Chapter 5
Towards Compulsory Participation in England

Alice Sullivan and Lorna Unwin

Introduction

Children in England who started secondary school in September 2008 have a special claim to fame: they form the first cohort obliged by law to participate in some form of officially recognised education or training until they reach their 17th birthday (Department of Children, Schools and Families [DCSF], 2007). This is because they will be 16 in 2013, the date that marks the first stage in the government's plan to raise what it refers to as the 'participation age'. In 2015, the second stage of the plan will require all young people to participate until they are 18. There have been calls for the school-leaving age to be extended to 18 since the end of the First World War (see Simon, 1986). The current age at which young people can leave school has stood at 16 since 1972, having risen from 14 to 15 in 1947 following the 1944 Education Act. The Act also announced that although young people could leave school at 15 and enter the labour market, they would be required to attend county colleges for the purposes of part-time 'continuation education'. In her discussion of these proposals, Tinkler (2001, p. 79) explains that policy-makers of the time felt that anyone who left school at 15 had 'received an education inadequate to their needs as individuals, citizens and workers', and that 'no wage earning occupation could in itself be a "proper" education for those who had left school at 15'. Furthermore, it was argued that young people would be happier and have richer lives if they remained in contact with an educational institution for some years after entering employment, particularly as the jobs they were likely to get might promote 'physical, mental and moral degeneration'.

The county colleges were never built and the call for 'continuation education' was dropped, but the ambition to make education or training compulsory in some form or other has been a matter of debate ever since. The focus in the 1944 Education Act on the protection of young people from the potential dangers of the labour market and the desire to continue their intellectual development for as long as possible has given way to a new set of imperatives for keeping young people in some form of officially

A. Sullivan (✉) and L. Unwin (✉)
Institute of Education, University of London, UK

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recognised education or training. The main focus of today's policy-makers is on the economic and social consequences of early leaving (for the individual, the economy and society), plus a desire to arrest England's poor showing in the league tables from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for national participation and 'dropout' rates. The current participation rate in post-compulsory education and training has not changed since 1994 when it plateaued at around 75%. These concerns are set within what the government refers to as a context of change (economic and social), and thus the background paper for the new legislation argued that:

> Young people growing up now can expect a life of change – and we must equip them not just with the cognitive capacity but also with the personal capabilities, resilience, interpersonal skills and the attitudes that will enable them to benefit from the opportunities this will bring. (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2007, p. 10)

It is important to draw attention at this stage to the fact that the new legislation is significantly different from previous changes to the school-leaving age. In 2013, the compulsory phase of schooling will still end at 16, and young people will be able to leave school. The new requirement to continue participating means young people will have to find a place in one of the following parts of the English system:

Full-time education – including school, college and home education
Work-based learning – such as an apprenticeship or other form of government-supported training (GST) program
Part-time education or training – if they are employed, self-employed or volunteering more than 20 hours a week

Although this variety of contexts means that the concept of 'school dropout', as used in other countries, still won't apply in England, the new legislation will build stronger walls around the publicly funded education and training system to the age of 18. The prison metaphor is not inappropriate: those young people who refuse to 'participate' will be subject to a series of penalties, the highest level of which would result in them appearing before a youth court and their parents or guardians being subjected to a 'parenting order' (DCSF, 2007). A parenting order, which can last for up to 12 months, is issued by a magistrate's court and usually requires the parent or guardian to attend counselling or guidance sessions for a period of up to 3 months. In some cases, they may have to attend meetings with teachers at their child's school, ensure their child does not visit a particular place unsupervised or make sure their child is at home at particular times. Failure to meet these requirements can result in prosecution.

This chapter examines the current inequalities in terms of the outcomes of the English system for young people aged 16–18. It is argued that whilst the ambition to raise the levels of participation in education and training beyond 16 is justified, much will need to be done to ensure that the education and training programs available to young people are of equal quality.

The chapter is divided into four further sections: the first discusses the nature of compulsory education in England to the age of 16; the second discusses the different pathways that comprise post-compulsory education and training; the third examines the impact of gender in relation to education and training; and the fourth provides some concluding remarks.

