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### Raising the participation age in historical perspective: policy learning from the past?

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# Raising the participation age in historical perspective: policy learning from the past?

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The raising of the participation age (RPA) to 17 in 2013 and 18 in 2015 marks a historic expansion of compulsory education. Despite the tendency of New Labour governments to eschew historical understanding and explanation, RPA was conceived with the benefit of an analysis of previous attempts to extend compulsion in schooling. This paper assesses the value of a historical understanding of education policy. The period from inception to the projected implementation of RPA is an extended one which has crossed over the change of government, from Labour to Coalition, in 2010. The shifting emphases and meanings of RPA are not simply technical issues but connect to profound historical and social changes. An analysis of the history of the raising of the school leaving age reveals many points of comparison with the contemporary situation. In a number of key areas it is possible to gain insights into the ways in which the study of the past can help to comprehend the present: the role of human capital, the structures of education, in curriculum development and in terms of preparations for change.

**Keywords:** *history; policy; participation age; school-leaving age*

At a time of stringent and rapid public spending cuts, the current Coalition government has committed itself to continuing with the policy of raising the participation age (RPA) in education and training. The previous Labour government passed the 2008 Education and Skills Act which extended compulsory participation in education and training to 17 from 2013 and 18 from 2015 (DfES, 2007; DCSF, 2007a, 2007b). The delay in implementing the policy was to allow time for capacity building, curriculum development, new qualifications and other related preparations. The idea of ‘participation’ was broadly conceived to include schooling, training, apprenticeships and part-time certified work-based learning.

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The legislation is a major policy initiative with significant educational and social implications. It represents a further addition to the system of compulsory education and is closely connected to the wider context of educational reform, in particular, 14–19 education (DfES, 2005a, 2005b, 2006).

The shared political commitment to the participation age policy has drawn sustenance from the way in which education has come to occupy centre stage in domestic and international policy arenas (CERI, 2006; Green, 2006). A pervasive discourse has presented education as crucial to both economic growth and social justice, for instance, by fostering personal well-being, a thriving civil society and a reduction in anti-social behaviour. In 2006, the Leitch Review of Skills (Leitch, 2006), emanating from the Treasury, harnessed the reins of this evolving educational discourse by arguing that Britain's long-term economic competitiveness depended upon increased investment in a diversified and vocationally relevant curriculum.

The ostensible political accord over this issue has obscured changes in emphasis which took place with the formation of a new government in 2010. The past, present and future 'trajectory' of this policy reveals contradictions and tensions (Maguire & Ball, 1994). Connections between educational policy and research are complex, multiple and, at times, fraught (Furlong, 2004; Whitty, 2006). Placing developments within a historical setting can provide crucial insights into contemporary policy and practice. An historical framework helps to locate the parameters within which educational practices are configured and reconfigured. At its best, history can be a 'liberating influence' which opens up new vistas and opportunities, based on the realisation 'that things have not always been as they are and need not remain so' (Simon, 1966, p. 92). The writer and academic Raymond Williams once claimed that 'History... teaches or shows us most kinds of knowable past and almost every kind of imaginable future' (Williams, 1983, p. 148). However, while historical approaches have been widely recognised as contributing to our knowledge of policy, it is a commonplace that academics and policy makers regularly ignore them. 'Policy amnesia', infused by 'year zero' thinking, can be a shortcut to believing that policy can achieve something 'new', often in a very short space of time (Higham & Yeomans, 2007a; Raffe & Spours, 2007; McCulloch, 2011). Indeed, many initiatives of the 'new' Labour governments from 1997 were characterised by a turning away from historical explanation and wariness that they might become ensnared in briars of history; instead, Tony Blair championed the idea of continuous 'radical' change. At such times, history can appear as a burden, an unwelcome inheritance which constrains the scope and imagination needed for an unknown future.

It is all the more interesting to note, then, that the decision to lengthen the period of compulsory education did inspire historical thinking and justifications among policy-makers. Government ministers themselves deployed historical arguments in explaining the benefits of raising the participation age, betraying an element of 'social learning' from past policies (Hall, 1993), particularly the raising of the school leaving age (ROSLA). It was argued forcefully that, for much of the

