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Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru

Raising the Age of Participation to 18

Professor Sue Maguire
Institute for Policy Research, University of Bath
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Summary

- This report assesses evidence about the rationale and effectiveness of raising the age of participation (RPA) in education and training to the age of 18 in Wales.
- There is a raft of international evidence based on analysis of historical data on the impact of raising the school leaving age (ROSLA). This points to it having a small positive effect on qualification attainment, unemployment rates and future earnings. However, the impact on improving retention rates in post-16 learning is questionable.
- Evidence from examples of the school leaving age being raised in different countries identified the costs as a key issue to be addressed, as well the significant time needed to plan implementation.
- In recent years RPA has included a wider range of options beyond school retention, including training routes, work with training, as well as alternative learning provision. There are useful lessons about implementation and delivery relating to cost, timing and monitoring impact.
- Although agreeing that young people benefited from remaining in learning until 18, key informants in Wales exhibited a lukewarm response to the idea of implementing RPA. Concerns were expressed about how a compulsory system would be enforced and its impact on young people from hard to help/hard to reach groups.
- A preference was stated for improving participation, retention and achievement rates by offering an enhanced and accessible post-16 offer across Wales.
- International evidence points to the need to focus efforts on encouraging continued engagement in learning and reducing early leaving.
- On the basis of the evidence, RPA would generate limited benefits for young people who are least engaged in learning. Substantial investment and creativity in developing learning packages to meet their needs could have greater impact.

Recommendations include:

- Focusing on reducing post-16 attrition rates and introducing a strategy to reduce early (school) leaving;
- Providing a coherent and consistent post-16 offer which is aligned with the objectives of the New Curriculum for Wales;
- Supporting early labour market entrants and strengthening their access to continued learning; and
- Providing sustained funding for prevention and reintegration initiatives targeted at young people not in education, employment or training.

Executive summary

The purpose of this rapid evidence review was to inform future policy development on the rationale and effectiveness of raising the participation age (RPA) in education and training to the age of 18 in Wales. It comprised:

- A summary of evidence from a review conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NfER) in 2007 to support policymaking in England on the RPA;
- An overview of the recent implementation of the RPA in England;
- A review of international evidence published since 2007;
- Published evidence on early (school) leaving; and
- Feedback from interviews that were conducted with a number of key informants in Wales.

Overview of evidence

Over recent years, some countries, including a number of USA and Australian states, have raised the participation age in learning, arguing that a better qualified workforce would improve economic output and performance in an increasingly globalised economic market. In some cases, this was supported by an inclusion agenda, with a commitment that enforcing continued participation in education (or training) for longer periods of time would help to narrow social and economic inequalities.

The purpose of the 2007 NfER review for the UK Government was to assess evidence on the anticipated impact, benefits and challenges associated with RPA. While it did present evidence about positive impacts emanating from the raising of the school leaving age (ROSLA) in terms of enhancing wage returns and educational qualification attainment, the volume of the evidence presented focused on the wider benefits of post-16 learning, rather than making a persuasive case for compulsion. Also, while a significant part of the report is dedicated to identifying the characteristics of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) and young people in jobs without training, the thorny issue of how their barriers to learning will be overcome through the implementation of the RPA is overlooked.

In England, the RPA was enacted in 2013 to cover all 17-year-olds and, in 2015, it was extended to all young people until their 18th birthday. While the original proposals set out planned to criminalise young people who failed to participate in any form of post-16 education and training (DfES, 2007), there was a lack of any form of

enforcement within the coalition government's implementation of the RPA, thereby implying a voluntary commitment on the part of young people to participate (DfE, 2010). Prior to the implementation of the RPA, a number of trials were conducted across England between 2009 and 2013 to help local authorities and education and training providers to prepare for the changes. No independent evaluation measuring the impact of the national roll-out of the RPA has taken place.

Wider evidence about the impact of ROSLA[1] relies on the analysis of historic data based on changes that were introduced several decades ago. Messacar and Oreopoulos (2012) found that in the USA, among those working more than twenty-five hours per week, a year of compulsory schooling was associated with a 10.7% increase in annual earnings. The sample included twenty- to twenty-nine-year-olds who were aged sixteen between 1970 and 2001. Avendano et al. (2020) showed that the raising of the school leaving age (ROSLA) in 1972, which raised the age of statutory schooling from 15 to 16, increased the proportion of people attaining a Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) in Great Britain by 9.0 percentage points from a baseline of 19.7%. While the evidence does show a positive impact on wages and qualification attainment, it must be contextualised with different economic conditions prevailing at the time, together with much lower rates of educational qualifications being obtained by young people.

Importantly, using various USA states' recent changes to the minimum school leaving age, it is estimated that each year of additional schooling a student receives lowers the probability that they will end up unemployed by 3.6 percentage points; lowers the likelihood of them being on welfare by 5.5 percentage points; and lowers the likelihood of them being below the poverty line by 8.1 percentage points (Messacar and Oreopoulos, 2012). Estimates of the impact of raising the compulsory school leaving/participation age on reducing NEET rates are missing from the evidence base.

More recently, statutory changes to extending the learning age have tended to broaden the range of options open to young people. For example, in some USA, Canadian and Australian states, young people are able to opt for education, training or employment with training.

While in many cases it is too early to measure the impact of these reforms on young people's educational and employment trajectories, they do shine a light on cost and implementation issues. For example, changes are often too rapid, with insufficient

[1] A difference should be noted between raising the school leaving age and more recent policy changes which focus on interventions in both education and training to widen and sustain young people's participation in learning.

time and funding given to schools and providers to prepare for implementation, including managing and meeting the needs of a much more diverse group of learners. Also, sanctioning measures are inconsistently applied. Early findings from the US showed that there were no differences in drop-out rates or post-16 attainment rates between states with different leaving ages (Oreopoulos, 2005).

Early leaving agenda

Instead of, or as well as, pursuing policies that legally require young people to remain in learning for longer periods of time, there is a raft of interventions internationally which concentrate on reducing early school leaving (ESL)/ early leaving (EL). The focus is on encouraging and retaining young people in learning for longer periods of time, with the overall aim of improving their economic and social outcomes, as well as enhancing nations' economic prosperity and performance. Approaches to ESL include a number of strategies such as preventative measures, intervention policies and compensation policies (Dale, 2010; Council of the European Union, 2011). A review of evidence showed that ESL/EL is a complex issue with many interlocking causal processes. It concluded that such complexity demands a strategic and coordinated response from policymakers, rather than a random selection of interventions (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE), 2016, p.47).

Feedback from key informants

In the context of Wales, there was widespread agreement among the key informants interviewed that young people across Wales should participate in some form of learning until the age of 18, although there were mixed views about how this might be achieved. Discussion focused on the merits and pitfalls of introducing RPA legislation to force young people to remain in learning and the alternative option of introducing policy changes which would be designed to encourage and extend participation, retention and achievement in post-16 learning. An overarching view was that young people should be offered a range of post-16 options (education, employment and training), and that a compulsory school-based post-16 route would be too narrow a choice for some groups of young people. Moreover, while nearly 90% of young people in Wales currently transition into education or training beyond the current statutory school leaving age at the age of 16, retention and achievement rates among 17-18-year-olds are much lower. This suggests there is a need for intervention.

There was no widespread endorsement for RPA legislation to compel young people to remain in learning until the age of 18. Concerns centred arounds the logistics of

implementation and enforcement. Perceived benefits included securing a wider post-16 offer, in order to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners. This included young workers in jobs without training, who currently do not receive policy attention or intervention, and obtaining sustained funding to support initiatives targeted at the NEET group. The need for organisational and structural change in the post-16 arena across Wales to achieve a coherent, equitable and consistent offer, which is underpinned by greater connection between pre- and post-16 pathways was a consistent message. Strategies that motivate and encourage young people's participation and retention and achievement in post-16 learning were widely encouraged.

Looking at imminent future policy developments, changes that will be introduced through the New Curriculum for Wales within pre-16 learning, as well as the proposed reforms in compulsory education, and post-compulsory education and training (PCET), were recognised as key levers for precipitating change in the post-16 arena. They provide mechanisms by which a harmonised post-16 offer with clear pathways can be achieved. Also, the PCET, subject to legislation, will establish the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) as a single, strategic authority responsible for overseeing all aspects of post-compulsory education and training by 2023. CTER should have a clear brief to tackle inequalities, especially those in the academic/vocational divide, as well as the position of young people in the labour market.

Conclusions

Studies which have undertaken analyses of historic data to determine the impact of the raising of the school leaving age found positive effects on earnings and qualification attainment rates, although their effect on retention rates is questionable. Also, the evidence on ROSLA in Great Britain found no benefits in terms of improvements to educational mobility and health outcomes. In recent years a number of countries/states which have implemented RPA have adopted a wider range of options open to young people beyond school retention, including training routes, work with training, as well as alternative learning provision. While it is too early to assess overall economic and educational outcomes from such measures, there are useful lessons about implementation and delivery relating to cost, timing and monitoring impact. The evidence that is available points to limited benefits to young people who are least engaged in learning and the need for substantial investment and creativity in developing learning packages to meet their needs.

Overall, the evidence to support legislation which raises the participation age in learning is weak. Its enforcement through recent legislative changes has been shown

to be patchy, and, in the case of England, appears largely non-existent. However, without RPA legislation or the enforcement of stringent targets to reduce early school leaving (ESL)/early leaving (EL), the result is often a fragmented set of time- or funded-limited policies to tackle disaffection among certain groups. The literature on ESL/EL indicates an over-reliance on individual policies and often voluntary interventions, rather than a strategic overarching legislative approach. A good example of legislative intervention is in the Netherlands, where a national policy framework for ESL includes an early warning system (EU, 2011, p.70).

Among key informants interviewed as part of the review, appetite for the need to introduce RPA legislation to enforce participation in post-16 learning was weak, with questions raised about the logistics of implementation and enforcement. Overall, it was considered that participation rates in post-16 learning in Wales were sufficiently high at the age of 16 to not warrant RPA legislation (although retention rates among 17-and 18-year-olds are much lower). The need for organisational and structural change in the post-16 arena across Wales to achieve a coherent, equitable and consistent offer, underpinned by greater connection between pre- and post-16 pathways, was a consistent message.

While the introduction and implementation of the New Curriculum for Wales and the proposed PCET reforms could be accompanied by legislation to raise the participation age and/or reduce early leaving in Wales, a number of factors relating to policy design, implementation and impact measurement would need to be taken into account. Without legislation, there is a significant risk that programmes to promote post-16 learning and engagement, which have been sustained in Wales through EU structural funds, will cease, as this funding source tapers out between 2021-23.

Recommendations

- The current focus on reducing attrition rates and improving qualification outcomes in post-16 education and training among 17-18-year olds should be sustained and should be supported by a review of the benefits of introducing a strategy to reduce ESL/EL.
- A review is needed (to coincide with the post-compulsory education and training reforms) to ensure that a coherent and consistent post-16 offer is available to all young people across Wales.
- The content of the post-16 learning offer needs to be reviewed and aligned with the objectives of the New Curriculum for Wales.
- Due consideration needs to be given to introducing legislative changes which would:

    - Embed a national policy framework for addressing ESL; and
    - Deliver greater responsibility to Welsh Government for managing welfare and support services for under-25s, potentially in partnership with DWP.
- A more rigorous and improved system of mapping and tracking the destinations of post-16 learners, potentially to the age of 24, should be developed and trialled.
- Sustained funding regimes should be introduced to support initiatives targeted at NEET prevention and reintegration measures.
- Gaps in Welsh-medium teaching and learning must be addressed.
- Research is needed to develop a greater understanding about young workers in jobs without training (and their employers) before introducing policy intervention to support their learning and wider needs.

Introduction

This review was commissioned by the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) to explore published evidence and findings from interviews with a small number of key informants which relate to raising the age of participation in education or training to the age of 18 in Wales. Its aim is to inform ministerial discussions and decisions around future policy development in this area.

Details on the approach and methodology can be seen in Annexes 1 and 2.

Context

The rationale for raising the participation age (RPA) in learning among young people centres on the argument that a prolonged period in education or training can improve all young people's qualification attainment and acquisition of skills, as well as their future earning potential. As well as potentially resulting in social and economic benefits, implementation of the RPA was also seen as a way to boost the UK's performance with regard to participation in education and training in comparison to other OECD countries (DfES, 2007). Following a period of consultation, the 2008 Education and Training Act included proposals for a future government to raise the age at which young people are expected to stay in learning in England to 17 years from 2013 and to the age of their 18th birthday from 2015. This includes young people remaining in full-time education or training or moving into full-time work with training. While these plans were implemented in England, the devolved administrations of Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland had the discretion to implement the same legislation, although, to date, they have not chosen to do so.