Compulsory Education in England

Children in England enter the 'primary stage' of education in the year in which they have their fifth birthday. Prior to this, children from the age of 3 who attend some form of pre-school provision are in what the 2002 Education Act termed the Foundation Stage of education. At the age of 11, children then transfer to new schools to start the 'secondary stage' of education. Depending on the part of the country, some secondary schools take pupils to the age of 18, and some to the age of 16. A minority of 'middle schools', which take pupils from the age of 8 or 9 to the age of 12 or 13, still exist. The vast majority of schools are funded and maintained by the state, but there are privately funded primary and secondary schools (which usually refer to themselves as 'independent' schools), and they have a significant impact on the rest of the system. The status of private schools in Britain is quite different from that of the private schools in either the United States or continental Europe. Whereas in most developed countries, private schools are primarily religious and often highly subsidised (by church or state), British private schools are in the main socially and (often) academically exclusive institutions, which, being unsubsidised, are far too expensive for the bulk of the population. Because Britain incorporated most denominational schools within the state sector, its private sector is relatively small. As Hillman (1994, p. 403) puts it: 'In most countries private schools provide for religious, ethnic and cultural diversity. In Britain they provide an often high-powered preparation for a significant proportion of the future members of high-status occupations.' The domination of elite occupations by alumni of the top private schools (often, for historical reasons, termed 'public schools') has long been apparent (Boyd, 1973). The majority of secondary schools do not select by ability, but there are still 164 state-funded grammar schools covering pupils in around one third of England, entry to which is determined by an entrance examination taken at the age of 11. Grammar schools also exist in Northern Ireland, but not in Wales or Scotland. In 2007, only 7% of pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 (Year 11) were attending private schools. Sixty per cent of private school pupils gained five or more A*-C grade passes in their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams, including English and mathematics, compared with 46% of state-maintained school pupils. Evidence suggests that a substantial proportion of the apparent academic advantage at the private schools is due to the academically and socially selective nature of their intake (Sullivan & Heath, 2003). Pupils at state schools defined as 'selective' outperformed private school pupils at GCSE, with 98% gaining (five or more) 5 + A*–C GCSE exam passes.[1] Despite efforts towards 'widening participation', students from private schools still gain a disproportionate level of places at elite universities. For example, nearly half of the home undergraduates at Oxford University come from private schools (Oxford University Gazette, 2008).

[1]Source: Table 3 http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000768/revisedGCSE2008sfrtables.xls

Under both Conservative and Labour governments, education policy over the past 20 years or so has promoted 'diversity' (of types of school) and 'parental choice' within the state system in England. In contrast, and as Raffe (2010) notes, the advocacy of diversity is something that Scotland has resisted. Where once, Labour governments regarded the shift to a totally non-selective comprehensive system of secondary schooling as crucial to creating a more equal society (see Lodge & Blackstone, 1982), Tony Blair's New Labour government elected in 1997 signalled a significant change to the so-called old Labour principles. This saw the introduction of various initiatives to encourage greater involvement from employers and other interested parties from the wider community in the running of schools. Part of the argument is that schools (and other educational institutions) need to learn how to innovate and be more enterprising, and this is connected to a belief that it is only through such an approach that so-called failing schools, mainly found in deprived areas, will be turned around. Sammons (2008) argues that the origins of the intense pressure on schools to improve their performance since the election of the New Labour government, and since 2007, under Blair's successor, Gordon Brown, can be traced to a lecture in 1995 given by Michael Barber (now Lord Barber) who was a key New Labour education adviser and former Professor of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London. Barber advocated the need to challenge what he saw as deep-rooted low expectations and poor quality of education in schools in disadvantaged communities.

In 2000, the Labour government announced that it intended to create a number of 'academies', a new type of secondary school partly inspired by the previous Conservative government's establishment of city technology colleges (CTCs) and which, in turn, had been influenced by the charter schools initiative in the United States. Academies are state-funded schools, which are established and managed by sponsors, including existing schools and colleges of further education, universities, philanthropists, businesses, the voluntary sector and the faith communities. Government claims that sponsors will challenge traditional thinking on how schools are run and, hence, help to reverse cultures of low aspiration in areas of the country where school results are deemed to be unacceptable. The sponsor's role is to set up an endowment fund to be used by a board of trustees to run the school, with particular emphasis on initiatives to stem the impact of deprivation on education in their local communities. Woods et al. (2007, p. 240) describe academies as 'hybrid organisations' in that they combine 'private characteristics', such as being 'independently managed', backing by independent sponsors and freedom to innovate, with '…public characteristics, such as dependence on government funding and expectations to contribute to social goals by tackling educational inequalities and contributing to the regeneration of communities'.

Between 2002 and 2005, over 50 academies had been opened or approved and current plans are to increase their number to 400. Academies are set up with the backing of the local education authority (LEA) in the area, and the LEA has a seat on each academy's governing body. When academies are co-sponsored by their local authority, the LEA will have two seats on the governing body. Academies are not maintained by an LEA, but they collaborate closely with it, and with other

schools in the area. Research suggests that academies do not actually achieve better examination results than schools with comparable intakes of students (Gorard, 2005). The government has also pledged to support the expansion of faith school provision within the state sector. This now includes Muslim, Hindu and Sikh schools, as well as Christian and Jewish schools. Both academies and faith schools have been accused of covert social and academic selection of pupils.

