

Chapter 6

Participation in Post-Compulsory Learning in Scotland

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Introduction

The Scottish education system has no generally recognised concept of school completion or graduation. After the age of 16, when education ceases to be compulsory, the level, duration, mode and content of learning vary widely, and there is no standard or benchmark by which to judge whether an individual has completed secondary education. The system's key characteristic is flexibility; post-compulsory education and training comprise a 'climbing frame' with multiple entry and exit points rather than pre-determined lines or programs leading to fixed standards to be achieved by all learners. This chapter therefore focuses on levels of participation in post-compulsory learning. It also refers more briefly to the attainment of those who participate, although unlike many other countries, 'participation' and 'attainment' are the subjects of separate discourses in Scotland.

The Scottish education system is generally perceived to perform well. Recent strategic audits have identified education as a source of Scottish comparative advantage (McConnell, 2006). However, this strong performance is blemished by low participation in post-compulsory learning, compounded by low attainment among many of those who participate, by a large number of teenagers not in education, employment or training (NEET), and by inequalities in participation and attainment. The United Kingdom as a whole has lower participation in post-16 education and training than most of its comparator countries, and participation is lower in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. According to one recent report, 63% of 15- to 19-year-olds in Scotland were in education and training in 2003, the lowest percentage of any country in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Scottish Funding Council [SFC], 2008a).¹ Scotland has

¹An earlier report cited a figure of 'just under 70%' for the same year (Scottish Executive, 2006a). A more recent estimate, supplied by the Scottish Government, shows 72.4% of Scottish 15- to 19-year-olds in education in 2006 (this includes apprenticeships but excludes Skillseeker training programs). The comparable figure for the UK was 75.7% and the OECD average was 83.0%.

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one of the OECD's highest proportions of 15- to 19-year-olds who are NEET; it also has one of the highest proportions of 15- to 19-year-olds in employment without education, suggesting that the NEET problem is one of low participation in education rather than a shortage of employment (Scottish Executive, 2006a). Early in 2007, Scotland's First Minister Jack McConnell commissioned a report on extending compulsory education beyond the current minimum leaving age of 16; his government lost office after the 2007 election and the report was never published. Later in the same year, an OECD team reviewed the *Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland* (OECD, 2007). It concluded that Scottish schools had important strengths but faced two main challenges: an achievement gap between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and low and socially unequal participation and attainment in learning beyond compulsory schooling. The first challenge is shared with many other countries, which have similar levels of social inequality; the second challenge – of low post-compulsory participation and attainment – is faced by Scotland to a greater extent than most other European or OECD countries.

Low participation makes it harder to achieve national policy objectives such as raising skill levels and ensuring their wide distribution. It also matters for the young people themselves: early leavers face disadvantage in education and the labour market, especially females and the lowest qualified, whose risk of unemployment or unstable employment is greatest (Howieson, 2003; Hannan et al., 1998). Many become NEET, and some of these find it difficult to escape from their NEET status.

The social science literature offers at least three explanatory frameworks for low participation.

Cultural explanations focus on the cultures or sub-cultures of young people and of the education system. Such explanations attribute low participation in Scottish post-16 education to a 'British' youth sub-culture, which celebrates early transitions to adulthood (Jones & Wallace, 1992), and to the disengagement produced by the cultural distance between the school system and many young people. The OECD review of Scottish education blamed the academic ethos of schools for failing to engage and motivate weaker learners. Cultural explanations draw on the theories of sociologists such as Bernstein (1971) and Bourdieu (1997) who analyse the cultural foundations of curricula, pedagogies and school organisation in relation to those of young people and their class backgrounds. Cultural explanations figure prominently in policy debates, reflected in exhortations to raise aspirations, in calls for programs to be made more 'relevant' and in the belief that 'parity of esteem' is the answer to low participation in vocational learning.

Rational explanations argue that young people respond in a rational (or at least, 'situationally' or 'pragmatically' rational: Goldthorpe, 2000; Hodkinson et al., 1996) way to the opportunities, incentives, costs and constraints associated with participation in education. They attribute low participation in Scotland to educational pathways which offer poor prospects of success for low-attaining young people, to the weak links between education and employment, to the weak incentives of a polarised labour market with many low-skilled jobs which require few

qualifications, and to the lack of transparency of pathways and the destinations to which they lead. Rational explanations draw on the rational-action theories of writers such as Boudon (1974) and Goldthorpe (2000), and are used especially to predict ‘secondary effects’ of social class on choices at key decision points such as the end of compulsory schooling, as distinct from ‘primary effects’ on attainment. Rational explanations also feature in policy analyses and prescriptions, such as the ‘pathways engineering’ approach proposed by the OECD (1998).