twentieth century, there existed a widespread historical consensus in favour of raising the leaving age: ‘Historically as a nation, we have long believed that young people should be in some form of education and training at least up to the age of 18’ (DfES, 2007, p. 3). In vindicating RPA, ROSLA was also summoned as a central feature of post-1945 peacetime society (DfES, 2007, p. 9); indeed, internationally the growth of compulsory education has been closely allied to nation building (Ramirez & Boli, 1987). Historical arguments were endorsed by the Secretary of State for Education, Ed Balls, in his 2007 speech to the Fabian Society, when he pledged the government to raise the participation age: ‘now—90 years on—we are finally legislating to fulfil that 1918 commitment [i.e., 1918 Education Act] and raise the education leaving age to 18’ (Balls, 2007; DCSF, 2007a). His analysis maintained that the key remaining issue was one of implementing an agreed proposal. Here also historical lessons from the past were drawn, with particular parallels to the 1972 raising of the leaving age from 15 to 16. Balls (2007) emphasised his determination not to make the ‘same mistake as in 1972, when there was little thought given to what young people would actually do in their extra year of schooling’. Although explicit historical arguments and assumptions have informed government proposals, such ‘policy learning’ has been noticeably constrained by the political context (Raffe & Spours, 2007). Our own research suggests that the formation of the policy to raise the participation age has been unduly selective in its historical awareness. For example, the assumption of a historical consensus on the need for compulsory education to 18 ignores the long and widespread opposition to the reform.

The policy interest in the history of extending compulsion has been matched by research interventions. One positivist strand has scoured recent history for lessons to expedite what is taken to be a laudatory policy. The CfBT research paper, *Lessons from history: Increasing the number of 16 and 17 year olds in education and training* (Kewin *et al.*, 2009), examined successful strategies and examples of ‘what worked’ in the past. It made a number of ‘key lessons for policy-makers aiming to maximise participation in education and training and minimise unemployment amongst 16 and 17 year olds’ (p. 9). A second approach to the participation age policy has located it within a broader framework. Jeremy Higham and David Yeomans have argued that the high level of failure in past initiatives in 14–19 education has resulted, in part, from ‘policy amnesia’ and the repetition of previously failed policies (Higham & Yeomans, 2007a, 2007b, 2011). Historical research has been used to outline the limited ways in which 14–19 education has been conceived as an isolated, ad hoc problem rather than a means of improving the education system as a whole and challenging the ‘deep curricula and organizational divisions at 16+’ (Hodgson & Spours, 2008).

Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours sensibly give prominence to the period since the 1970s and 1980s in explaining 14–19 education. Yet the recent past is not the only historical lens for analysing present policies. In particular, the participation age policy has strong affinities with the raising of the school leaving age in earlier decades. Elucidating longer-term changes and continuities, as well pinpointing

shifting discourses and their importance, can help to track the tensions and complications in which policies are bound up (Tosh, 2006). The attempts to compel successively older sections of the population to attend school also reveal some familiar arguments relating to the economy, the organisation of education, the curriculum and school building (Crook, 2005; Simmons, 2008; Cowan *et al.*, 2012). The establishment of an 'education system' forged a framework within which contradictions and dilemmas have circulated over time. Educational structures have resulted from the tenacious legacies of previous policy and practice; as a result, schools have often proved remarkably resilient to change and reform (Silver, 1990; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

In embarking on such a journey, which coalesces around different historical moments, it is essential to strike a warning note concerning the diverse historical contexts out of which mandatory schooling was constructed and extended. The raising of the school leaving age took place in contrasting historical environments. When the school leaving age was raised to 14 after the 1918 Education Act, Britain was a colonial power dominated by manufacturing industry and acutely visible inequalities. From 1944, with the introduction of a 'welfare state' and 'secondary education for all', the extremes of poverty were mollified somewhat during the 'golden years' of economic growth despite the fact that Britain was entering a period of gradual and relative economic decline. The school leaving age was raised to 15 in 1947 and to 16 in 1972, a point which marked the close of a period of contested post-war growth. Only a few years later in 1976, the Labour Prime Minister Jim Callaghan, in his famous 'Ruskin Speech', clearly signalled the changing educational climate by asserting that education should respond to the needs of the economy and to a perceived skills gap in the workplace (Simon, 1991). Education would increasingly be called upon to help manage the problem of rising youth unemployment (Finn, 1987). It is in the current moment of global instability that the participation age is to be raised to 17 by 2013 and 18 by 2015. We must tread with caution in attempting to connect the various moves to prolong compulsory schooling across these widely different historical spheres. With these provisos in mind, it is possible to identify certain patterns of development.