From 1988 until 1994, all pupils in English secondary schools followed a 10-subject national curriculum divided into four 'key stages', ending with external assessment at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16. From 2009, the testing of young people at 14 was to be dropped, following consistent and intense pressure on government to ease the assessment burden. From 1994 onwards, various interventions were made by government to provide more flexibility for schools to adapt what was seen as an overly prescriptive and unwieldy curriculum framework. In 2002, the Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP) went a considerable step further, and allowed schools to release some 14- to 16-year-olds from parts of the national curriculum so that they could attend vocational courses for up to 3 days a week at their local further education college. From their evaluation of the IFP, Higham and Yeomans (2007) concluded that government had been 'pushing at an open door' as far as schools were concerned because the majority of teachers believed that the 10-subject national curriculum had compelled large numbers of young people to take subjects that did not motivate or interest them. There are also Youth Apprenticeships for 14- to 16-year-olds, which involve work experience with local employers.

The ability to 'choose' which subjects to study is part of the government's desire to develop a 'personalised' approach to education:

> The central characteristic of such a new system will be personalisation – so that the system fits to the individual rather than the individual having to fit to the system. This is not a vague liberal notion about letting people have what they want. It is about having a system which will genuinely give high standards for all…and the corollary of this is that the system must be both freer and more diverse – with more flexibility to help meet individual needs; and more choices between courses and types of provider, so that there really are different and personalised opportunities available. (DfES, 2004, foreword)

Whilst what has been termed the 'choice' agenda is being implemented throughout the country's public services, Avis (2004, p. 209) has warned, however, that the creation of multiple and differentiated pathways in education may serve to 'reproduce the patterns of inequality and structural differentiation present in wider society'.

With regard to the themes explored in this book, the key assessment stage in England takes place at 16 when pupils sit external examinations in a range of subjects (sciences, humanities, modern languages and vocational subjects) to be awarded the GCSE. This assessment comes at the end of 2 years of study; hence young people have to choose their GCSE subjects at the end of their third year in secondary school. These choices are important because they ultimately affect the extent to which young people can then gain access to subjects at a more advanced level, including at university. GCSEs are graded from A* to G, but the benchmark for success is to attain at least five GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics. The attainment of five GCSEs at the higher levels, formally classified

as a Level 2 achievement, is regarded as the entry requirement for the more prestigious apprenticeships, for jobs with training, and as the platform for progression to the next level of academic qualifications, known as 'A Levels', which are required to gain entry to higher education. Thus, the English system is characterised by this seismic break at the age of 16. Those young people who do not achieve the magic five GCSEs at grades A* to C are regarded as failures, for the system has no way of recognising the attainment of lower-level GCSEs even though a young person may, for example, have passed several at grades D to G. Those who do climb over the GCSE threshold are then able, if they wish, to remain in full-time education, either at school or at a further education college catering for the 16–18 age group, to study for A Levels.

Hodgson and Spours (2008) have identified the following five characteristics of the English general education system:

- Qualifications-led and dominated by GCSEs and A Levels
- Selective at 16+
- 'Elective' with considerable learner choice in terms of individual qualifications post-16 and increasingly post-14
- Individual subject focused rather than programatic
- Little curriculum breadth – particularly post-16

These characteristics have resulted in the system being criticised for forcing young people to take increasingly narrow groups of subjects and for favouring those who can most easily succeed. In order to counter such criticisms, since 2000, a major thrust of education policy in England has been to construct a 14–19 phase of education that will encourage young people to remain in full-time education or government-funded training and overcome the terminal status of the GCSE stage at the age of 16 (for detailed reviews, see Hodgson & Spours, 2003, 2008). The most recent initiative to emerge is the introduction of 14–19 Diplomas covering a range of vocational areas of study (e.g., information technology, engineering and creative and media) from September 2008. They will be delivered through partnerships between schools and colleges, and young people will be able to combine them with GCSE and A-level study. Decisions about the content of the diplomas have been led by Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), which represent employers in 25 areas of the economy, and universities have been involved to some extent in relation to stipulating how much general education would be required for a diploma to be recognised for entry to a degree course.

The design of and inspiration for the new diplomas came from the Tomlinson Working Group on 14–19 Reform (led by Sir Mike Tomlinson) set up by government in 2003. The group recommended that GCSEs and A Levels be replaced by a new overarching diploma covering all 14–19 learning. Despite considerable enthusiasm for this model from significant numbers of teachers, teacher unions, parts of the academic community, some employer organisations and other interested parties, the idea was rejected by Tony Blair and his government in 2005. Government decided, however, that the concept of a diploma could be introduced as a way to create a more substantive vocational offering within schools and colleges for

full-time students. Despite the fact that colleges of further education had been running full-time vocational courses for young people aged 16 and over for many years, the new 14–19 Diplomas are being promoted as 'the' vocational program. The first students enrolled in September 2008, so it is too early to pronounce on the effectiveness of this new pathway, but there are considerable concerns that these new qualifications are being introduced too quickly without adequate pilots, that there is too much inconsistency across the subject lines, and that they are already overly academic in terms of their content and forms of assessment (see Stanton, 2008).