Developmental explanations focus on aspects of young people’s psychological or social development, which affect their capacity or disposition to participate in education. Young people may drop out of learning because they lack self-esteem, self-efficacy or resilience, because they lack cognitive or social skills, or because of dependency on drugs or alcohol. Such ‘deficits’ are the product, in part, of the family and social environment; low educational participation in Scotland may reflect relatively high levels of poverty and deprivation, as well as parenting behaviours and social environments which result in developmental trajectories associated with dropout from education. Developmental explanations draw primarily on psychology and on theories of individual and social development, although they have recently received attention from economists and life-course researchers (Heckman & Masterov, 2004; Feinstein et al., 2008). Unlike cultural and rational explanations, they imply a ‘deficit’ model of dropout. They have been influential in recent policy debates, reflected in support for early interventions and in increased government concern with parenting skills and family influences on individual development.

These three explanations are not mutually exclusive, nor are they exhaustive (other explanatory frameworks, such as social capital, may also help to explain participation). They were developed primarily to explain social inequalities in educational participation and attainment, but they can equally be used to explain the overall level of participation and trends over time. Cultural and rational explanatory frameworks have been widely employed in macro-sociological research, so they may be more suitable for comparative analysis than ‘micro’ perspectives such as the developmental explanation described earlier. The three explanations are used in this chapter as a loose framework on which to base a review of post-compulsory participation in Scotland. The chapter is divided into seven sections. After a brief description of Scottish education in the following (second) section, the third section reviews the level, trend and distribution of post-compulsory participation. The fourth, fifth and sixth sections use the three explanatory frameworks to compare possible policy strategies and describe recent and current policy initiatives. The final section draws conclusions.

The Scottish Education System

Schooling in Scotland is compulsory from age 5 to 16. Pupils spend 7 years at primary school and a minimum of 4 years at secondary school. Except for private schools, which serve about 5% of the age group, schools are comprehensive and

co-educational, run by local authorities and linked with geographical catchment areas, although parents can choose schools in other catchments if places are available. The school system is uniform: Scotland has avoided the ‘school diversity’ agenda of England and some other countries. All schools are funded and administered on a similar basis, school standards are consistent, school social segregation is among the lowest in Europe and differential school effects are small.

School students progress with the same year group through the 11 years of compulsory schooling; grade repetition is virtually unknown. At the end of S4 (fourth year of secondary school), at age 15 or 16, pupils take Standard Grade (or equivalent) examinations. Standard Grades are single-subject, graded qualifications, typically attempted in eight subjects. They will be replaced in 2013–14 by re-designed single-subject qualifications following a public consultation in 2008 (Scottish Government, 2008a, b).

At present, Standard Grades mark the end of compulsory education, and they strongly influence subsequent destinations. It is not necessary to achieve a given level of performance in order to continue into post-compulsory education, but the grade achieved in a particular subject typically determines the level at which that subject can be studied in upper-secondary schooling, and young people with lower grades are relatively likely to enter college or training rather than stay on at school, or to leave learning altogether.

About a third of young people leave school at the end of compulsory education, at age 16. At least half of these 16-year-old leavers continue full-time learning either in colleges or in work-based national training programs. Colleges are all-purpose institutions offering a variety of vocational and general programs to students of all ages, including school leavers aged 16, 17 and 18. College programs are available at a range of levels up to and including Higher National (short-cycle higher education) qualifications. Most programs are designed for full-time study over 1 or 2 years. The main national training programs are Modern Apprenticeships, available to entrants of all ages, although 16- to 24-year-olds have priority, and Skillseekers, a program for 16- to 18-year-olds, mostly at a level below Modern Apprenticeships. A few early leavers enter part-time education or training outside of national training programs, usually provided or funded by their employer. All 16- and 17-year-olds not in education or training are entitled to work-based training under a Youth Guarantee introduced in 1988, when benefit entitlements were withdrawn from unemployed under-18-year-olds.

Formally, the different institutional pathways beyond 16 have equal legitimacy, and their diversity is celebrated as a strength of the system. In practice, they form a status hierarchy headed by schools. School staying-on rates continue to be used as key indicators of participation and, before 2007, separate government departments covered school and post-school education. Destination statistics are published for school-leaver groups, rather than for school-year groups who complete compulsory education at the same time. This makes it difficult to compare school and post-school options as equivalent destinations.