In Wales participation of 16-18-year-olds in education or training increased to 78.3% in 2019 compared to 77.6% in 2018 (Welsh Government, 2020). This represents a slight increase on rates reported over the previous five years, although remains lower than the rates achieved followed the 2008 economic recession, which stood at 80%. The proportion of the same age group who were NEET increased to 11.1% in 2019 from 10.6% in 2018. In 2019, 36.3% of 16-18-year-olds were in full or part-time employment, with 10.6% in employment but not in education or training. Therefore, in 2019, just over 20% of the 16-18-age cohort were not in education or training because they were either NEET or in work which did not offer accredited training.

While participation rates in post-16 learning are high among 16-year-olds, they taper off among 17- and 18-year-olds. For example, in 2019, 72.9% of 16-year-olds were in full-time education compared with 64.5% of 17-year-olds and 55.4% of 18-year-olds.

Main findings from NfER's (2007) report

A report undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NfER) in 2007 looked at international evidence on the benefits and challenges of RPA (Spielhofer et al., 2007). The report was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in England 'to explore the likely impact, benefits and challenges associated with the proposed change' (Spielhofer et al., 2007, p.1) identified in the *Raising Expectations* Green Paper (DfES, 2007). This referred to the proposal in the Green Paper that, from 2015, all young people should be required to participate in some form of education or training until the age of 18, with an interim shift, from 2013 to the age of 17.

The stated main aim of this external review was 'to collect and analyse national and international data relating to:

- the expected benefits of making education or training compulsory to the age of 18 (including the likely impact on attainment)
- the challenges likely to be involved in implementing the proposed legislation, and enforcing participation in post-16 education or training
- the range of options which will encourage young people to continue with education or training post-16, and the support they will need to enable them to make effective choices.' (Spielhofer et al., 2007, p.7-8)

The timescale of the literature search was restricted to literature which had been published since 2000.[2]

The overall conclusion reached, on the basis of their review of international literature, was that it was too early to assess the impact of changes introduced as a result of

[2] This was decided on the basis of significant policy changes relating to the school curriculum in England from 2000. Consequently, with the exception of a small number of references from the late 1990s, this limited time period was adhered to. Somewhat surprisingly, in setting out these parameters, the raising of the school leaving age (ROSLA) in 1972 was cited as potentially having 'some bearing on the proposed changes' identified in the *Raising Expectations* Green Paper, however little mention was made of it thereafter, or of the historic analysis which continues to be undertaken about its impact.

RPA type policies. This was because any such policies (and few were identified) had been implemented very recently, so that no evidence was available about cohorts who had emerged from the process. Nonetheless, the claim was made that 'increasing participation in education or training *may* have the following benefits':

This was mainly based on a raft of literature which focuses on the benefits of extended learning more generally, rather than being targeted at RPA type policies. Of principal interest for this current review are the findings relating to the impact on future wages, labour force participation and attainment. As far as the other areas are concerned, the report, while providing some discussion of the literature, acknowledges that 'in most cases, the evidence for a causal relationship was weak' (Spielhofer et al., 2007, p.46).

Future earnings

Perhaps the most compelling evidence in the report was that which identified increases in future earnings as a result of additional participation in education. Analysis of data associated with a) the increase in the compulsory school leaving age from 15 to 16 in the UK, and b) from 14 to 15 in the Republic of Ireland in 1972, pointed to annual earnings increasing by 12% (Oreopoulos, 2002). Other studies carried out in the USA, Australia, Sweden and Canada came to similar conclusions, enabling the report to conclude that 'students compelled to complete an extra grade of school have historically experienced an average increase of nine to 15% in annual income' (Spielhofer et al., 2007, p.28).

Labour market participation

A wealth of evidence cited in the review pointed to young people who participate in post-16 education or training being, in the future, more likely to be in employment and to be receiving higher wages, than their non-participating counterparts. A caveat to these findings was that it is highly likely that those who participate in education post-16 also have characteristics, in addition to their 'staying on', which would, in any case, make them more employable. Furthermore, 'vocational qualifications do not yield the same economic benefits as academic qualifications' and 'the benefits of some vocational qualifications at Level 2 or below are negligible' – although they 'may have a significant impact on young people who left school with no previous qualifications' (Spielhofer et al., 2007, p.45).

A key element in some of the studies cited is the assertion that qualification attainment is more important than length of time spent in education. One study, on the basis of analysis of the impact of legislation covering England and Wales in 1997 which required young people to remain in education until the end of the academic year in which they became 16, suggested that 'the effect of gaining a certification and not just merely length of schooling alone plays an important role in explaining future economic outcomes' (Del Bono and Galindo-Rueda, 2006, p.4). This would appear to support the case for compulsory participation, with participation until some qualification attainment had been achieved being preferable to merely time-bound compulsion.

In providing evidence relating to the potential impact of RPA on future labour market participation, the review emphasises that this was based on studies where further participation in education was 'voluntary', rather than 'compulsory'. This is important in that, as is pointed out, 'young people who choose to participate in education post-16 may share certain characteristics which make them more likely to find and remain in employment in later life' (Spielhofer et al., 2007, p.33). Another conclusion drawn from the general literature is that 'post-16 transitions are strongly linked with students' pre-16 experience of education' (Spielhofer et al., 2007, p.44). In other words, for there to be any positive effect on young people's future earnings and employment accruing from RPA, individuals' engagement with education is crucial.

Attainment

In terms of attainment, the NfER review found 'only limited evidence regarding the effect of raising compulsory school leaving ages on educational outcomes' (p 34). The evidence cited was from a study in Canada which focused on a change in school-leaving laws and found that 'a one-year increase in the number of mandatory

school years is associated with a 0.18 increase in average grade attainment, on average' (Oreopoulos, 2006, p.36). Additional evidence included that from analysis of data related to changes in the compulsory school leaving age in Sweden between 1949 and 1962 (Meghir and Palme, 1999).

Studies from the UK, Canada and Australia are cited for showing a positive impact of qualification attainment on future employment. Interestingly, it is pointed out that any evidence is derived from 'a context of voluntary participation' (Spielhofer et al., 2007, p.4) and successful participation.

'Conditions for success'

On the basis of the literature covered in the study, NfER's review sets out a number of 'conditions for success', which are considered to be essential to RPA and providing the benefits which are sought. These are:

- Enforcement which is based on incentives for young people to engage, rather than on sanctions for non-compliance.
- Guidance and support from impartial professional advisors, who can create an awareness of the full range of opportunities and possibilities available to young people.
- Providing a better and more engaging curriculum, which offers alternative pre-16 provision and 'encourages young people to want to continue learning'.
- Providing a range of post-14 and post-16 pathways which is coherent, 'suitable' and 'attractive'.
- Ensuring there is improved monitoring and tracking of young people.
- Addressing underlying social characteristics associated with non-participation. These include poverty, family background, parental support, and housing.

Caveats

The NfER report provides a wealth of well-referenced material to offer what is accurately described as 'substantive findings relating to topics closely associated with the issue of raising the age of participation' (Spielhofer et al., 2007, p.8). In doing so, it is also apparent that a number of caveats need to be taken into account when considering the relevance of the report for devising and implementing legislation for RPA. These are:

1. Due to the restricted stipulated timescale for the inclusion of published material – 'work published from 2000 onwards' – and the scarcity of examples of RPA

legislation being enacted within that period, it was unsurprising that there had not been time for evaluation of impact to be undertaken. As a result, it was stated that there was 'only limited direct evidence of the impact or challenges of raising the participation age', including the effects on educational outcomes.

2. Evidence focusing on the impact of participation in education generally is derived from cohorts of young people whose participation was 'voluntary' rather than compulsory. It is therefore unclear whether being compelled to remain in education or training post-16 would produce the long-term benefits sought by RPA.
3. While studies found associations between length of time participating in education and qualification attainment, this did not necessarily imply that there was causality i.e. a direct causal link.
4. The report was published in 2007, at a time when it was widely projected that, in the UK, a characteristic of the labour market would be a continuing growth in skilled jobs requiring qualifications, accompanied by a decline in unskilled jobs. Labour market trends since that time would call that projection into question (Clarke and Cominetti, 2019).

While NfER's report covers the challenges faced in identifying and supporting two groups of young people who do not participate in post-16 education and training, namely the NEET cohort and young people in jobs without training, no evidence is presented on how introducing compulsory school leaving age and/or RPA measures have overcome their barriers to formal learning.

Implementation of raising the participation age in England

The rationale for the RPA in England, as laid out in the Labour Government's Green Paper, *Raising Expectations: staying in education and training post-16* (DfES, 2007), centred on the argument that a prolonged period in education or training would improve all young people's qualification attainment and acquisition of skills, as well as their future earning potential. The document also highlighted the potential social and economic benefits accruing from the RPA and its capacity to boost the UK's performance with regard to participation in education and training among OECD countries (DfES, 2007, p.5). Following a period of consultation, the 2008 Education and Training Act specified that, from 2013, young people who had reached the age of 16 and who had not acquired a Level 3 qualification would have a duty to participate in education and training. This must comprise 'appropriate full-time education or

training; a contract of apprenticeship; or part-time education or training towards an accredited qualification as part of a full-time occupation or alongside an occupation of more than 20 hours a week'.[3]

The Act specifies that the Secretary of State should stagger the raising of the age of compulsory participation in England among young people to 17 years from 2013 and to their 18th birthday from 2015. However, the House of Commons Select Committee's sreport *Participation by 16-19 Year Olds in Education and Training* (2011) notes that the detail of the Act with regard to the participation of 18-year olds is largely inaccurate (Maguire, 2012):

> **"The effect of the 2008 Act is that all 16-year-olds will have to participate from 2013 onwards, as well as those who start the school year aged 16 but turn 17 during the course of the year. The effect of further raising the compulsory participation age in 2015 will be merely to extend the requirement to all 17-year-olds, and it is therefore somewhat misleading to talk about raising the participation age to 18"** (House of Commons Education Committee, 2011, para: 9).

While the original proposals set out plans to criminalise young people who failed to participate in any form of post-16 education and training (DfES, 2007), within the coalition government's implementation of the RPA, there was a lack of any form of enforcement in the immediate future, thereby implying a voluntary commitment on the part of young people to participate (DfE, 2010). Subsequently published RPA regulations and statutory guidance made clear that the duties on employers would not be implemented from 2013, although young people in full-time work will retain the responsibility to participate in some form of education or training (DfE, 2012).

The last time such a change had been introduced in the UK was in 1972, under the raising of the school leaving age (ROSLA), when the age at which young people could leave school was raised from 15 to 16. A fundamental difference between the RPA and ROSLA is that the RPA does not require young people to remain in full-time learning and offers the flexibility to combine work with training and learning. This potentially made implementation and tracking more difficult, given the differing options and pathways that young people can choose. It also requires the cooperation and monitoring of a vast array of both education and training providers, and employers. In contrast, ROSLA was relatively straightforward, although costly, since it required all young people to remain in school until the age of 16. Its foundations

[3] **http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/25/notes/division/5/1/1/1/1**

had been established in the 1944 Education Act, or Butler Act, with the delay of twenty-eight years to its implementation being due to the cost to the public purse, in terms of new school buildings and the additional teachers required to support such changes (Balls, 2007). Similar problems confronted the ROSLA from 14 to 15 years (which was also set out in the 1944 Act), although this was enforced from 1947 (Norris, 2007).

As part of the preparation for RPA, a number of phased trials were conducted in selected local authorities and sub-regions across England between 2009 and 2013. These were designed to encourage local authorities to plan, develop and implement their approaches to the RPA. The Phase 2 evaluation report concluded that, despite two years of preparation, in most cases local authorities either did not have a comprehensive plan for RPA delivery in 2013/15 or had failed to undertake a thorough analysis of the eligible cohort. In some areas, work with education and training providers was restricted to a small number, and there were no plans with regard to wider implementation (Isos Partnership, 2011, p.6).

While delays to the RPA trials were largely attributed to a protracted period of uncertainty surrounding the roll-out of the policy, following the change in government, this coincided with a fundamental shift more widely in policy direction and funding. At the end of a two-year period, trial areas had identified key challenges linked to RPA delivery due to reductions in funding and in guidance services, as well as shifts in responsibility linked to the management of schools and the commissioning of post-16 funding. For example, reductions in overall local authority budgets were predicted to impact on their ability to buy provision, maintain support systems, and to develop and monitor the necessary tracking systems for RPA delivery (Isos Partnership, 2011, p.16).