There has been considerable change to the governance and funding arrangements related to schools in England over the past 10 years or so. The 'Every Child Matters' agenda and the Children Act 2004 placed the responsibility on the city- and county-based local authorities that administer school-based education to establish new departments to bring together all services covering children and young people. This so-called inter-agency approach (involving schools, health services, the police and the voluntary sector) was enshrined in the government's decision in July 2007, when Gordon Brown took over from Tony Blair as Prime Minister, to split the existing DfES into two new departments: the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). DCSF is responsible for children and young people (and hence their education and training) up to the age of 18, whilst DIUS looks after education and training beyond 18. This was seen as a particularly problematic split for further education colleges, which cater for students from the age of 14 (as part of a program that allows school pupils to spend part of the week attending courses in college) to adults at and beyond retirement age (see Huddleston & Unwin, 2007, for an overview of the colleges' remit).

Pring (2008, p. 678) argues that the 'Every Child Matters' agenda has had the result that:

> Education is now officially seen as one aspect of 'well-being' (howsoever this is defined) and, reciprocally, 'well-being' is seen as a condition, generally speaking, for educational achievement.

This conflation of education with broader concerns for young people's personal and social development is reflected in the legislation to increase the participation age to 18:

> Young people who participate between the ages of 16 and 18 are less likely to experience teenage pregnancy, behave anti-socially, be involved in crime or go to prison. They are more likely to be healthy and to develop good social skills, which makes it easier for them to find work and succeed in life. (DCSF, 2007, p. 4)

Post-Compulsory Education and Training in England

At the age of 16, young people can:

- Remain in full-time education in school or college
- Study part-time at college
- Enter employment, full-time or part-time

- Enter government supported work-based learning – apprenticeship (available at Levels 2 and 3) or a pre-employment program
- Become classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training)

To encourage full-time participation, young people whose parents/guardians earn less than £30,000 a year can apply for the means-tested Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) worth up to £30 per week.

The latest figures for England, as provided in Table 5.1, show that 71% of 17-year-olds are in full-time further education or government supported training (GST). The prevalence of GST is the highest in the North East of England (13%), and lowest in London (4%).[2]

As these national statistics show, there are regional variations, but further breakdowns at the level of wards within cities would show even starker contrasts from one area to another. For example, there are substantial differences in the levels of educational attainment in different London boroughs (Lupton & Sullivan, 2007). These gaps between rich and poor areas are apparent in all cities, to varying degrees. Nottingham is another city of stark contrasts between areas. In 2007, 64% of pupils in Nottingham North gained five or more A*-C grades at GCSE, compared to 49% in Nottingham South.[3] Between 1991 and 2006, the proportion of school-leavers who continued in education rose from 61% to 78%. At the end of compulsory schooling in 2006, girls were more likely to continue in education (82%) than boys (74%), while boys were more likely than girls to be in employment or GST. Rates of unemployment or NEET were similar between the sexes (7% for females and 8% for males).[4] The proportion of 16- to 18-year-olds who were classed as NEET was at a high during the mid-1980s, which was a time of high unemployment. However, levels have been fairly flat since the early 1990s. In addition to the classification as 'NEET', young people can be classed as 'NET' (Not in any Education or Training). In practice, this category provides an overestimate of the number of young people who are receiving no education or training at all, as government classifies anyone in a job that does not involve some form of government-supported or recognised form of training as NET. Recent qualitative case study research suggests that some young people in this category are receiving both on- and off-the-job training as part of their job (see Maguire et al., 2008). In addition, research shows that it is very misleading to treat both the NEET and NET categories as homogeneous, as they include young people who have a range of reasons and motives for not participating in officially recognised pathways.

[2]The 29% of 17-year-olds not participating in education and training may well be considered, in line with definitions in other parts of this book, as 'dropouts' in other countries, recognising though the difficulties that this concept presents in the English context, difficulties discussed in this chapter. The rates may be even higher than those suggested here because no account is taken of actual completion of education and training (Editors' note).

[3]Source: DCSF http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/inyourarea/statics/pcons_lea_892_4.shtml

[4]Source: DCSF Education and Training Statistics for the United Kingdom, 2007, Table 3.10.

Table 5.1 Post-compulsory education and training rates of 17-year-olds 2005–06

	In further education			Government supported training (GST)	All in full-time education and GST
	At school	Full-time	Part-time		
North East	*22*	*34*	*7*	*13*	**70**
North West	*21*	*40*	*5*	*11*	**71**
Yorkshire and the Humber	*24*	*32*	*6*	*10*	**66**
East Midlands	*30*	*29*	*6*	*9*	**68**
West Midlands	*26*	*35*	*6*	*9*	**69**
Eastern	*33*	*31*	*5*	*7*	**70**
London	*36*	*35*	*5*	*4*	**75**
South East	*32*	*34*	*5*	*7*	**72**
South West	*31*	*32*	*6*	*8*	**71**
England	*29*	*34*	*5*	*8*	**71**

Source: DCSF Education and Training Statistics for the United Kingdom (2007), Table 2.2.