Our study, funded by the ESRC, is based upon archival and documentary research into the raising of the school leaving age, mainly between 1959–1979 but also exploring a longer time span. This study is relevant to the whole of the UK although this needs to be qualified. ROSLA was a UK-wide measure even though it raised difficult issues in Scotland in particular. Despite national and regional differences, much was also shared in preparing for and implementing ROSLA. However, RPA applies mainly to England and, with the agreement of the National Assembly, Wales. Our research analysed a wide range of archival materials from the National Archives in London and National Archives of Scotland, in addition to those of educational agencies such as the Association of Education Committees, as well as local education authorities. In this paper we focus upon key areas of relevance to RPA, specifically in relation to notions of human capital, the structural organisation of education, the implications for the curriculum; and the preparation

for, and implementation of, change. Each of these examples are, in turn, examined historically and connected to contemporary developments.

### **Human capital, the economy and finance**

Economic motivations have furnished the crucial justification for raising the participation age. Education policy and learning has been saturated by economic thinking in recent years although social justice and cohesion are often presented as secondary factors flowing from the economic. While this appears to capture a markedly modern phenomenon, it also represents a contemporary inflexion of a much older debate which revolved around the thorny issue of how education has been understood as a cost and a benefit.

For much of the twentieth century education was seen as an additional outlay, a burden upon productive industry that had to be paid for when the country could afford it. Even this could be an optimistic view for, in the early twentieth century, grave doubts were expressed regularly about the value of educating the working class. It hardly seemed worth schooling the supposedly less-able children beyond the basic 3R's which were seen as more than an adequate preparation for life dominated by manual work. E.T. Good, writing in the *English Review* in 1926, worried about the growing momentum for raising the school leaving age 'regardless of cost or consequences'. A 'sifting out' process was favoured:

Give every child its chance, by all means; but drop this nonsense of training every boy as if he were going to be a lawyer, accountant, or school instructor, and every girl as if she were designed by Nature to become a commercial secretary or school teacher. (Good, 1926, p. 350)

It was in this context that arguments in favour of greater educational equality were shaped. Education came to be seen as an autonomous activity and as a broadly conceived investment benefitting society as a whole. For example, R.H. Tawney viewed education as a spiritual experience buffered from the rigours of earning a living later in life and offering some immunity from the deadening influence of the workplace. In reflecting on the history of compulsory education, he complained of the 'subordination of education to economic exigencies' (Tawney, 1966, p. 49) and argued that:

After fifty years of practical experience of the effort of raising the age of school attendance, the onus of proof rests upon those who allege that education will impede industry, not upon those who argue that education will stimulate all healthy national activities, and industry among them. (Tawney, 1966, p. 51)

This line of thinking threaded into the Hadow Report which maintained that both cultural and societal growth depended upon the full physical and intellectual development of children who might otherwise be stunted by entering the workplace at too early an age:

... it is unreasonable to attempt to harvest crops in spring, or to divert into supplying the economic necessities of the immediate present the still undeveloped capacities of those on whose intelligence and character the very life of the nation must depend in the future. There is no capital more productive than the energies of human beings. There is no investment more remunerative than expenditure devoted to developing them. (Board of Education, 1926, p. 145)

Such metaphors of natural growth fed into a progressive movement that found a welcome home in the post 1944 welfare state. Education gradually came to be seen as an investment within an expanding system. It would be argued that ‘wastage’ in education, through early leaving from grammar schools, was having adverse affects across society (CACE, 1954). The Crowther Report, *15 to 18*, crystallised many of these arguments and took them further in presenting the case for raising the leaving age to 16 which had been laid down in the 1944 Act, awaiting a time when the country was ready. The Report argued that prolonged compulsory education would enrich both individual and societal fortunes. In this sense, it marked a shift in the dominant mode of representing the value and purpose of education (CACE, 1959).

Education was coming to be regarded as complementary to the economy and this was reflected in the spread of the term ‘human capital’ during the late 1950s and early 1960s. It was believed that education provided the missing link in accounting for unexplained economic growth (Becker, 1964; Blaug, 1968). In the 1960s, when economic and social expansion appeared feasible, Walt Rostow’s bestselling *Stages of economic growth* (1960) resonated widely in claiming that education helped to lay the groundwork for economic ‘take-off’. Politicians gravitated to the notion in attempting to juggle the contradictory pressures of stimulating economic growth while also promising social benefits. Indeed, the Conservative shadow secretary of state for education, Edward Boyle, when in government, had announced the raising of the leaving age in 1964, and later argued that the reform would play an essential role in meeting an urgent economic need for more middle managers (Boyle, 1968).