In Phases 3 (2011-12) and 4 (2012-13), there was a shift towards locally-led delivery projects (LLDPs), which focused on local areas identifying challenges to RPA delivery themselves and developing solutions specific to local circumstances. The evaluation of the Phase 4 trials concluded that:

- Both the planning for RPA and delivery of LLDPs were heavily dependent on local partnership working. Local authorities drew extensively on their existing links with local key stakeholders, including working across different local authority services, linking with training providers, working with schools and colleges, and, in some areas, employers to deliver LLDPs and to prepare for RPA delivery;
- The ethos of achieving full participation continued to be challenged by funding regimes which create competition between post-16 providers for students to enrol on programmes, and which can lead to resistance among many

providers about notifying guidance services when young people were ‘at risk’ of or when they drop out of learning. Although some effective local systems had been developed for exchanging information on young people who drop out of post-16 education and training, this tended to be limited and often subject to time-lags, to the detriment of attempts to re-engage young people;

- While, in many areas, data sharing agreements/protocols had been successfully set up and their development had often been supported by LLDP funding, these were heavily dependent upon ‘goodwill’ agreements between the local authority and local providers, with regard to the timing of its delivery and content;
- Employer engagement, particularly with regard to identifying and supporting the needs of young people in work without recognised training remained the weakest link in meeting full participation requirements. Lessons learnt from Phase 4 LLPDs indicated that systems for identifying young people who had decided to move directly into employment at the end of Year 11 needed to be established, so that their transition into employment could be supported. Also, coordinating and streamlining local efforts to improve the number of apprenticeship places open to young people proved highly effective, through simplifying processes and making the recruitment of young people more attractive to employers; and
- The Key Stage 4 Destination Measure lacked sufficient regulation to ensure that all providers shared their knowledge about young people’s transitions. There remained an underlying concern that if data was not shared in a timely, consistent and accurate way, young people who failed to participate, or who dropped out of learning, would simply fall through the net, through shortfalls in systems management, reduced information intelligence and, crucially, support and guidance from trained and impartial personnel (Maguire and Newton, 2013).

Also, with respect to meeting the needs of young people, the findings highlighted that:

- Early intervention to prevent entry to NEET status required the appointment of skilled staff capable of maintaining support to young people and securing the engagement of local stakeholders;
- An awareness of the full range of factors that may indicate risk of becoming NEET was required, as some young people who do not have characteristics that make them obvious targets for additional support may still be at risk. These factors may extend beyond those typically included in risk of NEET

indicator (RONI) tools. This had been addressed in some localities by using local intelligence in parallel with data driven tools;

- Vulnerable groups of young people often required bespoke and targeted provision to overcome their barriers to learning, which may be financially costly to local authorities and providers;
- Young people with special educational needs and disability (SEND), care leavers and young parents may benefit from enhanced careers guidance, in order to maximise their use of specific funding streams; and
- Local authorities tended to concentrate on pre-16 NEET prevention, without tackling to the same extent early intervention to prevent post-16 drop-out, especially among young people who were participating in full-time training and work. This remained an under-developed priority in preparation for the implementation of the RPA (Maguire and Newton, 2013).

Following the introduction of RPA legislation in 2013/14, participation in full-time education rose sharply in 2013 and has continued to do so, peaking in 2019 at 83.7% of 16-17-year olds. However, over the same period, increases in full-time education have been largely offset by falls in apprenticeships and other training, resulting in little change of those not in education or training (NET). The NEET rate among 16-18-year olds has continued to fall since 2013 (DfE, 2020).

While these statistics show an impressive performance in terms of school/college-based staying-on rates, the picture is less positive for training rates. Further analysis of where enhanced post-16 education is occurring (i.e. school based sixth forms, sixth form colleges or further education colleges), the effect on training provision, together with a breakdown of qualifications undertaken and achieved, as well as drop-out rates, would provide a valuable insight into the impact of RPA implementation on teaching and learning.

Early criticism of the proposed RPA implementation came from education historians who have argued that it ignored the long and widespread opposition to the reform and the fact that comprehensive discussions and preparations were made in the 1960s and the 1970s (Woodin et al., 2013). Moreover, while the legislation has largely been disabled in terms of its enforcement, the associated costs of implementation of the RPA were also sidelined. Woodin et al. (2013) state that powers granted to local authorities to commission new educational provision were later revoked and that the National Audit Office (NAO) discovered a £100 million shortfall in the estimate of the enforcement and monitoring costs of local authorities. The NAO also quoted cost-benefit figures related to implementing RPA:

> **"The (Education) Department calculated that the policy would incur annual costs of £774 million, three-quarters of which are the direct, additional costs of education and training. The estimated net annual benefit of the policy was £1,626 million (adjusted to present value), assuming a steady state of full participation by 2016-17."** (NAO, 2011, p.5).

The RPA was also operationalised over the same period of time that significant budget cuts had been made to education expenditure due to austerity measures, including:

- The withdrawal of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), which provided financial support to young people from lower income families to encourage their participation, retention and achievement in post-16 education;
- The termination of pilot policies which were designed to support young people in the NEET group and young people who had entered jobs without training following the implementation of the RPA, namely the Activity and Learning Agreement Pilots which were operational between 2006 and 2011;
- The winding up of Connexions Services which provided independent and impartial advice and guidance to young people; and
- Cuts to local education authorities, following a drive to encourage more free schools and academies, which released them from local authority control (Maguire, 2012).

Wider evidence

There is a wealth of historic and recent international evidence on the pros and cons of raising the age when young people should leave full-time learning. While the focus on raising the school leaving age to 18 rests on retaining young people in the school environment, more recent trends focus on increasing participation among 17-and 18-year olds within a wider group of settings (school, training, employment with training), which pose different challenges. Moreover, recent evidence for RPA largely concludes that any decision should be part of a wider package of retention and dropout prevention policies rather than a solitary policy change on compulsory attendance.

When appraising the literature and policy evidence on what has worked, where and in what circumstances, it is important to be mindful of a number of key factors, namely:

- ROSLA is fundamentally different from RPA, in terms of age cohort, learning environment and enforcement issues;
- Evidence on ROSLA, in most cases to 16-years (for example the UK's ROSLA in 1972), reports impacts which are largely based on historic trends in terms of labour market benefits and qualification attainment rates; and
- 'Policy borrowing' from other countries, most notably the USA and Australia, comes with a health warning in terms of the capacity and ability to transfer evidence from countries with very different educational systems and labour market conditions to other contexts.

However, there are a number of common themes that permeate the evidence base, regardless of the age category and locality, most notably:

- The decision to raise the school leaving age/participation age is driven by the perceived economic benefits and qualification gains;
- Cost and implementation issues are considerable and often underestimated;
- Enforcement is difficult and patchy beyond the confines of the school environment.

Improving qualifications and labour market outcomes

The evidence suggests that historical efforts to impose minimum compulsory schooling/learning ages have raised the educational attainment of young people, which in turn has improved important life outcomes, such as their later earnings and well-being. In recent years, the decision to extend the compulsory learning age has been strongly linked by policymakers to economic debates, especially the need to enhance skill levels and hence improve their nation's competitiveness in an increasingly globalised world through enhanced participation in learning. Also, the need to expand learning opportunities in order to tackle social justice and inclusivity issues and to reduce drop-out in learning are arguments which have been espoused to support decisions to raise the statutory (school) leaving age.

Many industrialised nations, including EU countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, as well as states in the USA, Canada and Australia, have enacted legislation in recent years to extend compulsory learning. For example, in the January 2012 State of the Union address, President Obama called on all USA states to require students to stay in school until age 18 (Mackey and Duncan, 2013 p.1). In Australia, most states had raised the school leaving age to 17 years of age by 2009, with New South Wales following in 2010 (Audit Office, 2012).

International evidence from earlier interventions that raised the school leaving age to 15 and later 16 show positive impacts on qualification attainment and labour market outcomes. Avendano et al (2020) showed that the ROSLA in 1972, which raised the age of statutory school from 15 to 16, increased the proportion of people attaining a CSE (Certificate of Secondary Education) in Great Britain by 9.0 percentage points from a baseline of 19.7%. The reform also had a statistically significant effect on the achievement of the more academic qualification, the O-level, but of a smaller magnitude (2.5 percentage points from a baseline of 49.6) than the effect on CSE. However, they asserted that a significant number of those compelled to attend a final year of secondary school 'did not gain any qualifications, which suggests that they may not have benefited much from this additional year of education' (Avendano et al., 2020, p.3). Messacar and Oreopoulos (2012) showed that within USA states:

> **"For each year the dropout age was extended above sixteen, school attainment increased by an average of 0.12 years per student. High school completion rates increased 1.3 percentage points, on average, from raising the school-leaving age from sixteen to seventeen, and 2.4 percentage points from raising it to eighteen. Raising the school-leaving age also led to an increase in college enrollment rates by 1.5 percentage points, suggesting that those encouraged to stay on and complete high school take advantage of new opportunities by pursuing college."** (Messacar and Oreopoulos, 2012 p.9)

Findings relating to the world of work focus on wage effects. Analysis of the impact of raising the school leaving age from 14 to 15 in England and Wales shows positive wage effects: Oreopoulos (2008) found that this reform resulted in a 10% increase in wages, while Chib and Jacobi (2016) estimated the wage increase at 5-6%, and Devereux and Hart (2010) showed that the reform increased wages of men by 3%. Grenet (2013), who compared the effects of raising the school leaving age from 15 to 16 years in France and in England and Wales, found that the reform did not affect wages in France, but it increased the hourly wage by 6-7% in England and Wales. Buscha and Dickson (2018) analysed the impact of the implementation of ROSLA in Northern Ireland and Scotland and demonstrated a positive impact on young people's wages in Scotland. Further afield:

- Messacar and Oreopoulos (2012) found that in the US, among those working more than twenty-five hours per week, a year of compulsory schooling was associated with a 10.7% increase in annual earnings. The sample included twenty- to twenty-nine-year-olds who were aged sixteen between 1970 and 2001;

- Fischer et al. (2016) found that extended compulsory education from six to seven years in Sweden in the years 1930-1950 brought a positive wage premium (2%) to women;
- Meghir and Palme (2005) showed that extending compulsory schooling from seven/eight to nine years in Sweden during 1949–1962 led to a 3.4% increase in the wages of young people from low socio-economic groups; and
- Liwinski (2020) examined the effects of the education reform implemented in Poland in 1966, which extended the minimum school leaving age from 14 to 15 years, to determine its impact on hourly wage and employability. The evidence showed that the reform had no impact on women's hourly wages and had a negative impact on men's hourly wages.

Also, Grenet (2011) showed that the ROSLA reform in 1972 in England and Wales had a positive effect on raising literacy standards; increased qualification outcomes (in particular among girls); and improved wage returns. These improvements were not attributed solely to the retention of young people in learning for longer periods of time. The study compared outcomes in France, where it was found that the returns from extended schooling were negligible. This suggests that the difference between the two countries was the type and nature of learning and its relevance to the labour market. Thus, the enhanced qualifications achieved in England and Wales had a pronounced impact on young people's labour market outcomes. This raises the important question of the value of imposing extended periods of learning on young people without there being concomitant beneficial impact on their future labour market trajectories.

Australia New South Wales (NSW)

The NSW Government passed laws to raise the school leaving age from 15 to 17 years of age, effective from 1 January 2010. In NSW, the year 12 completion rate of 71.1% remained below the national average of 75.3% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Discussion to support proposed changes to the school leaving age also centred on economic benefits; most notably, operating in an increasingly globalised world was one of the reasons invoked by the NSW Government in explaining its decision to increase the school leaving age to parents. (Reid and Young, 2012). An enhanced curriculum offer coupled with flexible learning programmes and targeted careers advice were to be made available to help students choose suitable options. The NSW Government estimated that student numbers would increase gradually to about 8,900 additional students per year, either at school or in vocational education and training programmes. To support this initiative, the NSW Government estimated that more than $300 million would be required over four years from 2009-10 to support government schools and the Technical and Further Education Commission (TAFE). Both young people and parents face legal action for non-compliance.

A report by the Audit Office (2012) who undertook a review of the implementation of the changes overseen by the Department of Education and Communities found that: it was unable to quantify non-participation rates; suspension rates had increased; and more students who remained at school until 17 years of age were disengaged. While it was expected that enrolments on vocational education and training programmes would increase due to extended participation rates, TAFE course enrolments had decreased by 4,146, or over 13%, among 15-17-year-olds. A survey of government school students affected by the raised school leaving age found that programmes and pathways varied greatly from school to school, with small, isolated schools having fewer opportunities (Audit Office, 2012).