Within the 16–18 category, the risk of NEET increases with age. In 2006, 6.7% of 16-year-olds, 9.8% of 17-year-olds, and 14.7% of 18-year-olds were classified as NEET (source as above). Nevertheless, NEET status is often short term, and data from the Youth Cohort Study (YCS) suggest that the majority of 16-year-olds who were NEET in 2004 were no longer NEET by 2006. By age 18, 37% of those who had been NEET at 16 remained in this category. Only a minority of young people classified as NEET at any point in time are 'long-term NEET', and many will be NEET only for a brief period, or will 'churn' in and out of this status (Hayward et al., 2008).

Parents' social class is strongly associated with the likelihood of being NEET at the age of 18. However, prior academic attainment is an even more powerful predictor of NEET status. Eighteen-year-olds who had attained fewer than five D-G grade GCSEs in Year 11 (age 15/16) were 10 times more likely to be NEET than those with eight or more A*–C grades.

Similarly, the most powerful predictor of academic attainment by 18 is earlier attainment in the final year of compulsory schooling. Of those with eight or more GCSE A*–C grades at 16, 84% gained Level 3 qualifications by 18 years of age, compared to just 3–4% of those with no A*–C passes. Qualifications in the UK are organised according to levels. Level 2 is regarded as the benchmark for employability and, hence, the level that should be achieved by the end of compulsory schooling. Level 3 qualifications include A Levels and intermediate vocational qualifications. Parents' social class background is also linked to qualifications at the age of 18 years in a predictable way, with the offspring of parents from the professional classes and of graduates being the most likely to gain Level 3 qualifications, but intermediate and lower supervisory class individuals being more likely to gain vocational qualifications at both Level 2 and Level 3. Women were substantially more likely than men to achieve at Level 3.

Data from the Youth Cohort Study show that young people from Indian backgrounds had the highest rates of academic attainment at the age of 18 years, followed by whites, with black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi attainment being lower. To put this in context, Indians in England are relatively well-educated and disproportionately found among the professional classes compared to the white majority, while all other minority ethnic groups are relatively economically disadvantaged. Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents are more likely to be recent immigrants who are not fluent in English, and these communities have high rates of poverty. Nevertheless, it is striking that all of the major minority ethnic groups have higher rates of participation in further and higher education than the white majority. According to the Youth Cohort Study data cited above, 44% of white 18-year-olds were in full-time education in 2006, compared to 77% of blacks, 62% of Pakistani and Bangladeshis, and 84% of Indians.[5]

The fact that whites, and white males in particular, are relatively unlikely to persist in further and higher education has led to claims that white working-class males are 'the new underclass' (Paton, 2008). This adds a new dimension to the anti-feminist backlash of anxiety regarding girls' persistent trouncing of the boys in the battle of the GCSE grades. Now, to add insult to injury, not just females, but blacks too, are out-doing the white males (at least in terms of participation). Policy and media pronouncements on this new 'disadvantaged group' would never lead one to suspect that being a white male is still a major advantage in the English labour market and the wider society. Indeed, the heavy investment that ethnic minority youth make in education and training is driven at least partly by their relatively disadvantaged labour market positions, and the anticipation of labour market discrimination (Connor et al., 1996; Heath & McMahon, 1997; Heath & Smith, 2003). A lack of immediate job opportunities may also remove the incentive for ethnic minority youth to quit education (Leslie & Drinkwater, 1999; Rivkin, 1995). According to the Youth Cohort Study data cited above, 25% of white 18-year-olds in 2006 were in full-time jobs, compared to 9% of blacks and 9% of the Pakistani/Bangladeshi category. The figures for unemployment (i.e., NEET) were: whites 8%, blacks 9%, Pakistani/Bangladeshi 11%. Low-qualified women are also particularly disadvantaged in the labour market, and therefore have stronger incentives to invest in education and training than their male peers. The interaction between gender and ethnicity in determining educational participation is important; however, and, in contrast to other ethnic groups, there are more Pakistani and Bangladeshi men than women in higher education in Britain (Bhattacharyya et al., 2003; Dwyer et al., 2006).

The same source shows that 3% of 18-year-olds had gained vocational A-levels (AVCEs), and 7% had gained National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) or equivalent. A quarter of the cohort had vocational qualifications at Level 2 or higher, compared to 57% with academic qualifications at this level.