Despite such apparently propitious circumstances, this course of action was not a foregone conclusion as it required substantially increased funding (McCulloch *et al.*, 2012). The Crowther Report attempted to justify such expenditure by identifying the ‘valley of the later 1960s’ (1965–1969) when a population dip would help the country make the necessary financial and logistical adjustments incumbent upon raising the school leaving age. Arguments such as this helped to build pressure for change and make the reform appear achievable (CACE, 1959, pp. 147–148). In the 1960s, civil servants would struggle to recognise such a valley—which appeared to be more of a rivulet—in working out the detailed proposals but, by then, the commitment to raise the age could not be retracted (Pile, 1963). In fact, it allowed Edward Boyle to announce that ROSLA would take place later than originally conceived, in 1970–1971 (*Guardian*, 1964). Even so, financial concerns again became paramount with the devaluation of the pound in 1968. Delaying the raising of the school leaving age for

two years stood out as providing ‘a relatively self-contained and coherent decision, while the other possible savings cover a wide variety of different educational fields’ (First Secretary of State, 1967). In the event, widespread dismay was felt by Labour politicians and Lord Longford resigned from the cabinet. Nevertheless, a Treasury employee had noted that criticism would be subdued ‘compared with any package of smaller measures which could mean spoiling lots of ships for half-pennyworths of tar’ (Rampton, 1967). Thus, with a sudden economic downturn, ROSLA became a soft target, reflecting an awareness of costs.

However, the momentum behind ROSLA proved unstoppable. The need for more compulsory education seemed to be ingrained in the national psyche as something that could not be postponed forever. Being seen to reduce the leaving age at a time when economic competitor countries were raising it was not something that many politicians were willing to countenance in the 1970s. It was Margaret Thatcher who oversaw the Order in Council which raised the age to 16 in 1972–1973 (Thatcher, 1971), shortly followed by the white paper, *Education, a framework for expansion* (DES, 1972). This moment symbolically represented a high point of postwar educational growth prior to the retrenchment of the later 1970s.

In the contemporary context it is possible to illustrate the way in which these varying approaches to education and the economy have found favour in political constituencies and policy circles. The mutating notion of human capital has been a survivor from the 1960s through to its present day neo-liberal incarnation—the very elasticity of the term has contributed to its longevity. But it has become pervasive at a time when government regulation and control of the economy has been considerably weakened. Indeed, the meaning of human capital has shifted significantly so that there is now a responsibility upon us all to develop skills to handle rapid economic change while also delivering individual and collective prosperity:

It used to be that natural resources, a big labour force and a dose of inspiration was all that was required for countries to succeed economically.

But not any more. In the 21st century, our future prosperity will depend on building a Britain where people are given the opportunity and encouragement to develop their skills and abilities to the maximum; and then given the support to rise as far as their talents will take them. (DIUS, 2007, p. 3)

While there have clearly been noticeable changes in the economic context, the Leitch Review of Skills presented a before and after picture which simplified the way in which education may have contributed to economic and social well-being in the past. In building upon this idea, the impact assessment for the 2008 Education and Skills Act approached the issue of costs in a way that directly echoed the Crowther Report and perhaps underestimated the balance of incomings and outgoings. Its idealised accounting models led to the following claim:



The additional costs for each cohort of young people who participate to 18 due to RPA is £774m. . . Compared to the current 90% participation aspiration, the additional economic benefit of all young people participating is around £2,400m for each cohort, discounted over their lifetimes (in 2016–17 prices). (DCSF, 2007b)

Two key expectations were that 90% participation could be achieved voluntarily by 2015 and that the benefits should be calculated according to projected lifetime earnings. While these may or may not be reasonable conjectures to make (see Wolf, 2007), and the first of these may well be met, such confident assertions certainly facilitated the decision to spend additional funds.

Since then, with the election of the Coalition government in 2010, there has been a dramatic shift towards an emphasis upon costs and the need to find savings to reduce the national debt. The persistent oscillation between cost and investment has thus impacted, quite suddenly, upon the evolving policy in the twenty-first century. The initial vision for RPA has been diluted in the face of such pressures; the most obvious example being the cancelling of general diplomas (DfE, 2010a). The focus on cutting spending has also served to diffuse initial Labour government concerns that those in ‘jobs without training’ should be directed towards certified learning opportunities. This has not been a major issue for the Coalition government, a change also indicative of an increasing voluntary take up of post-16 education and training—at the end of 2009 just over 82% of 16- to 18-year-olds were in education and training (DfE, 2010c). However, this is a rapidly changing context and it is by no means guaranteed that wider social pressures will all work to make RPA a smooth transition. By the end of 2011, the numbers of 16- to 18-year-olds not in education, training or employment (NEET) had increased to one in seven or 267,000 in total, an increase of 2000 on the previous year (Harrison, 2011). Given the erratic and changeable economic climate, such challenges may well escalate in the years ahead.