Reid and Young (2012) examined the impact of what they perceived to be hastily introduced changes to the school leaving age in NSW on ethnically diverse schools and for students with learning and behavioural issues. They reported that many schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods which were often required to support an increased number of learners with a diverse range of needs, were struggling to do so, due to inadequate resources, 'lack of opportunity or too much competition for opportunities and limited pathways' (p.795). Moreover, they argued that their findings resonate with those of Billett et al. (2010) who asserted that many of the schools most impacted by the change in leaving age are exactly those which lack the means to take advantage of the opportunities it might offer.

Costs, capacity and implementation

Looking at evidence from the USA, where over recent years a number of states have implemented legislation to ensure that young people remain in education (and in some cases training or work), provides an insight and overview of cost, capacity and implementation issues. Eleven states raised their compulsory school attendance age during 2002-11,[4] and in states such as Oklahoma, Oregon and Utah, this provision has been in operation for over twenty years. The extent to which legislation is enforced varies considerably. For example, in some states, young people can drop out of education if they can secure employment, while in others, students can leave education subject to parental consent. Implementing the legislation to reduce drop-out rates may include fines, termination of driving privileges or youth detention, although, in the majority of cases, enforcement is not rigorous. Significantly, early evidence showed that there were no differences in drop-out rates or post-16 attainment rates between states with different leaving ages (Oreopoulos, 2005).

Proponents of extending the school/learning age point to historic evidence on enhanced wage potential, qualification gains, enhanced skills levels, as well reduced crime and teenage pregnancy rates, which are offset against additional costs of teaching, infrastructure requirement and attendance monitoring regimes. For example, Messacar and Oreopoulos (2012) estimate:

> **"roughly a 10 percent increase in annual income, on average, from nudging a student to stay a year in school. This means that the lifetime-earnings increase from finishing high school and joining the labor force at age eighteen rather than exiting high school at age sixteen is approximately $226,700 over the course of one's life. When we correct for the fact that much of this income comes long after the high school years, this sum is equivalent to a one-time payment of $94,300 at the age of sixteen (when individuals are facing the decision of whether to drop out)."** (Messacar and Oreopoulos, 2012, p.18)

They calculate the additional direct costs from a combination of recruiting more teachers, building new schools, or increasing class sizes, as well as additional welfare support staff and estimate that a state would pay almost $25,000 to keep a sixteen-year-old dropout in school through graduation. However, they argue that additional school capacity may already exist, which may reduce costs to $10,000 or

[4] Alabama, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, South Dakota, and West Virginia.

$15,000 for each additional student. Indirect costs include larger class sizes, the management of increased incidences of disruptive behaviour among students and potentially violent and criminal activity in schools (Messacar and Oreopoulos, 2012, p.18). No indirect costs are provided nor estimated costs of how any changes to the curriculum, which would be needed to meet the requirements of a broader cohort of learners, would be met.

To support the state of Maryland in its implementation of its recently raised compulsory school attendance age from 16 to 18 (from 16 to 17 at the beginning of the 2014/15 school year and from 17 to 18 at the beginning of the 2016/17 school year), a review of USA-based evidence was commissioned (Mackey and Duncan, 2013). The review found wide variations in estimates of the cost of raising the compulsory school attendance age, which are often part of the debate preceding enactment of new legislation. The Department of Legislative Services developed a Fiscal and Policy Note for Maryland, which predicted increased general fund expenditures of $8.8 million in fiscal 2017, $35.6 million in fiscal 2018, and about $71.2 million in fiscal 2020, plus additional costs for classroom facilities in some districts. They also report evidence from other research which found 'the costs for additional teachers and classrooms are likely to be minimal because compliance … will be low' (Whitehurst and Whitfield, 2012, p.6).

Mackey and Duncan also found a limited number of studies on outcomes related to a higher compulsory school attendance age, with many of them being methodologically flawed. None of the eleven USA states which were under scrutiny as part of the review reported any relevant studies, reports, or organised efforts to track outcomes subsequent to changes in the compulsory student attendance law.

A review of the evidence on dropout and truancy highlighted that, while some national or multistate studies have documented associations between compulsory school attendance age and positive education outcomes, such as higher high school attendance rates, lower dropout rates, and increased educational attainment, some of the datasets used were outdated. One study found that a one-year increase in the compulsory school attendance age was associated with a 0.07 year increase (approximately 26 days) in the time the average student stays in school (Oreopoulos, 2007). Another study suggested that compulsory school attendance age 'had a weak relationship with dropout timing (during higher grades rather than lower ones) and no meaningful relationship with completing high school', with no significant correlations between dropout rates and increases in compulsory attendance ages (Landis and Reschly, 2011). A further study showed that when controlling for student demographics, no positive impact on state graduation rates was observed as a result of increasing the school leaving age to 18 (Whitehurst and Whitfield, 2012).

A review of the evidence on school crime drew on the findings of Gilpin and Pennig (2012), who reported that raising the school leaving age from 16 to 17 years in USA states was not linked to an increase of in-school crime, while raising the age to 18 years was associated with an increase of 6.2% in four out of the five states that formed part of the study. Raising the school leaving age to 18 was also linked to higher suspension rates and lower exclusion rates. Another study found that a higher compulsory attendance age was correlated with decreased property and drug crimes among male students because potential perpetrators are required to be in school (Chan, 2012). Finally, research which examined specific in-school problems associated with higher compulsory attendance ages identified a greater propensity for female students and younger students to miss school due to concerns about their personal safety at school, as well as being subject to in-school theft (Anderson, Hansen, and Walker, 2012).

Mixed messages were reported in Mackay and Duncan's (2013) review with regard to enhanced social outcomes that are accrued from higher compulsory age attendance. For example, one study concluded that the quality of education declined following the enactment of stricter compulsory school attendance laws over 1917-39 (Sansani, 2010). Another study reported mixed results, with above average students taking more honours classes and college entrance exams and below-average students receiving a lower quality education because they share classrooms with students who would otherwise have dropped out (Luppino, 2011).

Overall, the main finding from Mackey and Duncan's review was as follows:

> **"The evidence for raising the compulsory school attendance age is inconclusive, so no clear policy implications can be drawn on the merits of such policies. Most of the recent studies conclude that any decision to raise the compulsory school attendance age should be part of a package of retention and dropout prevention policies rather than a solitary policy change."** (Mackay and Duncan, 2013 p.3)

A lack of evidence about preparation and impact following legislation to implement policies to higher compulsory age attendance is echoed in research findings from other countries/ states. For example, from 2008, young people in the state of Western Australia were required to remain in education, training, or approved employment until the year in which they turn 17. Hodgson (2019) reported that shortly after the implementation of the raised school leaving age (and despite a raft of programmes and interventions targeting at-risk young people), the Western Australian Auditor General concluded that school attendance was declining and post-16 providers' attendance policies and strategies failed to capture the causes and reasons for non-attendance. A more extreme example emanates from Hungary,

where the Public Education Act (1996) increased compulsory school attendance from age 16 to age 18, requiring students to spend two more years in the education system. The legislation affected students starting elementary school in September 1998, thereby providing the education system with a significant amount of time to prepare for change. Adamecz-Volgyi (2018) shows that despite the significant lead-in time, schools were unprepared for change, in terms of managing larger cohorts of young people and, more specifically, engaging unmotivated students in learning and developing courses targeted at disadvantaged and/or low ability students. Consequently, the National Public Education Act (2011) reduced the compulsory school age from 18 years back to 16 years, starting from September 2012. Moreover, statistical analysis demonstrated that raising the compulsory school leaving age had a disproportionate impact on vocational schools, which experienced raised drop-out rates, a decrease in the quality of teaching and a shift in student composition to include more students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Adamecz-Volgyi, 2018, p.1).

Finally, relating teachers' performance to the raising of the school leaving age, Green and Paniagua Navarro (2012) examined the impact of the increase in the school leaving age that occurred in Spain in the academic year 1998-1999. Their results showed that the policy led to increases in teachers' absence through illness by roughly 15%, rising to almost 50% in regions that traditionally had lower post-compulsory school participation. They highlight research evidence that links teacher absenteeism with lower student performance and conclude that increasing the compulsory school leaving age has the potential to reduce educational quality (Green and Paniagua Navarro, 2012, p.1018).

Enforcement

An array of sanctions exists to address non-participation, in particular across North America. These include fines, prison sentences, community service orders (parents), and suspension of young people's driving licences. In the Netherlands, incremental fines are imposed on parents to stem persistent non-school attendance among young people. While sanctions are in place in many countries, evidence about the scale of enforcement and, crucially, the impact of either the threat of sanctions or their enforcement is hard to find. Lambert et al. (2015) argue that such absence of detail about a country's or state's participation policy may suggest that policymakers have not fully thought through the implementation of enforcement or are uncertain as to how the policy will be received by local agencies which would be required to enforce it.

Messacar and Oreopoulos (2012) highlighted that imposing restrictions on driving privileges has been shown to be a successful deterrent to non-compliance. However, in their review of sanctions which had been applied across USA states, they maintained that punitive measures are often not strictly enforced, for reasons of cost. Participation in counselling and mentoring programmes is offered before pursuing court action and imposing financial penalties.

Ontario, Canada

In 2005, the province raised the age of compulsory learning from 16 to 18 with legal enforcement. It was accompanied by a programme of learning designed to offer a flexible learner-led curriculum, as well as an expansion of the teaching resource to meet the demands of extended participation in learning. Young people are offered a range of positive incentives to stay on in schooling and to achieve a qualification in its Student Success/Learning to 18 (SS/L18) Strategy, including a more diverse and vocational curriculum in upper secondary schools. The aim of the programme was to encourage the development of innovative and flexible educational opportunities to meet students' differing needs and to foster positive student engagement with education. It included the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Programme (OYAP), which is a school-to-work transition programme offered through secondary schools and supported by the introduction of a training tax credit to employers (OECD, 2008). Within the legislation, there were court sanctions for 16-17-year olds who failed to comply, including the possibility that the courts could suspend the driver's licence of a student convicted of truancy. It also included sanctions for parents convicted of neglecting or refusing to send 16-17-year olds to school and for employers convicted of employing 16-17-year olds during school hours where students are not legally excused from attending school.

The evaluation of the Ontario Ministry of Education's SS/L18 Strategy found that the programme: focuses on learner needs; promotes inter-agency working; encourages flexibility in provision; expands choice; and increases a focus on tracking and monitoring students. The evaluation reported that the SS/L18 Strategy was improving the learning conditions for, and success of, secondary students in Ontario (Ungerleider, 2008). While there is little evidence about the extent to which sanctions are applied to young people, their parents or employers, between 2004 and 2010 there was a 13 percentage point increase in diploma graduation rates. A caveat here is that this achievement is not necessarily attributable to a single policy intervention.

Wider social and economic outcomes

There are a number of studies which have examined the impact of ROSLA on wider social outcomes, most notably on reducing teenage pregnancy rates, youth crime rates and reducing health inequalities, as well as enhancing participation in civic duties e.g. voting. Less robust data exists on the short- and long-term effects on reducing NEET and unemployment levels.

Messacar and Oreopoulos (2012), using various USA states' recent changes to the minimum school leaving age, estimated that each year of additional schooling a student receives:

- Lowers the probability that they will end up unemployed by 3.6 percentage points;
- Lowers the likelihood of them being on welfare by 5.5 percentage points; and
- Lowers the likelihood of them being below the poverty line by 8.1 percentage points.

Estimates of the impact of raising the compulsory school leaving age on reducing NEET rates are missing from the evidence base. However, data from the OECD showed that countries with much higher proportions of young people in post-compulsory education than the UK (for example, Belgium, Poland and Ireland) reported much higher than average rates of youth unemployment (OECD, 2010, p.28). Thus, extending participation in learning may not necessarily make a significant difference to youth unemployment or NEET rates.

In terms of improvements made to intergenerational educational mobility, Sturgis and Buscha (2015) found largely no effect emanating from the increase in compulsory school leaving age in England and Wales in 1972. In Germany, Betthäuser (2017) reported improved educational attainment among middle income households, compared to the most advantaged group, due to the increase in compulsory school leaving age. Grätz (2019) analysed data across Austria, Denmark, France, and the Netherlands, and argued:

> **"Results suggest that increasing compulsory school leaving age did increase educational mobility for men and women in France but left the intergenerational transmission of education unaffected for men and women in Austria, Denmark, and the Netherlands. These findings show that the effects of reforms in compulsory school leaving age on intergenerational mobility can be moderated by the societal contexts in which these reforms occur. Results are in line with a hypothesis according to which the effects of compulsory school leaving age reforms are more pronounced in contexts of low educational attainment."** (Grätz, 2019, p.2).

