even though the conditions in this route may not suit their child.

The dominant role of 11–18 schools in a marketized system at 16+ affects not only the distribution of learners between post-16 providers; it also works against the less visible work-based route. There is a lack of understanding of apprenticeships in schools and little incentive to suggest that their high-attaining students should start one at 16 (Ofsted, 2013; HoC, 2016). This is a contributory

factor that keeps the apprenticeship system and work-based route small for young people, with only 6% of the 16–18 cohort participating (DfE, 2017d).

The overall effects of the education market appear to be the creation of ‘transitions tripartism’ at 16+: the securities of the academic route to higher education; the complexities of a ‘middle route’ as many students engage on the margins of A levels, opt for mixed academic/vocational programmes or engage with broad vocational education courses; and the relative invisibility of a small work-based route at 16. Far from raising standards, improving the breadth and quality of provision or ensuring satisfying outcomes from USE, the effects of an enhanced post-16 market appear to lead to the opposite. What we see is the growth of stratified and risky transitions that for middle attainers, in particular, will tend to show up a year later at the 17+ transition point.

Transition 3. The 17+ barrier and early school leaving

At the end of the first year of post-16 study, the lack of curriculum and qualifications articulation between 14–16 level 2 study and post-16 level 3 study and the effects of the education market conspire to make this transition point particularly difficult for middle attainers in the English USE system. The problem of the ‘17+ transition point’ comprises two related issues: first, 17+ ‘retention’ and whether those who stayed on at 16 are also participating in the second year of study; second, how well students attain at 18, which for most marks the end of USE. While the 17+ issue was evident in all three local areas, it was a particular focus of the London study because of the contrast between the relative success of 14- to 16-year-old middle attainers at Transition Point 1 and their evident difficulties beyond this.

In terms of full-time education participation, the English system sees relative declines during the 16–18 phase, from 87% at age 16 to 77% at 17 and 50% at 18 in 2016 (HoC Library, 2017). Delving deeper, data on London schools demonstrated, for example, that only 62% of learners with five A*–C grades at GCSE or vocational equivalents, but without English and mathematics, remained on to the second year of A level study in their school sixth form. The retention rates for those taking level 3 vocational/applied courses in a school sixth form were even lower. Problems at 17+ also impacted on attainment at 18. In the case of London, learners attained higher examination results in GCSEs than the national average pre 16, but lower than the national average post 16 as measured by overall A level points. A major factor behind this was the reduction in the size of programmes of learning as students dropped more than one subject at the end of their first year of study, thus reducing further the breadth of an already narrow curriculum (Hodgson & Spours, 2014b).²

While the 17+ issue has been mainly focused on the transition to level 3 provision post 16, it also concerns those learners who enter 16+ education not having attained the benchmark of five GCSE A*–C grades with English and

mathematics. This accounted for just under 30% of the cohort in 2013 (DfE, 2014b). Our London research suggested that, of those learners who started level 2 courses post 16, less than one third would progress to level 3 study a year later. These level 2 learners thus faced even greater progression problems than ‘marginal’ level 3 learners in relation to the 17+ barrier.

The London study also provided insights into the reasons for the ‘17+ barrier’. From discussions with practitioners across 20 London boroughs and in-depth interviews with heads of post-16 study and head teachers in 10 schools, we arrived at a set of ‘risk factors’ that contributed to inadequate examination performance, dropping one or more subjects, changing course or post-16 provider or dropping out of education altogether (Figure 6.1).

At first glance the majority of these factors appear to relate to learners, their families or wider society (e.g. lack of preparedness for post-16 study, lack of parental support or increased incidence of mental health problems) or ones that could and should be tackled at school level (e.g. enhanced subject choice or improving teaching and learning). However, behind many of them lie the powerful effects of national policy—in particular qualifications reform, the role of the post-16 education marketplace and the deep-seated problem of a historically shrinking youth labour market.

Effects of the education market also begin to tell at 17+ in terms of the quality of provision. In London, as elsewhere in the country, schools have been encouraged to seek independence of local authorities and to become academies that are directly funded by national government. In order to ensure the popularity of their academy with parents, and often encouraged by their academy sponsor, headteachers will decide to add or retain a small sixth form for 16- to 18-year-olds. Evidence from the three studies in the south-west of England,

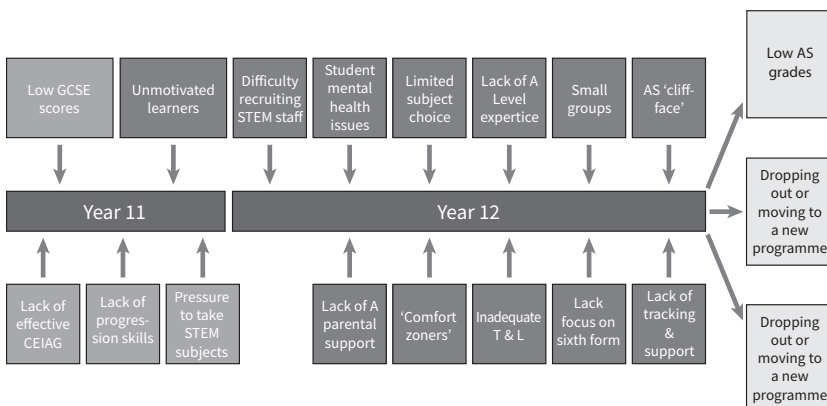


Figure 6.1: Risk factors and the 17+ barrier.