RPA was inherited with mixed feelings by Coalition partners who were initially lukewarm about the measure even though they maintained the policy when in power. Contradictory impulses are apparent in the decision to implement RPA while delaying its enforcement, ostensibly to allow time for adjustments and to avoid ‘criminalising’ young people (DfE, 2010b, p. 50; Liberal Democrats, 2010, p. 36). As in the past, being seen to publicly cut such a significant commitment was viewed with some trepidation. Moreover, adverse publicity would have been compounded by the need for primary legislation—unusually, a clause had been inserted into the Act stipulating that it either had to be implemented by 2013 and 2015 or repealed through primary legislation (Education and Skills Act 2008, paragraph 173, subsection 10, p. 115). This requirement may even have represented historical learning from the 1944 Education Act, parts of which were never implemented but remained on the statute book for decades before being quietly dropped. The possibility of a weaker enforcement regime, less typical of English education in the early twentieth century according to I.G. Kandel (1951), also testifies to the declining role of local authorities today—a further issue with historical ramifications.

## Structures

The initial vision for raising the participation age was based upon the claim that traditional schooling may not be the appropriate track for all students. In order to achieve 100% participation, it was suggested, a range of options relevant to 16- and 17-year-olds would have to be offered. Diversity was perceived as the key to attracting students to appropriate learning opportunities in the workplace, FE and other training bodies. There was to be a 'learning route for everyone' with options 'broad enough to enable all young people to choose a worthwhile and engaging education or training option that suits their needs and interests' (DCSF, 2007a, pp. 1 and 8).

Here again, historical understanding is instructive. As supporters of the policy have been keen to point out, the impulse for education to 18 has a long history (DCSF, 2007a, pp. 5–6). With the Education Act of 1918, the President of the Board of Education, H.A.L. Fisher, in addition to raising the school leaving age to 14, had aimed to establish day continuation schools up to the age of 18. While compulsory education to 14 was implemented, part-time study by those who had already left proved to be an easily expendable idea: a number of sporadic initiatives eventually became a victim of severe public spending cuts in the 1920s, the so-called 'Geddes Axe' (Simon, 1974). The priority accorded to the school leaving age was one that would be repeated in future years.

A similar policy pattern was revived in the 1944 Education Act which proposed, not only to raise the school leaving age to 15, and then to 16 when feasible, but also to establish a system of county colleges to support part-time study. These were to be twin pillars at the base of a new educational structure. But, while the leaving age was raised to 15 in 1947, county colleges remained an aspiration on the statute book. In 1959 the Crowther Report picked up the baton by advocating that county colleges should follow on the heels of raising the school leaving age to 16; both were considered 'important' and 'overdue' although, again, ROSLA was given priority (CACE, 1959, p. 143).

These proposals struck a chord with many educationists, not least with Sir William Alexander and others within the Association of Education Committees. There was considerable sympathy for county colleges and the long term policy of the Association favoured compulsory education to 18. But when considered in detail it was 'reluctantly' concluded that the school leaving age should take precedence given the material and teacher shortages (AEC, 1960–1963). Despite this setback, the realisation lent renewed vigour to the argument that the additional year of compulsory education might potentially be spent in an FE college away from the confines of schools which were seen to alienate a section of young people. In 1969 Edward Short, secretary of state for Education and Science favoured this proposal and it was sent out for consultation with educational representatives. William Alexander was fully supportive, arguing that FE colleges should not be too restricted: 'I have no doubt whatever that our people will welcome the suggestion' (Alexander, 1969a). However, consultations with bodies such as the County

Councils Association sparked counter-arguments in favour of retaining pupils in schools. Alexander later noted that his own committee were in fact wary of the proposal, in part because of the difficulty of guaranteeing equality of services between schools and FE colleges (Alexander, 1969b). Once again, the bout of enthusiasm for varying the options in the final years of compulsory education proved short-lived amid fears that schools would lose their funding and that inequality might be created in the system. Rather than offering a bridgehead to a more diversified education system, limited forms of co-operation between schools and FE were developed through linked courses to help manage temporary shortages and allow schools to access the vocational resources of colleges.