Health impacts from raising the age of compulsory learning have been examined by a number of researchers, given that educational participation is closely linked to achieving better health outcomes among the general population. Courtin et al. (2019), examined the health benefits derived from increasing the school leaving age

in France from 14-16 years in 1959 and found that increased participation did not achieve improved health outcomes in adulthood. They concluded:

> **"We found no evidence of positive health benefits of increased schooling on biological markers of health, and some evidence of worsening blood pressure and inflammation for participants from lower parental social class. Law-mandated increases in schooling may not bring health benefits to respondents from disadvantaged backgrounds, if longer schooling is not translated into improved intermediate socio-economic outcomes. Our findings do not necessarily question the notion that education leads to better health but suggest that law-mandated increases in schooling duration alone may not be sufficient to improve the health of disadvantaged groups."** (Courtin et al., 2019, p.379).

Courtin et al. (2019) also pointed to similar findings from a study conducted by Jürges et al. (2013) who found no significant effect of two British compulsory schooling reforms on biomarkers of inflammation and chronic stress for the total population. Avendano et al. (2020) analysed the mental health impacts from the introduction of the ROSLA in 1972 in Great Britain and found that enforced participation had a negative impact on the mental health of some groups of young people, most notably those who would have preferred to move into the labour market rather than spend another year at school. Moreover, they reported that the additional year of schooling had no positive effect on mental health and, for some individuals, increased self-reports of diagnosis of depression and anxiety disorder.

Wilson (2017) explored the effect of ROSLA in England and Wales in 1972 on fertility rates. She found that extended participation in education had deferred fertility from the early to late teenage years, with a large increase in the incidence of fertility at age 19. The impact of the increase in compulsory education dissipated after age 20.

Early school leaving (ESL)/ Early leaving (EL)

If RPA is a possible route to enhancing the life chances of more young people through extended participation in education and training, then evidence relating to the issue of early school-leaving (ESL)/early leaving (EL) should also be taken into consideration, notably in terms of:

- Their reasons for leaving education before reaching the point at which attendance in education is no longer compulsory;
- The impact which leaving education at this point can have on their post-education trajectories; and
- Policies and practices which have been introduced to address the 'problem' of ESL.

Debates about ESL/EL focus on the premise that policy and intervention should prioritise a strategy which includes preventative and reintegration measures, in order to maximise and enhance young people's participation in learning.

What is early school leaving?

There is no universal definition of early school leavers, who may be termed 'dropouts', or, on occasion, incorporated in the NEET (not in education, employment or training) category. In Europe, the definition tends to be age-related and predominantly refers to those leaving education at the end of compulsory education. The definition used by the European Commission (2013), reduces it to 'young people aged 18-24 who have only lower secondary education or less and are no longer in education or training' (p.8).

In contrast, in the United States, although there is no agreed definition of ESL, it tends to be used in the literature to describe those who leave full-time education before graduation and therefore do not gain their high school diploma (Neild and Balfanz, 2006). Approaches to identifying ESL in the USA are therefore focused on those who are likely to drop out of school before a specific level of qualification attainment.

A similar distinction is made by Estêvão and Álvares (2014) between functional and formal dropout, with the former emphasising 'the legal aspects of leaving school before completing compulsory education' (EASNIE, 2016, p.15) and the latter focusing on leaving school 'without adequate skills, knowledge or qualifications to deal with adult life and employment' (p.5). This clearly suggests that dropping out is likely to have long-term negative consequences for those who do so.

In the absence of any formal definition of 'dropout', an array of literature highlighted by EASNIE (2016, p.49) differentiates 'dropout' as an outcome into distinct processes, principally:

- **Push-out:** This suggests that it is factors within the school system which lead young people to drop out. These could include: poor attendance; being subject

to school discipline policies; consequences of bad behaviour; being expelled; and poor exam results.

- **Pull-out:** Students who are 'pulled out' from school are those who make the decision to withdraw as a result of factors such as: financial worries; being offered employment; caring for a family member; childbirth; being involved in criminal activity; and illness (Doll et al., 2013, p.2).
- **Fall-out:** Here, students disengage from school as a result of factors such as: student apathy; not completing schoolwork; and insufficient educational support.

Other labels attached to dropout include 'opt out', 'fade out', 'ease out', 'early departure', 'non-completion', and 'leaving' (EASNIE, p.14).

Causes and effects

Notwithstanding the differences in definitions and a variety of policy approaches, Dale characterised ESL as a process resulting from:

> **"interaction between family and social background, and school processes and experiences. It is the culmination of what is usually a long process that often begins before a young person enters school"** (Dale, 2020, p.5)

He subsequently pointed to there being a 'continuing broad consensus on ESL's causes and effects' (p.9). Certainly, a plethora of references exist to support the case for 'social background' being the principal 'risk factor' for ESL.

The literature offers a range of categorisations of the 'risk factors' or 'indicators' of the causes of ESL. On the basis of the 'many studies (which) have identified predictors and variables associated with dropout' in the United States, Lehr et al. (2004, p.16) differentiated between:

(a) **status variables**, which are defined as variables that are difficult and unlikely to change, such as 'socioeconomic standing, disability or ability level, family structure'; and

(b) **alterable variables**, which are easier to change, particularly through the inputs of parents, teachers, etc. such as 'attendance, identification with school'.

In the UK, a report by the Social Exclusion Unit (2000) differentiated between 'risk factors' and 'adverse outcomes', with the risk factors falling into three categories of family, school and community, and the adverse outcomes including drug abuse, youth

crime, school-age pregnancy, school failure, marital, health problems and homelessness.

In Australia, Hull (2005) presented a whole range of 'risk factors' which could be encompassed in the broader categories of: behaviour; attitude; and levels of literacy and numeracy. The risk factors associated with the likelihood of becoming 'at risk' were grouped into:

- Community and family risk factors (a total of 16 factors);
- Personal risk factors (19 factors); and
- School-based risk factors (12 factors).

Dale (2010) sought to draw together findings from a range of disparate studies to provide an 'All Factors Framework', which 'locates the range of factors which increase the risk of ESL within five levels:

- Family and Community
- Schooling
- Pupil and Peers
- The Education System
- Employment and Training' (Dale, 2010, p.17)

More recently, a comprehensive review of the literature asserted that, rather than a single cause of ESL, there are 'multiple risk factors and protective factors' at play, which relate to 'individual characteristics, family background, schools, education systems and wider social and economic conditions' (EASNIE, 2016, p.5). Drawing on a wide range of studies, this report identified three distinct areas of risk factors. These are:

1. **Family factors**, including:
    - parental social economic status;
    - parental educational level;
    - parental support and interest in their child's education;
    - household composition;
    - family stability;
    - being looked after or in care;
    - material resources in the home;

- single parent household; and
- being an immigrant.

2. **Individual factors**, including:
    - academic ability;
    - future aspirations;
    - school motivation;
    - low self-esteem; and
    - academic self-concept.

3. **Wider social factors** that tend to be focused on school, including:
    - school composition; and
    - supportive teachers.

Impact

Overall, the literature concludes that ESL has a negative effect, for example:

> **"Early school leaving (ESL) is costly for the individual, for society and for the economy. Not just in economic terms, but also in terms of low self-esteem, and the risk of social exclusion. More, and, in particular, better education can lead to positive outcomes, in relation to employment, level of salaries, better health, less crime, higher social cohesion, lower public and social costs, and higher productivity."** (Oomen and Plant, 2014, p.5).

The first part of this quotation echoes Dale's conclusion that, in addition to the adverse effects on individuals, ESL 'generates enormous fiscal and social costs across societies through the burdens it creates for a range of public services' (Dale, 2010, p.10). In 2009, it was estimated that ESL in Canada was costing over $37.1 billion per year through lower productivity, lower tax revenues and higher welfare payments (Dale, 2010, p.5).

The impact of ESL on individuals is considerable, as it has been associated with unemployment, lower earnings, work in blue collar occupations and precarious and unstable employment (Dale, 2010, p.49). Other consequences of ESL are a greater propensity to experience: unplanned/early pregnancy; crime; violence; alcohol and drug abuse; suicide; reliance on welfare benefits; and shorter life expectancy (Dale,

2020, p.32). This evidence was derived from a study in Europe and four non-European OECD countries (namely USA, Australia, Canada and Japan) (GHK, 2005). Similar consequences were identified in a 2014 EU report (European Commission, 2014). The European Commission report *Tackling Early Leaving* cites studies from France, Finland, Scotland, and Europe-wide studies which have produced calculations of the financial impact of ESL related to healthcare, criminal justice and social benefit payments (European Commission, 2014, p.23).

Policies and strategies

In terms of policies to address ESL, there is broad agreement about the need to have both policies which seek to prevent ESL happening and those which seek to re-integrate young people who have already left the education system. The distinction between 'preventive' and 'reintegration' strategies is of crucial importance in deciding when and where mechanisms for establishing risk factors are introduced and is reflected in the strategy of the European Union as set out in the 2011 Council Recommendation on policies to reduce ESL. This was built around three types of approaches:

Prevention policies

The main objective here is to 'tackle ESL before its first symptoms are visible' (European Commission, 2013, p.18). Key components include:

- Providing high-quality early childhood education and care;
- Increasing education by providing education and training beyond compulsory education;
- Promoting inclusive policies and providing additional support for schools in poorer areas;
- Supporting children from different ethnic groups and linguistic diversity; and
- Improving parents' involvement in education.

Intervention policies

Here, the objective is to 'transform schools into inspiring and comfortable environments which would encourage young people to continue education' (Przybylski, 2014, p.160). Components include:

- Monitoring students at greatest risk of ESL;
- Developing networks to involve parents and the local community;

- Supporting teachers to work with students at risk and to tailor their teaching methods to individual student needs;
- Providing mentoring support for students with special educational needs; and
- Providing financial support for learners from low socio-economic status backgrounds (EASNIE, 2016, p.32).

Compensatory policies

These are targeted at young people who left school early and should be offered a 'second chance' through transition classes; having informal education accrued out of school validated; and the provision of social, financial, educational and psychological support.

This whole approach resonates with that of Dale (2010, p.7), who suggested pre-emptive strategies; addressing system-cultural factors; targeted support for at-risk students; and school-wide strategies, including developing more attractive curricula with vocational content.

Similarly, Lyche (2010, p.7) insisted that 'single strand solutions' are insufficient and that a wide range of coordinated measures, with flexibility to adapt to local circumstances, should be implemented. These would include:

- **Preventive measures** focusing on cognitive and non-cognitive skills, parental involvement, and social support for families;
- **Transition support** in schools, with high expectations for students, substance abuse programmes, peer tutoring and programmes to tackle risky behaviour;
- **Individual support and mentoring** for students who are struggling; and
- The development of **coherent ESL programmes**.

A common thread in these strategic approaches is the insistence that intervention at an early stage of a young person's participation in the education system is essential. Moreover, it needs to be supported by mechanisms to provide mapping and tracking of students throughout their education. In their study of ESL among the member states, the EU (2011) highlighted examples of tracking systems which had been or were in the process of being introduced.

A student monitoring database and e-tracking portal introduced in the Netherlands in the national policy framework for ESL (EU, 2011, p.70) provides an example of an early warning system. It applies the student registration system to produce data at local, regional and national levels, mapped to socio-economic data including ethnicity data, unemployment rates and social benefits. As such, it places the behaviour of

individual pupils (in terms of attendance) in their local context. Decisions on action to be taken (if any) based on the model's attendance data are completed by officers of agencies which are external to the school. It also has a 'School Dropout Explorer', which is 'an interactive tool that provides quantitative data on ESL, and background information including educational programmes, project examples and regional contacts'. It makes trends in ESL easier to detect and monitor by providing comparable data by region, educational institution and school years (EU, 2011, p.224).

Comparisons between countries that have been more successful in maintaining low levels of unemployment and inactivity among 15-19-year olds (Austria, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland), and less effective countries (Australia), suggest the following potential underlying factors (Sweet, 2012, p.iv-v):

- **Institutional arrangements**, such as having longer upper secondary programmes, which therefore retain young people in education and training;
- The existence of **strong apprenticeship systems**, supported by employers and trade unions, which facilitate youth transitions; and
- Placing emphasis on **preventing early school leaving**, rather than relying on re-integration measures once dropout has occurred.

While there is little evidence available to suggest that RPA would have a positive impact on ESL, two studies conducted in the USA have generated interesting findings. Analysis of a national data set for academic years 2001-02 to 2005-06 in order to explore drop-out rates by state, region of the country, and compulsory school attendance ages of 16, 17, and 18 implied that 'the compulsory school attendance age had a small relationship with the timing of dropout but no meaningful relationship with high school graduation' (Landis and Reschly, 2011, p.719). Furthermore, 'no discernible pattern of reductions in drop-out rates was evident for states that raised their attendance ages'. A review of research examining the effectiveness of compulsory attendance laws in Massachusetts in reducing the dropout rate and increasing the graduation rate concluded that, while there was need to instigate a response the dropout crisis, there was a lack of evidence to support the raising of the compulsory school participation age (Norton et al., 2009).