STEM=science, technology, engineering and maths; T & L=teaching and learning; AS ‘cliff-face’ refers to the difficulty of making the transition from intermediate to advanced level study, represented here by the AS qualification.

London and the east coast suggests that this may be the case even when there are already strong and popular alternative post-16 providers in the locality. A number of institutional risks result. Small or new sixth forms are less able to offer a wide range of subjects, so learners may not be able to take those they want and are likely to succeed in. Sometimes the sixth form does not have a sufficient proportion of high-attaining learners and the optimum class size to create the environment for successful teaching and learning. In addition, teachers often lack expertise for this level of provision because the majority of their teaching experience has been with younger learners taking GCSEs, for which different skills are required.

Our research shows that difficult transitions at 17+ have a considerable impact on middle attainers because it means that they need to change course (often starting again from the beginning), move to a different institution or try to find their way into work or an apprenticeship, often with little information or guidance. The 17+ issue could thus be viewed as a particular version of ‘early school leaving’ that is defined as failure to complete USE and to add significantly to the level of qualification attained at the end of lower secondary education (European Commission, 2013).

Transition 4. Moving on from USE—transitions into the labour market and higher education

While the 17+ issue is very much focused on transitions within full-time education, lying behind it are deep-seated problems of the lack of labour market opportunities for young people because of the structural decline of youth jobs in the UK economy (UKCES, 2012). This is particularly felt at Transition Point 4, which sees most young people exit the USE system at 18+.

The overall trend at 18+ over the recent period in England has been the rise in higher education participation (DfE, 2017d). This was encouraged by the New Labour government’s Aim Higher campaign to widen higher education participation, with the policy aim of having 50% of young people participating in university by the age of 30. However, the higher education policies of the coalition and Conservative administrations from 2010 onwards were different, the main thrust being a large hike in tuition fees and the encouragement of an education market, particularly in relation to recruiting young people who have attained high A level grades.

At the same time, participation in apprenticeship up to the age of 18 over the past decade has remained relatively static at about 6% of the 16–18 cohort (DfE, 2017d) despite being a favoured policy by successive governments. The problems of weak signalling from the surrounding economy to young people became clear in all our local studies. In the deprived coastal town in east England, for example, many of the young people we interviewed simply did not believe that the North Sea renewables energy industry would arrive to produce

greater opportunities. Their view of the local labour market reflected historical and existing conditions—that the fishing industry had declined and that there was going to be a continuing prevalence of low-wage, low-skill and low-attraction retail, agricultural and food processing work. London presented a very different economic environment, although with its own problems for young people. In the London study, it was clear that education participation was having a greater impact on the activity of young people than the metropolitan labour market. While London learners are more highly qualified than in most other parts of the UK, not only is the work-based route proportionally smaller when compared nationally; London also has the longest delays in the transition between higher education graduation of London learners and entry to employment. This is because it has the highest graduation rates but also the highest unemployment rates for graduates (ONS, 2017). The roots of these problems lie less with the quality of education and training and more with the nature of the employment market in the capital, which is predominantly financial and service sector-oriented. These features attract migrants not only from abroad but also from the rest of the UK. Young Londoners, particularly middle attainers with lower qualification outcomes, are often outcompeted in a regional labour market that already has a paucity of youth jobs.

*Summary—the English version of USE limits the transitions
of middle attainers*

Our research suggests that the ‘adaptive’ Anglo-Saxon policies of New Labour and its ‘pure’ form under the coalition and Conservative governments have had a powerful effect on the transitions of middle attainers. New Labour’s qualifications reforms opened up opportunities for 14- to 16-year-olds while closing them down for 16- to 18-year-olds. They could be seen to have ‘half-helped’ middle attainers but ultimately let them down (Hodgson & Spours, 2013a).