[5]Source: The activities and experiences of 18-year-olds: England & Wales, 2006. Table B. http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000695/SFR47–2006.pdf

Those young people who leave compulsory schooling and enter one of England's vocational education and training (VET) pathways find themselves within an expanding, unbounded territory encompassing schools, colleges, workplaces and voluntary organisations. Some of the territory's activity is publicly funded and some through private sources (such as employers paying for workforce development or students paying full costs for courses), both bolstered through a level of cross-subsidy, which is poorly understood. The territory is populated by a range of stakeholders, with varying degrees of power and influence, and its activities take place in a multitude of buildings including village halls and decaying warehouses, school and college classrooms, state-of-the-art laboratories and the production plants of multinational companies.

The majority of young people who enter the VET territory are in the 50% of the cohort that has failed to achieve the GCSE benchmark. As a result, they will be required to continue to try and improve their basic or 'functional' skills in 'communication', 'application of number' and information technology. These young people will also be restricted to the Level 2 apprenticeship programs and, hence, are less likely to have access to off-the-job learning. Furthermore, young people who fail to reach the GCSE benchmark, but want to remain in full-time education, will have to leave school and enter further education colleges. This means that colleges have a higher proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds than any other type of educational establishment (Stanton, 2008; Fletcher & Perry, 2008). Colleges, however, receive less funding per student than schools, and hence, disadvantage would appear to beget disadvantage.

The complexity of the VET pathways brings young people into contact with a wide range of organisations in the public and private sector, the boundary between which is often blurred. For example, a young person might seek an apprenticeship in childcare. She might start by being referred by the careers advice service to a training provider who will register her and try to find an employer willing to recruit her on an apprenticeship basis. She might then return to the provider for off-the-job training or the provider might visit her in the workplace to carry out assessment towards a vocational qualification. This provider may be a private company, or a quasi-company which is part of the 'enterprise' section of a local further education college. Thus, negotiating a path between these different organisations quickly becomes part of the young person's post-school journey. The young person who remains in full-time education, however, has far less to negotiate and those who study for academic qualifications may never leave the comfort of the school or college. Complexity, it seems, is judged to be more suitable for those young people who are likely to have achieved less educationally (and hence, more likely to be from less advantaged backgrounds) up to the age of 16.

Evans (2002) uses the concept of 'Bounded Agency' to explain how young people try to exert control over their circumstances and decision-making, but find themselves restricted or impeded by structural barriers that are deep-rooted and very difficult to overcome. She stresses the need for agencies working with young people to 'emphasise brokerage and advocacy as a primary aim and function, to the extent that young adults perceive and experience this to be as real as the emphasis that is currently placed on their "deficits"' (ibid., p. 265).

Gender Segregation in Education, Training and Work

A particular concern regarding the 'choice' agenda is that it may exacerbate the influence of gender stereotypes on the types of qualifications that young people are able to achieve. Concerns about 'boys' underachievement', driven by the gender gap in GCSE passes, have dominated the policy agenda to such a degree that it has become difficult to raise wider gender issues, such as women's continued disadvantage in the labour market, and the fact that young women who leave school with low levels of qualifications are more disadvantaged in the labour market than comparable young men (Bynner et al., 1997; Howieson & Ianelli, 2008; Rake, 2000). Young women who are NEET also face an increased risk of early child-bearing and mental health problems (Bynner et al., 1997).

As the level of qualifications gained by the general population has expanded, it matters more than ever, not simply what level of qualifications an individual has, but what area this qualification is in. There is a clear link between gender segregation in qualifications and gender segregation in the labour market, yet schools and colleges have not addressed the way in which girls continue to be over-represented in those domains with the weakest labour market value. The tendency to see these gendered patterns as an unproblematic consequence of individual choices ignores the social pressures on young people to abide by gendered norms of behaviour. In addition, it is unrealistic to assume that young people possess (and are able to process) information regarding the long-term consequences of their teenage decisions for their adult labour-market positions (Manski, 1993).

While females have overtaken males in terms of overall academic attainment, traditional patterns of participation in particular fields of study have persisted. At A level, the most popular subjects for females (excluding general studies) are English, psychology, biology, art and design and mathematics. For males, they are mathematics, English, history, biology and physics. Figure 5.1 shows the number of A-level entries for these subjects according to sex. English, psychology and art and design are heavily female-dominated, while mathematics and physics are heavily male-dominated, despite the fact that girls and boys have similar attainments in mathematics at age 16.

Vocational qualifications are even more segregated by gender than academic qualifications. Females are concentrated in 'health and social care', and a full 40% of female qualifications in this category are accounted for by this one subject. The most popular subjects for males are Information Communications and Technology (ICT) and business.[6]

The biggest pull factor leading young people away from full-time education continues to be the labour market. It is known from research that the majority of 16- to 19-year-olds work part-time, and many have some work experience from the age of 14, so that 'earning and learning' has become the common experience for young

[6]Source: DCSF Education and Training Statistics for the United Kingdom, 2007, Table 3.5