Implications of raising the participation age in Wales

Key informant interviews

As part of this short evidence review, video interviews were conducted with nine key informants, who included senior policymakers, as well as senior representatives from organisations which play a key role in post-16 education and training across Wales. The purpose of the interviews was to elicit the informants' views on the current education, employment and training (EET) landscape in Wales, the need for change and whether RPA in Wales merits implementation.

Overview of the current post-16 education/employment/training landscape

While there was an overall consensus that a range of post-16 education and training provision does exist across Wales, there were a number of issues raised in relation to its reach, duplication, accessibility and perceived value. The following key issues were highlighted:

The academic and vocational divide

The academic and vocational divide continues to dominate and shape post-16 learning, including:

- **Perception:** There remains a widespread view among many young people, their parents and peers that academic learning delivered in a traditional sixth form environment offers a higher standard and quality of provision and opportunity in comparison to vocational learning offered in a further education (FE) setting. Moreover, academic learning delivered in an FE environment was also reported to suffer from the same 'image' issue. In the view of a number of key informants, this points to a need for improved information, advice and guidance to young people and their parents, in order to dispel negative and misinformed perceptions about the range and quality of the post-16 offer available within and between localities. In particular, the influence of

peers, families and some community held beliefs need to be changed, in order to broaden take-up of vocational education options.

- **Management:** Vocational and academic learning is split at government, regional and local level. There was a consensus that despite attempts to harmonise the vocational and academic post-16 offer, it remains fractured by schools and FE colleges being managed by different divisions within Welsh Government and separated at regional and local level, i.e. four regional schools networks and three different regional skills partnerships; separate funding arrangements; and with FE colleges being independent from local authority control. Furthermore, there is a 'fudginess' in the governance and accountability arrangements between local authorities and regional school consortia. Differences are also compounded through separate governance arrangements existing within schools and colleges, in terms of their working conditions, employment contracts and leadership/ professional standards. Work-based learning providers also have their own management structure, contracting arrangements and staff terms and conditions. In terms of responsiveness to labour market needs, concern was expressed about the lag between a case for the new provision in FE being initiated and new courses to meet current and future skill needs being established.
- **Competition:** The separation in governance and management arrangements between schools and FE colleges creates competition and, too often, works against the interests of achieving a cohesive post-16 education and training offer. Crucially, institutional funding incentives and arrangements often mitigate against supporting the interests of individual learners. While there have been attempts to engender partnership links at local levels to develop an integrated post-16 offer, and some examples of good practice do exist across Wales, they remain dependent upon individualised links and relationships.

"….there are a few areas in the 14-19 networks where they still have strategic partnerships and collaborative links but in other areas it is down to good relations between local providers, e.g. Welsh-medium schools and in some areas in the North West, they had money from networks and then used EU money and have developed a common offer… In other areas it has gone back to competition between providers a) because of a lack of focus and b) policy has changed and that sense of community working has gone." (Interviewee 5)

Young people in the labour market

Aligned to the argument set out above about the disparity in value attached to vocational learning, was a strength of feeling that, despite Welsh Government's

attempts to develop a vibrant post-16 apprenticeship route, it remains a second-rate option in the eyes of too many young people. It was asserted that greater efforts need to be made and sustained to promote the apprenticeship route to young people in schools. This includes tackling the misperceptions which influence young people's choices, in particular, from peer group and family influence. Moreover, despite salient efforts to improve awareness raising among young people about the range of post-16 options, too many young people take the 'safe' option of remaining in school.

Despite increases in post-16 learning rates in Wales in recent years, there remains a persistent number of young people who drop out of school at the earliest opportunity and move into work without training. While in some parts of Wales it was reported that this includes young people who move into family businesses and train 'on the job', data and profiling about this group of learners is largely unknown, Crucially, this includes information about how young people access employment, their working conditions, the nature of work undertaken and its sustainability. Moreover, little is known about their employers and their willingness and capacity to offer young people training if it was made available to them via apprenticeships or traineeships. There was a clear signal that more needs to be known about young people who enter the labour market under the age of 18, if the participation age in learning was going to be increased.

Young people in the NEET group

While there was an overall consensus that young people in the NEET group were a high priority in policy making and provision in Wales, in terms of both preventative and reintegration measures, the sustainability of funding to support interventions was raised as an issue of concern. Most specifically, this was linked to some NEET interventions being underpinned by ESF/EU funding and uncertainty about future funding mechanisms to support young people at risk of dropping out of learning, as well as young people who had entered the NEET group before the age of 18.

Pre-16 learning

A number of respondents raised concerns about the quality and content of pre-16 education and its impact on the propensity for some groups of young people to participate and complete post-16. Some of this concern centred around the qualification system and the drive to improve qualification outcomes, at the expense of meeting individual learner needs.

> **"Can you imagine being told at the age of 15 because of the tiered system that all you will get is a D grade but the golden ticket is C grade and above, why would you bother?....The system is baking in**

failure and only those who have specific advantages are able to take benefit from it." (Interviewee 4)

"The intervention at 16 to tackle NEET status is only demonstrating the failure that they have received before." (Interviewee 2)

Specific issues were raised with regard to vulnerable groups of learners and the narrowing of curriculum options to meet their needs due to the focus on the teaching of English and maths. It was reported that a reduced number of vocational options were available to young people in schools or in schools working in partnerships with colleges, specifically Level 1 course provision. While young apprenticeship programmes for 14-16-year olds were found to be effective, they can lead to some young people being dual registered, and their examination results become effectively 'hidden' to protect school performance figures. A similar issue relates to some young people's enrolment at pupil referral units.

A number of interviewees expressed concern about the extent to which post-16 learning and, more specifically, FE colleges were a compensation tool for a number of learners who had been failed by the compulsory school system. Specific attention was drawn to the large amounts of time having to be spent by college staff to enable learners to acquire or re-learn skills they should have learnt at school. Akin to this point was comment on the lack of formal arrangements that exist between many schools and colleges to support students' transitions at 16, specifically with regard to sharing information about issues which may place a student at risk of dropping out of learning.

"It feels that each phase of a learner's experience, lest that be primary, secondary or post-16, is looked at in isolation rather than a journey through the whole process. There are a lot of silos. I referred to it recently as a relay race and you should always pass the baton on (the learner) with responsibility. In too many instances, people are passing the baton on without ownership of what happened before." (Interviewee 3)

Transport

Transport continues to be regarded as a significant problem. The cost, time commitment and complexity of transporting learners to other providers, particularly in rural areas, are practical barriers to collaborative working and the rationalisation of provision. Distance learning, video conferencing and tutors travelling between sites were at the early stages of development and implementation before the Coronavirus pandemic, although valuable good practice should be shared and further developed.

Potential change and its implementation

While there was widespread agreement that young people across Wales should participate in some form of learning until the age of 18, there were mixed views about how this might be achieved. Discussion focused on the merits and pitfalls of introducing RPA legislation to enforce young people to remain in learning and the alternative option of introducing policy changes which would be designed to encourage and extend participation, retention and achievement in post-16 learning. An overarching view was that young people should be offered a range of post-16 options (education, employment and training), and that a compulsory school-based post-16 route would be too narrow a choice for some groups of young people. Moreover, while nearly 90% of young people in Wales currently transition into education or training beyond the current statutory school leaving age of 16, retention and achievement rates among 17-18-year-olds are much lower. This suggests there is a need for intervention.

Significant importance was attached to changes that will be introduced through the New Curriculum for Wales within pre-16 learning, as well as the proposed reforms in compulsory education, and post-compulsory education and training (PCET), as key developments for necessitating change in the post-16 arena. Some respondents argued that the ambitious changes that will be made to pre-16 learning will need to be supported by complementary changes to post 16-learning from 2027, when the first cohort of new curriculum learners will complete Year 11. This presents an opportunity to look at how a harmonised post-16 offer with clear pathways can be achieved. Also, the PCET, subject to legislation, will establish the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) as a single, strategic authority responsible for overseeing all aspects of post-compulsory education and training by 2023. The purpose of setting up the Commission is to strengthen and simplify the post-16 sector

in Wales and to make learning opportunities more relevant and responsive to the needs of learner.[5]

Applying compulsion to improve participation, retention and achievement rates in post-16 learning

A number of issues were raised about the introduction of RPA legislation in Wales, in relation to its impact, funding and implementation. On the positive side, it was argued that the introducion of RPA legislation would raise expectations among young people, their peers, parents, and employers that learning must continue beyond the age of 16 and, in doing so, would increase participation rates at the end of Year 11. However, doubts were raised about the need to apply legislation, when the majority of 16-year-olds currently remain in some form of learning. There remained an underpinning concern about whether RPA legislation would improve retention rates among 17- and 18-year olds. A widely held view was that enhanced retention could only be achieved by improving the post-16 curriculum offer and its accessibility across Wales.

There was an expectation that RPA legislation would need to be accompanied by a boost to post-16 funding, which, in the context of budget cuts over recent years, was broadly welcomed. Programmes that currently support young people in the NEET group were singled out as an area which could benefit from sustained funding. Currently, these are underpinned by money from various funding streams, which makes the sustainability of provision very difficult.

Furthermore, substantial investment would be needed to widen the curriculum offer to embrace the needs of a wider group of learners, most specifically young people who are NEET, in employment without training or in receipt of alternative forms of pre-16 learning. Staffing levels and building capacity may need to be increased in schools and colleges (depending on demographic trends), as well as investment in staff training and development. The needs of employers, in particular those who currently recruit young workers without offering accredited training, would also require assessment and management. In addition, a robust enforcement strategy would be required, with particular consideration given to what and how sanctions would be applied, the format of an appeals process and a timetable for implementation.

[5] https://www.estyn.gov.wales/sites/www.estyn.gov.wales/files/2020-08/Post16_2018_2019_en_0.pdf

Other implementation issues that were raised included:

- Ensuring young people across Wales have access to a similar post-16 offer;
- Minimising competition and duplication between providers and engendering partnership working in order to meet learners' needs;
- Destination tracking and monitoring; and
- Managing potential disruptive behaviour and higher truancy rates in schools and colleges emanating from enforced participation.

Introducing penalties and enforcing learning among groups of learners who have disengaged from learning by the age of 16 was considered to introduce a significant risk factor. As these are predominantly young people from low socio-economic groups and disadvantaged areas, introducing RPA may serve to increase their economic and social exclusion, and participation in future learning.

Reducing non-participation and early post-16 drop-out through extended support and widening choice

A preferred route to achieving improved participation, retention and achievement rates in post-16 learning in Wales was through an enhanced post-16 offer. This could emanate from a review of post-16 funding and provision, in terms of its content, mode and quality, with a view to achieving greater diversity and re-assessing how a universal post-16 offer can be achieved across Wales. In addition, the needs of groups of learners who currently drop out or fail to participate, and their reasons for disengaging, would need to be assessed and managed. This would require identifying and widening access to training for young workers and employers, possibly through increasing the number of apprenticeships and traineeships and/or the introduction of youth focused training programmes.

Significant implementation issues that were identified included:

- Cost;
- Achieving a coherent and consistent offer which is learner-centred;
- Minimising opportunities and incentives which create competition between post-16 providers;
- Establishing partnership working between post-16 providers;
- Reducing duplication;
- Exploring alternative teaching and learning options outside of classroom-based teaching;

- Equal access to impartial advice and guidance;
- Offering financial incentives to learners and employers;
- Introducing enhanced mapping and tracking of post-16 learners; and
- Robust support systems to minimise early leaving.

Given the entrenched cultural barriers to participation in education and training that still exist within some communities, achieving enhanced participation, retention and achievement in post-16 learning across Wales would necessarily be a long-term goal. However, tackling young people's barriers to engagement in continued learning was seen as critical to addressing social and economic exclusion.

Welsh language

Regardless of the route taken to strengthen post-16 participation, retention and achievement rates, it was a strongly held view that stringent efforts needed to be made to enhance and extend teaching and learning through the medium of Welsh. The shortage of teachers and lecturers was highlighted as a significant and sustained problem. Specifically, the absence of skilled teachers to deliver higher level vocational courses through the medium of Welsh within the FE sector remains a persistent problem, accompanied by a lack of qualifications and shortage of verifiers and resources available in Welsh. This remains a barrier to extending both the number of teachers/lecturers with the requisite skills and Welsh-medium post-16 learners. It was asserted that a ten-year plan is needed to:

- Radically improve the quality of the teaching of Welsh in English speaking schools;
- Increase the pipeline of young people who are Welsh speaking, to sustain their language and written skills beyond compulsory/post-compulsory learning; and
- Strengthen teacher training capacity.