On the other hand, government policies since 2010 have been much more threatening to the middle attainer. These young people have been overlooked as a group and scattered between increasingly strongly defined and selective academic education and scarce high-quality apprenticeships. Competing schools and colleges are keen to recruit these learners, but are less able to organize effective and extended progression routes for them (Spours, Hodgson & Rogers, 2017). And this group may be particularly vulnerable to continuing government cuts in funding for post-16 education (Belfield, Crawford & Sibieta, 2017) because they require more support to be able to function effectively in USE. The English USE system has uniquely low hours of tuition compared to relatively successful USE systems (SFCA, 2015) and the position is deteriorating under the policies of austerity. These factors, combined with a stalled youth labour market, mean that the middle-attaining group is in danger of becoming the new education ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2011).

Building a local opportunity landscape—a new terrain for transitions

Developing High Progression and Skills Networks linked to the local economy

In the final section of the chapter we argue that the futures of these young people cannot be guaranteed by top-down divisive policies or by the vagaries of the market but, instead, require a more organized local opportunity landscape. Middle attainers will not, by and large, leave their area to attend university. The learner who is willing to travel to learn but not to migrate from their home requires a more solid local collaborative landscape within which to progress and to undertake successful transitions to further study and working life, most often through vocational education. This will mean not only the development of appropriate, high-quality provision but also the building of clear progression routes into further study and employment that actively involve collaboration between education and training providers and wider social partners at the local and regional levels.

The practical first steps to support the progression of all 14–19 learners will require the building of a collaborative infrastructure at the local level where education providers, employers and other social partners see themselves as key contributors to both a more effective education and training system and economic development of the locality. One possible formation we have termed High Progression and Skills Networks (HPSNs) (see Hodgson & Spours, 2018).

HPSNs might be understood as a set of formalized, dynamic relationships between social partners at the local or sub-regional level designed to transform that locality/sub-region through sustainable economic, social and educational development. It is based on an ecological concept of interdependence: that none of the individual social partners can achieve this objective alone but that transformation will only take place if they combine their specialist functions. Each of the partners has a different, yet complementary, role within the network and one that might change over time (see Figure 6.2). In the current English context, HPSNs could emerge from new post-Area-Based Review sub-regional Skills and Employment Boards, such as those being developed in London (Spours et al., 2018).

Roles for schools and colleges collaborating with other social partners might include:

- providing the knowledge and skills to support both work- and college-based learners to move upwards and along a latticework of progression routes and transitions between initial learning, work and more continuous learning;
- developing specialist technical provision at the higher levels closely linked to growth areas of the locality's economy and services;



Figure 6.2: High Progression and Skills Networks (HPSNs).

- nurturing longer-term collaborative projects between employers (particularly SMEs), local government, higher education and further education and training providers to identify specific skill demands; to co-design relevant learning opportunities; and to develop effective progression routes;
- stimulating innovation in learning and in work practices to ensure skills utilization and sustainable economic development.

Supportive wider reforms—towards a new education model

New types of local partnership working, while an important step, will not in themselves overcome the main effects of the Anglo-Saxon model on the transitions of young people. These new and emerging local structures will need to be supported by a wider set of reforms that begin to shift the fundamental governance of education policy (Evans, 2015) and curriculum policy.

In previous publications (e.g. Hodgson & Spours, 2012; Spours, Hodgson & Rogers, 2017) we have argued for a gradual but co-ordinated effort to create a new model of USE in England that is more unified and progression-oriented and less divided and selective. More specifically, Transition 1 (14–16) will require a curriculum that has a greater focus on progression skills for 14- to 16-year-olds with less emphasis on completing a range of subject-based GCSE examinations. Transition 2 (16+) will need a step change in the delivery of careers education, information, advice and guidance, with a much greater role for impartial voices in the form of the local authority, careers specialists, the

contribution of active partnerships discussed in the previous section and less institutional competition. Transition 3 (17+) suggests the need for changes to level 3 qualifications so that the increased intellectual demands that are needed to succeed in USE are matched by efforts to create a gradient that the middle attainer can climb, together with greater flexibility to combine different forms of knowledge and skill. For some this will mean taking more time (three years rather than two post 16) and increased hours of tuition for all. Finally, Transition 4 requires action beyond education and a closer relationship with the local and regional economy, highlighted in the development of HPSNs.

But gradually moving the education model away from its Anglo-Saxon orientation and towards a more collaborative and social partnership model will also require a more fundamental rebalancing of the state, in which national government sees its role as strategic leadership and enacting the devolution of power so that regional and local government and communities have the necessary tools to transform their localities and regions within a clear national framework that supports equity and social justice. Without these shifts and new relationships it is hard to see how English USE can support the progression of all young people, including the overlooked middle attainer, to become a modern and universal upper secondary phase.

Notes

- ¹ This is not a commonly used term in England. Rather, this phase is referred to as '14–19 education and training', but here we are using upper secondary education because it is more commonly used in international comparisons.
- ² The normal pattern during this period was to take four AS subjects in the first year of study, dropping down to three in the second year.

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