As noted earlier, there is no recognised concept of upper-secondary completion or graduation in Scottish education, and the level, duration, mode and content of

learning vary widely. One reason for this is the diversity of pathways; another reason is the diversity of programs within each pathway, and their open-ended character. The upper-secondary school curriculum is elective: students choose a mixture of single-subject courses at a variety of possible levels over 1 or 2 years. Each course is separately certificated. High-attaining students aiming for university typically take five 'Higher' courses in the first post-compulsory year, followed by a mixture of additional Highers, re-sits and/or 'Advanced Highers' in the second. For lower-attaining students, the volume and level of study is more variable; many take 'Intermediate' courses possibly combined with one or two Highers. About a third of students who stay on in post-compulsory schooling leave after 1 year, often to enter college or an apprenticeship. Most full-time college provision consists of set 1-year programs at a choice of levels with opportunities to progress between programs. Work-based provision is also organised around set programs, but these vary in duration and demand.

All post-compulsory courses and programs are unit-based and describable in terms of credit values and levels of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). It would be possible, therefore, to define benchmarks for graduation based on defined volumes and levels of study, and required subjects or competences. In practice, however, this is not the way the Scottish system works – or has worked hitherto. New Scottish Baccalaureates in languages and science are being introduced to encourage study of those subjects. They will be awarded for combinations of existing qualifications (two Advanced Highers and one Higher) in the relevant subject area together with an interdisciplinary project, and they will cover only part of a full-time program. They are neither graduation certificates nor baccalaureates as these terms are understood in other countries. Scotland's open or flexible system contrasts with the more structured pathways characteristic of most other European systems. Scottish schools may expect students to take particular subjects (usually English, sometimes mathematics), but otherwise students choose the courses that match their interests, ambitions and abilities, strongly influenced by the perceived requirements of 'end-users' such as universities and employers. However, this flexibility affects some students more than others: for students following the royal road to elite universities, the choices are relatively simple; for other students, and especially the least qualified who may need most support to navigate their pathways, the options are less clearly defined.

Nearly half of young people (47% in 2006) enter full-time higher education before the age of 21; about a third of these take sub-degree courses at college. The higher education (HE) system is stratified, not only between universities and colleges, but also according to universities' ability to select their students, with the lower-status 'recruiter' institutions typically showing greater flexibility in recruitment and in the requirements for entry. Admission to higher education is decentralised, and school qualifications do not confer an entitlement. A majority of young people who enter HE do so on the basis of Highers and other school qualifications, but a minority follow a college route into HE, often progressing from non-advanced vocational programs to sub-degree programs, and sometimes progressing from these to university degree courses using articulation or credit transfer arrangements based on the SCQF.

The Scottish labour market is closely integrated with the rest of the UK. It is weakly regulated and has weak occupational labour markets. Selection procedures are flexible; qualifications are important signals in the labour market but only in a small range of occupations do they provide a licence to practise.

The Level, Trend and Distribution of Post-Compulsory Participation

In the absence of a concept of secondary completion or graduation, Scottish research on participation or dropout in post-compulsory education has typically focused on participation in the spring after S4, the last compulsory school year. Much of this research has been based on the Scottish School Leavers Survey (SSLS), a series of surveys conducted from the early 1970s until 2005. From 1984 to 2005, the SSLS followed representative samples of year groups for 3 years (occasionally more) beyond compulsory schooling. Table 6.1 shows the ‘main activities’ of

Table 6.1 Main activity of four Scottish year groups at age 16–17 and at age 18–19 (%)

Completed S4 in:	1984	1990	1998	2002
Main activity at age 16–17	1985	1991	1999	2003
School	42	59	65	68
College	4	4	8	9
Training program	23	18	8	8
Job	18	13	11	8
Unemployed	11	6	7	4
Other	2	1	2	4
Total	101	101	101	101
Weighted n	(6,422)	(4,416)	(7,534)	(4,712)
Main activity at age 18/19	1987	1993	2001	2005
Full-time education	21	34	45	45
Training program	5	8	11	9
Job	53	40	33	35
Unemployed	15	11	8	7
Other	6	7	3	4
Total	100	100	100	100
Weighted n	(3,858)	(2,724)	(4,933)	(3,200)

Note: S4 is the last compulsory school year. Most members of each year group celebrated their 16th birthday between March 1 of the S4 year and the end of the following February.