Also, young people should be encouraged to recognise and exploit the benefits of their bilingual and multilingual skills, in relation to enhancing their employability.

Conclusions

NfER's 2007 review was charged with assessing evidence on the anticipated impact, benefits and challenges associated with RPA. The timescale of the literature search was restricted to outputs which had been published since 2000, which confined the evidence base. Moreover, the volume of the evidence presented focused on the wider benefits of post-16 learning, rather than making a persuasive case for compulsion. Also, while a significant part of the report is dedicated to identifying the characteristics of young people in the NEET group and young people in jobs without training, the thorny issue of how their barriers to learning will be overcome through the RPA is overlooked.

In England, the participation age was raised to 17 years from 2013 and to young people's 18th birthday from 2015. While the original proposals set out plans to criminalise young people who failed to participate in any form of post-16 education and training (DfES, 2007), within the coalition government's implementation of the RPA, there was a lack of any form of enforcement in the immediate future, thereby implying a voluntary commitment on the part of young people to participate.

While the RPA trials did provide valuable learning to support wider implementation, there has been no published and independent evaluation of the impact of the legislation since its roll-out. Post-16 destination data provide evidence that rates of participation in education increased since 2013, although training rates have fallen. This suggests that the RPA is encouraging more young people to remain in school, although it is impossible to isolate its impact from other changes which occurred over the same period e.g. the introduction of the apprenticeship levy.

Alongside England, a number of US and Australian states have over recent years raised the participation age in learning, swayed by the argument that a better qualified workforce would improve economic output and their performance in an increasingly globalised global economic market. In some cases, this was supported by an inclusion agenda, with a commitment that enforcing continued participation in education (or training) for longer periods of time would help to narrow social and economic inequalities. The evidence to support these assertions is, at best, mixed.

In the case of Great Britain, there has been extensive analysis of the impact of the raising of the school leaving age (ROSLA) in 1972, when it was extended from 15 to 16 years. While the evidence does show a positive impact on wages and qualification attainment, it must be contextualised with different economic conditions prevailing at the time, together with much lower rates of educational qualifications being obtained by young people. Importantly, in terms of its implementation and delivery, the

commitment to raise the school leaving age was enshrined in the 1944 Education Act, which signifies the length of time taken to fund and implement its delivery.

More broadly, in recent years a number of countries/states which have implemented RPA have adopted a wider range of options for young people beyond school retention, including training routes, work with training, as well as alternative learning provisions. While it is too early to assess overall economic and educational outcomes from such measures, they provide useful lessons about implementation and delivery. Evidence from the US and Australia show that the implementation of changes was sometimes too rapid, with insufficient time and funding given to schools and providers to prepare for changes, including managing and meeting the needs of a much more diverse group of learners.

Instead of, or as well as, pursuing policies that legally require young people to remain in learning for longer periods of time, there has been a raft of interventions internationally which have focused on reduced early school leaving (ESL). The focus is on encouraging and retaining young people in learning for longer periods of time, with the overall aim of improving their economic and social outcomes, as well as enhancing nations' economic prosperity and performance. A review of evidence shows that ESL/EL is a complex issue with many interlocking causal processes. It concluded that such complexity demands from policymakers a strategic and coordinated response rather than a random selection of interventions.

The issue of raising participation through compulsory or voluntary means was contextualised through discussions with a number of key informants in Wales. Overall, it was considered that participation rates in post-16 learning in Wales were very high at the age of 16 and the need for statutory changes to enforce higher rates of participation were widely questioned. However, retention rates among 17-18-year olds remain significantly lower. Concern was raised about NEET rates and the trajectories and lack of intervention to support early labour market entrants.

Appetite for the need to introduce RPA legislation to enforce participation in post-16 learning was weak, with questions raised about the logistics of implementation and enforcement. Perceived benefits of enforced participation included establishing a commitment to a wider post-16 offer, in order to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners, especially young workers in jobs without training (who are currently not receiving any policy attention or intervention), and securing sustained funding to support initiatives targeted at the NEET group. Far greater concerns surrounded the degree of competition between post-16 providers and provision (academic versus vocational) which currently undermines reach and impact. The need for organisational and structural change in the post-16 arena across Wales to achieve a coherent, equitable and consistent offer, underpinned by greater connection between

pre- and post-16 pathways, was a consistent message. Strategies that motivate and encourage young people's participation and retention and achievement in post-16 learning were widely encouraged.

Looking at imminent future policy developments, changes that will be introduced through the New Curriculum for Wales within pre-16 learning, as well as the proposed reforms in compulsory education, and post-compulsory education and training (PCET), were recognised as key levers for precipitating change in the post-16 arena. It was argued that the ambitious changes that will be made to pre-16 learning will need to be supported by complementary changes to post 16-learning from 2027, when the first cohort of new curriculum learners will complete Year 11. This presents an opportunity to look at how a harmonised post-16 offer with clear pathways can be achieved. Also, the PCET, subject to legislation, will establish the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) as a single, strategic authority responsible for overseeing all aspects of post-compulsory education and training by 2023. CTER should have a clear brief to tackle inequalities, in particular in relation to the academic/vocational divide, as well as the position of young people in the labour market.

While the introduction and implementation of the New Curriculum for Wales and the proposed PCET reforms could be accompanied with legislation to raise the participation age and/or reduce early leaving in Wales, a number of factors would need to be taken into account. Without legislation, there is a significant risk that programmes to promote post-16 learning and engagement, which have been sustained in Wales through EU structural funds, will cease, as this funding source tapers out between 2021-23. For example, in a recent study of NEET interventions across the UK, this stream of funding was found to be of particular importance to the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, in ensuring their continued commitment to recognising and supporting the needs of young people in the NEET group (Maguire and Keep, forthcoming). Acute concern existed among most policymakers in the sample about the impact of Brexit on this policy arena. In the absence of UK-wide initiatives to support young people in the NEET group, EU money was 'shoring up' policy intervention. Of great concern was how this current stream of funding would be sustained post-Brexit and what, if any, future provision would exist and be funded, in the absence of a UK-wide commitment to sustained funding through the Shared Prosperity and Levelling Up Fund.

In England, the recent RPA was not accompanied by additional funding, despite legislation, largely due to ongoing funding cuts and austerity measures since 2010. For example, in a recent study of NEET interventions across the UK, England was found to be much more reliant on charities and philanthrophy to support initiatives, in comparison to the UK's devolved governments (Maguire and Keep, forthcoming).

Putting funding concerns aside, the implementation of RPA legislation is not without its difficulties. Evidence cited in this report from US and Australian states which have adopted RPA legislation point to:

- Problems linked to hasty timetables for delivery as an impediment to successful implementation;
- Failure to measure and curb non-attendance; and
- Disadvantaged young people/communities often not benefiting from widening participation linked to the enforcement of continued learning (Mackay and Duncan 2013; Hodgson, 2019).

Overall, the evidence to support legislation which raises the participation age in learning is weak. Its enforcement through recent legislative changes has been shown to be patchy, and in the case of England, appears largely non-existent. However, without RPA legislation or the enforcement of stringent targets to reduce early leaving, the result is often a fragmented set of time-limited/funded policies to tackle disaffection among certain groups. The New Curriculum for Wales/PCET offers a platform for change which builds on OECD country experience that demonstrates the need to focus on:

- Early prevention;
- Supporting and engaging pre-16 learners who are experiencing difficulties;
- Monitoring those at risk;
- Offering good quality pathways to those less academically gifted; and
- Offering additional support for learning at the end of secondary school (OECD, 2007; OECD, 2018).

Crucially, this offer should be extended within the post-16 arena. Looking beyond full-time post-16 learners, the needs of post-16 young workers must be better understood and addressed, as they remain a neglected post-16 learner group, due to their dispersal within the labour market. This could includes interventions to support their learning needs, perhaps through part-time study options and reducing their propensity to experience ‘poor’ work and economic insecurity. The challenge to secure and sustain funding to support NEET interventions remains another key part of post-16 education, employment and training reform in Wales.

The literature on ESL/EL indicates an over-reliance on individual policy intervention and often voluntary interventions rather than a strategic overarching legislative

approach. A good example of legislative intervention exists in the Netherlands, where a national policy framework for ESL includes an early warning system (EU, 2011, p.70). While measures to combat ESL/EL have been widely adopted internationally, as a means of curbing rates of economic and social exclusion among young people, the term itself is not widely utilised across the UK. That is not to say that measuring and reducing the number of young people who drop out of education (or training) before meeting minimum age and/or qualification standards is not important. Rather, the emphasis has remained on maximising participation in learning and reducing NEET (not in education, employment or training) rates.

Finally, while the UK as a whole has embraced a wider definition of the NEET group (16-24 year olds), this has failed to be accompanied by mechanisms to undertake coherent mapping and tracking of the wider population. The focus has remained on tracking the destinations of the 16-18 year old group, despite evidence which suggests that the pre- and post-18-groups struggle with adult employment services (Cooke, 2013). Welsh Government has been pioneering in the establishment of *Working Wales,* which is targeted at providing employment support to both economically active and economically inactive groups (Welsh Government, 2018). This policy design places an emphasis on individuals' voluntary participation in job-seeking and guidance services, and offers the potential to be paired with responsibility for the management and administration of welfare provision covering 16-24 year olds. This responsibility is currently held by DWP, but could potentially be devolved to Welsh Government. Alternatively, a formalised partnership agreement should be brokered between DWP and Welsh Government to jointly manage welfare and support services for under 25s.

Recommendations

- The current focus on reducing attrition rates and improving qualification outcomes in post-16 education and training among 17-18-year olds should be sustained and should be supported by a review of the benefits of introducing a strategy to reduce ESL/EL. This should include eliciting the views of young people on their preferences and the reasons for them.
- A review is needed (aligned with the PCET reforms) to ensure that a coherent and consistent post-16 offer is available to all young people across Wales, which:
    - avoids duplication;
    - offers flexibility to learners and employers;
    - provides a breadth of options to cover the range of young people's and employers' needs;
    - clarifies roles and responsibilities at national, regional and local level; and
    - minimises competition between providers and different post-16 routes.
- The content of the post-16 learning offer needs to be reviewed and aligned with the objectives of the New Curriculum for Wales.
- Due consideration needs to given to introducing legislative changes which would:
    - Embed a national policy framework for addressing ESL; and
    - Deliver greater responsibility for Welsh Government for managing welfare and support services for under 25s, potentially in partnership with DWP.
- A more rigorous and improved system of mapping and tracking the destinations of post-16 learners, potentially to the age of 24, should be developed and trialled, with a view to minimising learner drop-out and offering a greater degree of support to young workers (especially those in precarious work).
- Sustained funding regimes should be introduced to support initiatives targeted at NEET prevention and reintegration measures.
- Gaps in Welsh-medium teaching and learning need to be addressed, especially in relation to:

    - teacher and other resource shortages in vocational subjects and how this void may be filled; and
    - how the currency and profile of Welsh-medium provision can be further enhanced within post-16 learning and beyond, including working more closely with parents.
- Research is needed to develop a greater understanding about young workers in jobs without training (and their employers) before policy intervention to support their training and wider needs is introduced. This should be aligned with the recommendations made by the Fair Work Commission,[6] with priority given to offering more support to under-18s in precarious and unskilled work.

[6] **https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-05/fair-work-wales.pdf**

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Annex 1: Approach

The methodology comprised:

- an inception meeting to agree the parameters and key issues of the study;
- a scoping review to identify sources of data;
- a review of evidence and literature, through a search of the literature;
- analysis and synthesis to extract the key messages and provide a thematic analysis of the effectiveness of RPA implementation; and
- reporting.

A required starting point for the evidence review was to update the literature review undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NfER) in 2007. The NfER **report** looked at international evidence on the benefits and challenges of increasing the participation age. Of crucial importance was to review the evidence emanating from the RPA trials which were conducted prior to the recent implementation of the policy in England, as well as any emerging evidence relating to its impact. Emphasis was also placed on deriving EU/international evaluation evidence, specifically statistical impact data on programme performance on both compulsory participation measures and interventions which sought to reduce early leaving from education and training through a targeted and voluntary approach. In searching the literature, combinations of key words were applied: e.g.

- RPA in education and training;
- reducing early leaving;
- early school leaving measures;
- extending learning among young people;
- raising the school leaving age;
- youth participation in learning; and
- youth training participation and 'NEET' interventions.