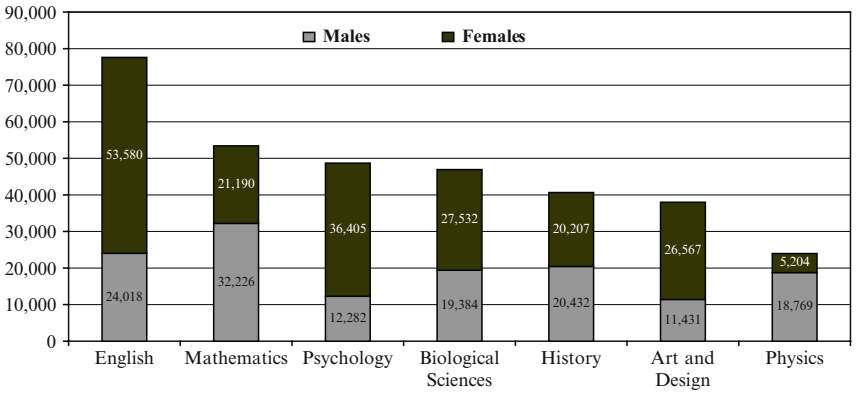

Fig. 5.1 A level subject entries by sex for 16- to 18-year-olds in England 2006–07[7]

people (Hodgson & Spours, 2001, p. 386). The massive growth of service industries has benefited from a willing army of young, part-time workers whose identity shifts, often on a daily basis, between student, employee and consumer. Employers can offer flexible hours, the possibility of working long shifts to earn extra money, and employment close to home. These employers will often demand little in the way of prior experience or qualifications, but require applicants to meet the emerging requirements of the 'aesthetic labour market' (see Nickson et al., 2003). For a teenager concerned to earn just enough money to cover their social life and mobile phone bills, such jobs are very attractive. That attraction may, in turn, lead to a decision to stay with a job that offers few long-term prospects but in which the young person feels safe. This may have particularly damaging consequences for young women as figures from the 'Apprenticeships' program indicate (see Fuller et al., 2005).

The government-funded 'Apprenticeships' program in England covers three work-based pathways (see Fuller & Unwin, 2008). 'Young Apprenticeship' is for 14- to 16-year-olds and involves work experience alongside full-time study in school and college. The two main pathways for 16- to 25-year-olds are 'Apprenticeship', which leads to Level 2 qualifications, and 'Advanced Apprenticeship', which leads to Level 3 qualifications. Apprenticeships are available in around 100 occupational areas, but, as is shown below, the majority of apprentices are found in 12 sectors. Apprentices usually spend 4 days a week in the workplace and 1 day in an off-the-job setting in a college, in a company-based workshop, or with another form of training provider. The majority have 'employed' status. The length of apprenticeships varies from around 1 to 3 years according to the requirements of the sector, and the content of the training program is determined by Sector Skills Councils (SSCs). Government funding covers the cost of training to meet the mandatory qualification requirements, and employers pay the apprentices' wages.

[7]Source: DCSF: GCE/VCE A/AS and Equivalent Examination Results in England, 2006/07, Tables 2, 2m, 2f. http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000755/

Table 5.2 Sixteen to 18-year-olds, 'average in learning' 2006–07 (12 months) by gender and apprenticeship level

	Female	Male	Total
Advanced Apprenticeship L3	10,217	42,800	**53,017**
Apprenticeship L2	40,541	56,690	**97,231**
Total	**50,758**	**99,490**	**150,248**

Source: Learning and Skills Council, http:www.apprenticeships.org.uk/partners/frameworks/apprenticeshipsdata/reports20062007

Table 5.3 Aged 19+, 'average in learning' 2006–07 (12 months) by gender and apprenticeship level

	Female	Male	Total
Advanced Apprenticeship L3	20,585	25,558	**46,143**
Apprenticeship L2	22,138	25,315	**47,453**
Total	**42,723**	**50,873**	**93,596**

Source: Learning and Skills Council, http:www.apprenticeships.org.uk/partners/frameworks/apprenticeshipsdata/reports20062007

Given that employment structures in the UK are highly segregated by gender, it is perhaps no surprise that the Apprenticeships program mirrors such divisions, as Tables 5.2 and 5.3 show. The segregation of vocational training by sector has strong implications for the *level* of qualifications that can be attained.

Two important points about apprenticeship participation emerge from these statistics. First, the majority of participants in the program are male, with the male–female imbalance being the starkest in the Advanced Apprenticeship. Second, the majority of participants are in the younger, 16–18 age group, and most of them are in the Level 2 program.