In the intervening period since the school leaving age was raised to 16, a profusion of terms have attempted to represent this ideal of post secondary education: not just adult education, which has a longer history (Woodin, 2007), but also permanent education, recurrent education, continuing education and, most recently, lifelong learning. When pitted against the entrenched position of the school, this educational litany of transient terms has never managed to capture a coherent set of material practices on the ground.

The participation age policy, in a different context, faces similar pressures. The creation of a 14–19 category has done little to dispel the fact that 16 remains the crucial divide because it marks the end of the compulsory school age. As the participation age rises to 18, the assumption of a variegated offering for young people in a range of different settings may be called into question. Some important and positive partnerships have been developed between schools, FE and training providers but it is clear that most work will take place in schools (Hodgson & Spours, 2008; Pring *et al.*, 2009; Higham & Yeomans, 2010). The initial vision of a diversified offer attuned to the needs of all young people will have to be channelled into what is available in any given area. In the past, the responsibilities for delivering compulsory education fell back on schools and, in the absence of an adequate number of alternative providers in the future, the same pattern will be repeated. Even though there is no expectation that all work will take place in schools, their presence will continue to predominate. The students who leave school may find that alternative opportunities are limited, a shortage which will stimulate FE, the voluntary and private sectors to develop new provision. For some time, this declining group of young people may be unable to locate appropriate learning opportunities and find themselves isolated in unsuitable courses. The significant number of young people who make the ‘wrong’ choices by trying out courses for which they are not suited, may exacerbate this issue in an educational world familiar with fixed terms. These tensions were addressed by the Wolf Report on vocational education (DfE, 2011) which identified both the importance of core academic study as well as the need for innovation and flexibility in vocational education—a vision that may take some time to achieve.

There is an irony here with implications for the future development of policy. Local education authorities have been consciously undermined by successive governments so that their role is now limited to monitoring and service provision,

fostering collaboration rather than giving direction (DfE, 2010b). They were recently offered a lifeline with responsibility for 14–19 education (DfES & DIUS, 2008) and, as RPA comes into force, local authorities may find their remit theoretically widened. But in practice, downgrading the role of local government has continued apace and the diversifying ecology of secondary education in England, including academies, trusts and free schools, will exert countervailing influences that impair them further. As a result, 14–19 education is likely to remain divided between schools, on the one hand, and isolation in a range of FE, voluntary and private training options on the other. The need for collaboration and partnership can be expected to grow in this new context.

### **The content of education and curriculum**

Changes in the structure of education have been intimately linked to issues of content; the decision to extend compulsory education shone a spotlight upon the curriculum, a contested area intimately linked to broader social and moral concerns (for a recent view, see Popkewitz, 2011). The lapse in time between 1964 when it was agreed to raise the leaving age to 16 and the ultimate date of implementation in 1972–1973, allowed considerable scope for preparations to be made. Raising the leaving age was going to affect a high number of pupils who would not have previously remained at school and this fed a concern to develop an appropriate curriculum for these young people in a rapidly changing world.

The Schools Council, from 1964, was charged with developing appropriate curricula to deal with the expansion of education and specifically with ROSLA. Indeed, after 1964, the policy focus on ROSLA shifted to curriculum development which was identified as a critical solution to the conundrum of what young people would actually do in the ‘extra year’. It was rapidly recognised that isolating ROSLA students could easily stigmatise them. Rather, they aimed to re-think the whole of the curriculum as a part of wider educational changes. At an early meeting of the Council it was recorded that:

The Committee considered that the use of the expression ‘extra year’ might create the impression that raising the school leaving age merely involved adding to existing courses, whereas they wished to emphasize that what was needed was a complete re-appraisal of secondary courses. (Schools Council, 1964)

Initiatives such as Lawrence Stenhouse’s humanities curriculum project recognised the scope to develop curricula appropriate to all pupils, not just the ‘non-academic’; ROSLA preparations were going ‘to provide for most students, before they leave school, courses which explore the new territories of experience opened up by the adolescent’s encounter with the adult world’ (Stenhouse, 1967). In the 1960s, advocates of comprehensive education also saw the raising of the leaving age as a necessary prelude to achieving a common curriculum for everyone. A five rather than four year secondary course had long been held up as a requirement for an educated democracy, especially given that public examinations were held at age 16.