Determining whether a particular document or piece of data was included was dependent on its:

- **focus** - issues relating to youth employment interventions and evidence;
- **geographical coverage** - predominantly on data and reports from the UK and other advanced economies;
- **type of study** - substantive, objective pieces of research; and

- **quality** – methodology, sample size and representativeness, the objectivity and transparency of analysis and the robustness of findings.

In order to capture the feasibility and benefits of introducing an RPA in Wales, a number (n= 9) of on-line/telephone interviews with key stakeholders across Wales were undertaken to ascertain their views. The selection of participants was agreed with the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) and Welsh Government. The main criteria for deciding who was included in the list were that they represented key organisations at a senior level, and that they could offer informed perspectives on issues relating to how different needs and priorities can be addressed.

Annex 2: Discussion guide

Discussion guide for interviews with key stakeholders on RPA in Wales

Background and introduction

Explain background to the research.

The aim of the interviews is to talk to key stakeholders, in order to:

a. **build up a picture of views about post-16 participation rates in education and training in Wales;**

b. **understand what are perceived to be the core issues that need to be addressed to improve them; and**

c. **outline and discuss core options for change, in particular, raising the age of participation, and how this might work in practice work for different groups of young people/their parents; employers; education and training providers in different local circumstances; and the benefits that respondents, recipients and Welsh Government may derive from it.**

We are talking to a range of stakeholders, so that we can build up multiple perspectives.

Reassure the interviewee about confidentiality and ask permission to tape record the interview – for the researcher's purposes only.

About your role

What is your current job role?

What is/ was your involvement in post-16 education and training provision in Wales?

PROBE:

- What is your role (if different)?
- Are you involved at provider, local authority or at national level?
    - Find out whether involved in the design, development, and/or implementation of post-16 provision.

About current post-16 participation, retention and achievement rates

Note: This discussion will be fairly loosely structured. The key aims are to find out:

- issues relating to current participation, retention and achievement rates
- existing barriers, challenges and achievements

Tell me about post-16 learning in Wales - effectiveness and reach.

PROBE IF NECESSARY, in respect of:

- Young people?
- Providing learner choice?
- Maximising post-16 participation, retention and achievement rates?

How effective do you think the curriculum offer is overall in meeting the needs of young people and the future needs of the labour market?

PROBE, in respect of:

- Young people?
- Providing learner choice?
- Increasing and improving post-16 participation, retention and achievement rates?
- Meeting future learning and skills needs?

To what extent do schools, training providers and FE colleges work together to provide and deliver a harmonised post-16 offer? Do you think the proposed Commission for Tertiary Education in 2023 is needed?

PROBE in terms of;

- The barriers to achieving co-working
- What works best where, why and how?

How they could work more closely together

To what extent are young workers/ their employers supported in securing and participating in post-16 learning opportunities?

What do you feel are the main strengths and weaknesses within current post-16 arrangements?

PROBE FOR (if necessary):

- Learner choice
- Range and access to provision
- Quality and outcomes
- Value for money and cost effectiveness
- Ability to meet local, community and business needs

Potential change and its implementation

What are your views about making changes in Wales to enhance post-16 participation, retention and achievement rates?

PROBE FOR (if necessary):

- Need
- Capacity
- Scope for improvement and change
- Relationships between different stakeholders
- Funding arrangements

To what extent is compulsion i.e. legally raising the age of participation needed to maximise rates in post-16 learning?

What do you consider to be the major issues surrounding the design and implementation of raising the participation age?

PROBE FOR (if necessary):

- Age range – 17 or 18 or Year 12 and Year 13?
- Infrastructure requirements – governance and provision
- Enforcement – young people or/and parents/carers
- Competition between providers
- Disadvantaging some post-16 routes

- Timescale needed to implement change
- Expected outcomes
- Costs, value for money and cost effectiveness
- Ability to meet local, community and business needs
- Sustainability

In what way(s) can participation, retention and achievement rates in post-16 learning can be increased without legal enforcement/requirement?

PROBE FOR (if necessary):

- More early intervention to curb drop out – NEET early intervention programmes/ 'at risk' initiatives, more support for young entrants into the labour market
- Enhance the range, type, location and scope of options open to post-16 learners
- Enhance funding available to post-16 providers
- Enhance tracking systems to improve transition support for young people/parents
- Encourage greater co-working between post-16 providers i.e. reduce competition
- Encourage greater partnership working between employers and post-16 learning providers
- Harness and exploit existing partnership and collaborative links
- Harness and exploit existing programmes and initiatives

What are the main barriers facing young people?

PROBE FOR (if necessary):

- Motivation
- Access
- Value attached to range and type of provision available
- Funding
- Guidance and support

What (if any) are the barriers to changing the provision offered?

PROBE FOR (if necessary):

- Funding and infrastructure needed
- Timescales
- The impact of urban and rural factors on provision and learner access
- The impact on local communities
- Transport issues

How do you think that these barriers (if any) can be overcome?

PROBE FOR (if necessary):

- Removing funding anomalies/disincentives within post-16 education and training
- Creating centres of excellence across academic and vocational learning within and between localities
- Reducing duplication of provision/small class sizes
- Minimising complex transport and timetabling arrangements
- Encouraging greater co-working between post-16 providers
- Strengthening links between post-16 providers and the labour market

How can changes be made while sustaining a commitment to the role of the Welsh language in teaching and learning?

PROBE FOR (if necessary):

- Responding to local and regional differences and requirements
- Retaining/expanding all Welsh Medium sixth forms
- Ensuring a breadth of coverage within vocational learning
- Enhancing funding commitment

<u>Finally:</u>

Are there any particular aspects that we have not addressed in the interview and that you wish to discuss?

Thank participant for their time.

Annex 3: Duration of compulsory education/training in Europe (2020/21)

Country	Starting age	Leaving age	Duration (years)
Albania	6	15	9
Austria	5	15	10
Belgium	5	18	13
Bosnia and Herzegovina	6	15	9
Bulgaria	5	16	11
Croatia	7	15	8
Cyprus	5	15	10
Czech Republic	5	15	10
Denmark	6	16	10
Estonia	7	16	9
Finland	6	16	10
France	3	(18)	(15)
Germany (12 Länder)	6	18	12
Germany (4 Länder)	6	19	13
Greece	4	15	11
Hungary	3	16	13
Iceland	6	16	10
Ireland	6	16	10
Italy	6	16	10
Latvia	5	16	11
Liechstenstein	6	15	9

Lithuania	6	16	10
Luxembourg	4	16	12
Malta	5	16	11
Montenegro	6	15	9
Netherlands	5	16	11
North Macedonia	5 years 7 months	17 or 19 years 6 months	11 - 13
Norway	6	16	10
Poland	6	15	9
Portugal	6	18	12
Romania	6	17	11
Serbia	5 years 6 months	14 years 6 months	9
Slovenia	6	15	9
Slovakia	6	16	10
Spain	6	16	10
Sweden	6	16	10
Switzerland	4	15	11
Turkey	5 years 9 months	17 years 6 months	12
UK - England	5	18	11
UK - Wales	5	16	11
UK – Northern Ireland	4	16	12
UK - Scotland	5	16	11

Source: Adapted from European Commission (2020) *Compulsory Education in Europe 2020/202: Eurydice – Facts and Figures* page 4.

Annex 4: School leaving age and employment age (OECD/EU)

Country	School leaving age	Empl. age	Notes
Albania	15	15	
Australia	15-17	15	School leaving age varies from state to state – mostly 17
Austria	15	15	
Belgium	18	18	Full-time education is compulsory to age 15, with at least part-time education from 16 to 18.
Bosnia/Herzegovina	15		
Brazil	17	17	At 15 and 16, young people are allowed to start an apprenticeship
Bulgaria	16	16	
Canada	18	14	
Chile	18	17	
China	15	16	
Croatia	15		
Cyprus	15	15	
Czech Republic	15	15	
Denmark	16	13	
Estonia	15/16	18	
Finland	14/16	14	The age of finishing varies depending on the age of starting school.
France	16/18	16	The statutory minimum leaving age is 16 but some may leave at 15 if they have been offered employment or an apprenticeship. Since September 2020, training has become compulsory for students aged between 16 and 18.
Germany	18	15	From 15 to 18, leavers have to pursue at least part-time vocational secondary education.
Greece	16	16	
Hungary	16	16	

Iceland	15/16	15	
India	14	18	
Indonesia	15 or 18	14	Leaving age varies between provinces, with most being 15
Ireland	16	15	
Israel	18	14	
Italy	16	16	
Japan	15	15	
Korea	15	15	
Latvia	16	15	
Liechstenstein	15	15	
Lithuania	16	16	
Luxembourg	16	16	
Malta	16	16	
Mexico	15	14	
Montenegro	15	15	
Netherlands	18	16	
North Macedonia	17/19	17	The leaving age varies according to the type of programme followed.
New Zealand	16	16	15 year olds may leave for employment with the permission of the Ministry of Education
Norway	16	15	
Poland	15/16	15	One can leave school at 15 or 16 but have continue education up to the age of 18.
Portugal	16	16	
Romania	17	16	
Russia	15	14	
Serbia	15	15	
Slovakia	16	14	
Slovenia	15	15	
South Africa	15	15	

Spain	16	16	
Sweden	16	16	
Switzerland	15	15	
Turkey	14	17	
UK – England	18	16	
UK - Wales	16	16	
UK – Northern Ireland	16	16	
UK - Scotland	16	16	
United States	16 or 17	14	School leaving age varies from state to state

Sources: Adapted from a) European Commission (2020) *Compulsory Education in Europe 2020/202: Eurydice – Facts and Figures* page 4, and b) Right to Education project, **http://www.right-to-education.org/node/279**, and ILO International Labour Standards on Child Labour, **http://www.ilo.org/global/standards/subjects-covered-by-international-labour-standards/child-labour**. Accessed from OECD webisite 13th January 2021: Table PF 1.8D '*School Leaving age and Employment Age 2013*[7]'

[7] OECD figures relate to 2013 data, which may have been subject to change by individual countries/states

Annex 5: Approaches to flexible pathways and on raising the minimum school leaving age

Extracted from: **OECD (2012).** ***Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools.*** **Table 2.5. Approaches to flexible pathways and on raising minimum school-leaving age: Page 88.** Paris: OECD Publishing. Retrieved from: **https://www.oecd.org/education/school/50293148.pdf**

Country	Approach
France	In 2009 VET programmes were reduced from 4 to 3 years in order to increase the number of students obtaining a professional diploma (baccalauréat professionnel). The reform comprises the strengthening of student support and guidance mechanisms and curricular changes including training periods in real work environments (Moisan, 2011).
Ireland	The public funded programme Youthreach offers general education, vocational training and work experience to unemployed early school leavers aged 15-20. Basic skills and practical work training, general education and the use of new technology are part of the programme. Youthreach learners are entitled to receive training allowances and additional allowances for meals, travel and accommodation are also available.
Manitoba (Canada)	In September 2011, Manitoba raised the compulsory school age from 16 to 18, and enabled students 15 years or older to participate in activities and programmes, including work training, that provide educational benefits outside regular school courses.
Netherlands	All young people up to age 18 must attend school until they attain a basic qualification. A strong policy on truancy and absenteeism is applied. The Ministry has signed performance agreements on dropout with municipalities and schools in 39 regions (2008-2011). Options such as combining work and study have been explored to respond to dropouts over 18.

Norway	The Certificate of Practice Initiative provides at-risk students with the possibility of choosing a two year upper-secondary programme (school and practice based) leading to a lower level degree recognised by industry, rather than the full four year VET upper secondary. Upon completion, they can complete their full upper- secondary degree adding the remaining two years. From the pilot, it appears that dropout rates are very low and 65% of the students continue their education.
Spain	Initial Vocational Qualification Programmes (PCPI), which were introduced in 2009, aim at providing more flexibility to complete lower secondary education. They target students age 16 and older who do not hold a lower secondary certificate, and 15- year-olds on certain conditions. Initial vocational qualification programmes include specific modules which allow the student to receive training in a particular professional area; general modules to develop basic competences and to ease transition from the education system to the labour market; and modules leading to the Certificate in Compulsory Secondary Education.

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Author Details

Sue Maguire is Honorary Professor at the Institute for Policy Research (IPR), University of Bath, Associate Fellow at the University of Oxford's Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) and a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Social and Economic Research (CASE) in Poland.

For further information please contact:
Manon Roberts
Wales Centre for Public Policy
+44 (0) 29 2087 5345
manon.roberts@wcpp.org.uk

Wales Centre
for Public Policy
Canolfan Polisi
Cyhoeddus Cymru