Despite apprenticeships currently being available in over 100 sectors, over three quarters of apprentices are found in just 12 sectors. Nonetheless, the diversity of occupations and jobs covered in these sectors is indicative of the very different types of workplace settings in which young people on apprenticeships find themselves. One key difference is in the proportion of participants following L2 and L3 programs. In electrotechnical, the vast majority are following the Advanced Apprenticeship; whereas in retail, hairdressing and construction, over 8 out of 10 are following the L2 program. The 12 most populated apprenticeship sectors are as follows, in descending order:

- Construction
- Hairdressing
- Business administration
- Customer care

- Hospitality
- Childcare and early years
- Engineering
- Vehicle maintenance
- Retail
- Health and social care
- Electrotechnical
- Plumbing

The extent of the segregation is, however, of considerable concern, particularly because the structure of the program into Level 2 and Level 3 pathways exacerbates the impoverished position of young women. In their analysis of gender segregation in England and Wales, Fuller et al. (2005) showed that, although there are roughly the same number of female apprentices as male, the females are more likely to be found in Level 2 apprenticeships. This is because females dominate apprenticeships in the service industries (e.g., health and social care, retailing, hairdressing), which, in turn, offer far more Level 2 than Level 3 apprenticeships. The economic returns to Level 2 vocational qualifications are poor compared to Level 3 (Dearden et al., 2000; Jenkins et al., 2007) and female apprentices have fewer opportunities for progression than their male counterparts.

This troubled part of the VET territory is particularly affected by the refusal of successive governments to regulate employer behaviour. In addition, the very notion of an apprenticeship model of training will come under increasing pressure as the current global economic crisis continues to have an impact over the coming years. Despite the fact that many young people benefit from involvement in government-funded youth training programs (see Unwin & Wellington, 2001), this provision has been heavily criticised since the late 1970s, and the current 'Apprenticeships' program bears all the problematic hallmarks of its predecessors (see Fuller & Unwin, 2008).

Conclusion

This chapter has described the complex landscape of both compulsory and post-compulsory education and training in England. Whilst examinations at age 16 still mark a watershed in terms of the extent to which young people's futures will be determined by their relative success or failure, the concept of 'dropout' from the system cannot be strictly applied.[8] Rather, the majority of young people continue to participate in the system by joining one of the many pathways that open up after

[8]The notion of 'not in education, employment or training (NEET)', though, can be used to identify those within a cohort who are no longer in school and do not hold upper secondary or equivalent qualifications and can be considered 'dropouts' as defined in other countries. This could be applied at an age, such as 17-year-olds, as in Table 5.1 of this chapter (Editors' note).

the compulsory phase of education has ended. Some young people switch between pathways, trying one and then another, and some who become classified as NEET or NET may reappear in an official pathway at a later stage.

The concept of 'graduation' to mark the end of compulsory schooling in England was first discussed by government in 1999 as a contribution to combating the dangers of social exclusion created by an education system that labeled 50% of 16-year-olds as failures. A report from the then Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) argued that:

> Graduation would be a challenging but achievable goal requiring as a minimum the Level 2 standard of achievement in formal qualifications (academic, vocational or occupational), and also involving the key skills of communication, use of numeracy and a range of options for arts, sport and community activity. (SEU, 1999, p. 11)

When the concept was piloted in three areas of the country, young people, parents, employers and teachers were found to support the idea, but the disadvantages were felt to be too great. As Lindsay and Maguire (2002, p. 8) explain, the very fact that graduation would require young people to meet certain thresholds would still mean some, and probably the most disadvantaged, would remain excluded.

It is clear from the data and discussion presented here that the age-old fault lines of social class, gender and ethnicity still have a serious impact on the fortunes of individuals, and that failure to achieve early on in life can prove to be a profound impediment to later progression. Despite the considerable expansion of the numbers of young people entering higher education over the past 10 years, and the 'widening participation' agenda, the impact of social class on the chances of participation in higher education remains strong. In addition, only 78% of young people who start (towards a) full-time degree are now expected to gain a degree, and completion rates vary widely according to the prestige of the institution (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2008). Employment and wage rates on graduation also vary widely across institutions (Chevalier & Conlon, 2003).

In 2013, England will see whether the first 16-year-olds obliged to remain in some form of education or training until they are 18 have conformed with the government's wishes. In a highly critical review of the new legislation, Wolf (2008, p. 7) argues that it runs counter to our understanding about the relationship between motivation and learning. Furthermore, she states that it will have a negative impact on the youth labour market as many businesses that currently employ 16- and 17-year-olds will stop doing so because of the requirement to provide them with formal recognised training. This will, according to Wolf, have the self-defeating effect of harming the most disadvantaged and marginalised young people (ibid.). The counter arguments are that for too long, England has allowed employers to recruit young people without any requirement to provide them with the necessary vocational education and training to enable them to progress both within and beyond their current employment. This neglect is regarded as being harmful for the well-being of both the country's economy and for the individual.

Regardless of the effects of the new legislation, however, it is clear from this chapter that it is unlikely on its own to solve the deep-rooted inequalities in the

English system. Whilst much progress has been made over the past 20 or so years in terms of the numbers of young people acquiring qualifications at the end of their compulsory phase of schooling and in terms of the numbers who progress to further and higher education, it is still the case that social class and, to some extent, geography, remain tough barriers to overcome.

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