However, this impulse to make education open to all led to varying interpretations, especially at the level of curriculum reform. In relation to ROSLA, the widespread concern not simply to add ‘an extra year’ but rather to re-think the nature of education in the face of considerable social and economic changes could take on a directly vocational purpose for specified employment in which ability levels were demarcated. The chief executive of the Construction Industry Training Board upset some Ministry officials by making some ‘outlandish statements about the lowness of quality of school leavers’ (Kogan, 1967) but couched his case in a familiar language which was more palatable to his audience:

Not just... ‘adding an extra year’, but rather... refashioning the educational content and treatment of the whole post-primary period... The major problem will concern the boys and girls in the broad average range of mental abilities, for whom leaving school at 16 to commence employment is accepted as the natural situation. (Brech, 1967)

New courses, with limited prestige, delivered in separate ‘ROSLA blocks’ could, ironically, be hatched from within a notion of education for all.

Bouts of enthusiasm for vocational education in relation to ROSLA gave way to fears and prevarication. Concessions to the vocational needs of young people and society would be subsequently tempered by an emphasis upon the importance of general education prior to entering the labour market. Fears about the lack of progression or quality of some vocational proposals were compounded by trade union concerns that work experience might become a source of cheap labour. Although ‘vocational’ often implied an introduction to issues connected with the world of work as opposed to training for actual employment (see Brooks, 1991), in practice, many ROSLA students could sample directly vocational opportunities in things like home economics and hairdressing for girls and car maintenance for boys (for example, CYEE (Central Youth Employment Agency), 1971). The varied permutations of vocational education did not dispel the reality that secondary education continued to reflect broader educational and social divisions. The pursuit of curriculum reform could be continually thwarted by the reality of preparing pupils for radically different futures in life and work. A desire to infuse education with a sense of equality and spirituality might easily be reduced back to a material analysis based on the needs of the economy. The tension between equality and differentiation would rapidly blur in such cases. Overlapping yet distinct educational arguments appeared to separate and dovetail in unexpected ways and were indicative of the confusion and complexity in developing a suitable curriculum for all.

A congruent set of dilemmas has suffused contemporary debates over the participation age and 14–19 education. For instance, the attempt to provide an overarching baccalaureate qualification, following the Tomlinson Report, was sacrificed by the Labour government just prior to the 2005 general election (Hodgson & Spours, 2008). The proposal for a common qualification was partly inspired by the need to create greater equality of opportunity and ensure that all students were on commensurate tracks from which they could progress. As a result, Ed Balls was left to argue that the new diplomas would be equivalent to A

levels, a barely credible claim given the latter's embedded status as 'gold standard' qualifications. The more recent decision by the subsequent government to abandon academic and general diplomas did little to boost a flagging response to these new qualifications in an already overcrowded educational market place; diplomas were to fend for themselves and would remain 'as long as there is a demand', according to Schools Minister Nick Gibb (Paton, 2010). The gradual undermining of diplomas eclipsed the desire for separate but equal qualifications. Although, today, there is a greater awareness of the need for progression routes for all learners, especially at the lower levels, the deep set historical and curricular inequalities have been an enduring presence. It is ironic to note that while prevailing assumptions about fixed ability have dissipated over the past half century, economic and social inequality has greatly intensified (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009), a development that affected the education system as a whole.

### Preparation

The curriculum reform stimulated by ROSLA proved to be a very long-term process. It aggravated the lack of purpose felt by a section of young people and stimulated experiments in vocational education that gathered pace from the mid-1970s. In the 1960s, great hopes for fundamental curricular changes gave way to a gradual realisation that Schools Council projects were only preparatory and had not been implemented on a widespread basis. It proved difficult to generate a sense of ownership among schools and teachers, many of whom were, initially, less focused upon the reform. The proliferation of teachers' centres played a crucial role in disseminating curricula changes and facilitating discussion but, in the first instance, they only reached a limited number of teachers and schools. The Schools Council aimed to galvanise schools and teachers through an eclectic range of initiatives, funding, working groups, publications and general exhortation—a 'baker's dozen' approach (*Guardian*, 1966). This non-directive and persuasive programme frustrated some policy makers and, over time, fuelled demands for greater co-ordination and planning (DES, 1968). In addition, the apparent lethargy in preparations was picked over by critics in organisations such as the National Association of Schoolmasters which issued dire warnings that schools and the teaching profession were not ready for the ROSLA (NAS, 1966, 1973).

Only when the new leaving age became a reality could curriculum changes be tested in practice. Despite its initially limited reach, the Schools Council played an essential role in fostering discussion and development which might be more widely adopted at the appropriate moment. While some LEAs asserted their confidence in preparing for ROSLA, such as Manchester and London, elsewhere grave doubts were raised about what had been done in anticipation of the change. By 1968 Edward Boyle, watching the evolving situation from the shadow cabinet, noted that readiness was relative to the enactment of the reform itself:

... when people say 'we shall not be ready for this reform' the answer is, we shall not be ready until everybody knows it's coming. We shall never be ready until we do it... it's only when people know that there can be no further postponement and this reform is coming, that we shall prepare ourselves and be ready for it. (Boyle, 1968)

The Schools Council had represented a tentative step into the 'secret garden' (Hansard, 1960) of the curriculum and it was hardly realistic to expect that detailed curricular plans would be made immediately. Indeed, for some teachers, planning offended the essence of teaching; curriculum change impacted upon personal sensibilities and wider cultural shifts which took some time to alter (Schools Council, 1969). ROSLA was not a quick fix but, rather, necessitated widespread alterations before, during and after implementation.

Speaking from a different set of assumptions in 2007, Ed Balls chided an earlier generation of policy makers and educationists for their lack of preparation in 1972, a claim which misunderstood the policy. Indeed, the extended period for implementation created considerable space for interpretation and adjustment of the initial aims for the policy. Today, the situation is very different to that in the past, with a national curriculum and a far more centralised education system. However, it will prove difficult to fully implement the participation age policy until it has actually come into force. As we have seen, local planning on a universal and coherent basis will not be possible in all areas given the eclectic and widening range of semi-autonomous stakeholders in education. The evaluation report for RPA local pilot projects bore this out and revealed variable levels of preparedness; for example, one recommendation suggested that LEAs appoint someone to co-ordinate the participation age work, which implies that many had not done so by 2010 (ISOS, 2010). Only so much preparation will be achievable in the short term before the new participation age comes into effect. During this time there will inevitably be a degree of falseness about a situation in which compulsion has not actually been applied to the new group. The staged plan for enforcement will broaden the scope for adjustment and experimentation. As a result, the more significant moment of implementation may be revealed in the many adjustments and alterations which will take place in the years following the change. Developing long-term quality options for 16- to 18-year-olds will prove to be a not inconsiderable challenge.

## **Conclusion**

The importance of extending compulsion in education has not always been widely recognised. In part this has arisen from the fact that public discussion surrounding the measure following its implementation has often been truncated. In this sense ROSLA has been different to other policies in so far as it has created an arena within which educational policy and practice has been played out. At each stage in the augmentation of compulsory education, public interest has swelled and then subsided once the reform became widely accepted. The staged and periodic nature of ROSLA meant that, in the 1960s and 1970s, during the period of incubation

and preparation, the policy acted as an umbrella under which many educational policy issues were gathered—curriculum, pedagogy, buildings and so on. But this phase was inevitably short-lived before the change found a gradual acceptance and ROSLA ceased to be an organising principle. In this way, broad and often politicised debates over educational reform became gradually enfolded into educational administration (see Curtis, 1988). Historical research can help to unravel the political and social contestation inherent within such apparently neutral and benign measures. It can re-connect the interplay of politics, economics, curriculum and educational structures which may at first sight appear to be independent.

An historical approach to policy helps to identify not only continuities but also breaks with the past. In some respects, the raising of the participation age represents unexplored educational territory. RPA bears a resemblance to earlier proposals for county colleges and day continuation schools rather than ROSLA which was focused upon schools. In addition, the policy making process underlying ROSLA and RPA reveal further discontinuities. Today, the postwar expansion engendered by ROSLA has given way to greater central control of education policy characterised by quangos, quasi markets, informed by a plethora of policy texts, in which an array of partly representative organisations are active (Hodgson & Spours, 2006). In the 1970s, policy followed clearer avenues between national government, local education authorities, their representative bodies such as the Association of Education Committees, County Council Association, as well as schools and trade unions—an educational microcosm of a wider corporatist politics (Middlemas, 1979).

Long-term perspectives on educational change help to explicate both the past and the present. ROSLA and RPA show how policy is prone to ambiguity and interpretation during an extended process of adoption. All policies involve a level of innovation and interpretation (Ball, 2006) and this is amplified in increasing compulsory education which necessitates protracted lead-in times, intensive debate, preparation and implementation. Moreover, on each occasion when the school leaving age was raised, issues and problems have been bequeathed to successive generations, which could not be resolved in the short-term. Extending compulsory education has been motivated by creating fair and equal access to education and, for many, there has been improvement. But such policies have to survive for a long time during which they may be downgraded and impact upon the quality and nature of the provision, especially during economic crises when policy transmogrifies into new shapes. When the participation age is raised, it is likely to have a number of further unforeseen consequences, fostering access and opportunity as well as differentiation and inequality.

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