Source: Scottish School Leavers Survey. Tables 6.1 and 6.2 are based on a data set constructed by Linda Croxford for the ESRC-funded Education and Youth Transitions project, and subsequently extended for Scotland for the Scottish Government-funded Scottish Trends project (see Croxford et al., 2007; Croxford, 2009).

four SSLS year groups at age 16–17 (in the spring after S4) and at age 18–19, 2 years later. Between the 1980s and the early 2000s, participation at age 16–17 in full-time education rose substantially; it rose even more, in proportionate terms, at age 18–19. Of those in the year group which completed S4 in 2002, more than three quarters were still in full-time education at age 16–17, and nearly half were in full-time education at age 18–19 (about three quarters of these were in higher education). The proportion in training programs at age 16–17 fell sharply over the period, while the proportion in these programs at age 18–19 increased slightly; this partly reflects a shift in their function from absorbing the consequences of mass school-leaver unemployment to developing skills for the economy.

Table 6.1 suggests that the growth in participation in school, college or other full-time education had slowed down by the early 2000s. The 2002 S4 cohort was the last to be surveyed by the SSLS. More recent trends are indicated by official statistics, which suggest that participation has stopped increasing during the current decade. Between 1999–2000 and 2006–07, the proportion staying on at school beyond the compulsory leaving age fell by a percentage point, from 68.4% to 67.4% (Scottish Government, 2008c). The participation rate of under-21-year-olds in higher education fell from a peak of 51.5% in 2000 and 2001 to 47.1% in 2006 (Scottish Government, 2007a). The number of 16- to 24-year-olds in national training programs has shown no clear trend since 1999; it stood at around 38,000 in 2007 (Scottish Government, 2007b). The one type of participation that has continued to rise is in full-time college programs (excluding higher education), which attracted 23% of school leavers (of all ages) in 2006, compared with 19% in 1999 (*ibid.*), but this has not been enough to increase total participation levels significantly.

Table 6.2 shows how participation in different forms of learning at age 16–17 among members of the 2002 S4 cohort varied according to gender and educational and family background. More young women than young men continued in full-time education, but more males entered work-based training. The strongest single predictor of participation was attainment at Standard Grade. A majority of the two highest attainment categories continued at school; those with lower qualifications were more likely to enter college or training, but they still had much lower participation rates overall. Social class and family structure were also associated with participation. And more than half of young people who truanted for days or weeks at a time during their last compulsory year did not continue formal learning thereafter. Table 6.2 shows simple bivariate associations, but more detailed studies confirm that gender, educational attainment and parental class are independently associated with participation (e.g., Paterson & Raffe, 1995; Howieson, 2003). They also show that these determinants have changed little over time, even when total participation rates were rising, although there has been some weakening of the correlation between S4 attainment and full-time participation, associated especially with a trend for less-qualified young people to enter college.

A substantial proportion of young people who continue in education or training beyond 16, and especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, either drop out of their post-16 courses or achieve relatively poor attainments. Less-qualified young people who continue at school beyond 16 have an uncertain chance of

Table 6.2 Main activity in spring 2003 (at age 16–17) of young people who completed S4 in 2002, by gender, educational and social background (%)

	School	College	Training	Other	Total (n)
Gender					
Male	65	8	11	16	100 (2,380)
Female	71	10	5	15	101 (2,332)
Standard Grade attainment					
5+ Credit awards	94	1	1	4	100 (1,845)
5+ General awards	60	13	10	16	99 (2,116)
5+ Foundation awards	26	20	19	35	100 (533)
Others	23	13	14	50	100 (171)
Parents' social class					
Prof and managerial	83	6	4	8	101 (1,830)
Intermediate	65	9	11	16	101 (1,378)
Working	55	15	10	21	101 (1,086)
Unclassified	50	13	10	27	100 (416)
Family structure					
Mother and father	73	8	8	12	101 (3,328)
Step parent(s)	59	9	10	21	99 (360)
Lone parent	56	14	7	23	100 (896)
Other	53	13	8	26	100 (103)
Truancy in S4					
Days/weeks at a time	20	15	13	53	101 (287)
Less frequent or never	71	9	7	13	100 (4,412)

substantially improving on their low attainment (Howieson & Iannelli, 2008). Recent reforms enhanced low-attainers' access to post-compulsory school courses, but had a less favourable impact on their subsequent progression (Raffe et al., 2007). Completion rates for college programs have risen in recent years and are currently about 70%; some students drop out and do not complete because they are offered a job (SFC, 2008b). Completion rates from training programs have also risen in recent years, but they are still relatively low. In 2005, only half of 16- to 24-year-olds leaving Modern Apprenticeships had completed their programs; reasons for non-completion included: company closure, finding another job, disciplinary reasons, loss of interest, or finding that the training was not what they were looking for (Cambridge Policy Consultants [CPC], 2006). Success or failure in post-compulsory learning is not random: social inequalities in participation and attainment increase between the ages of 16 and 18 (Raffe et al., 2006).

An estimated 53% of young people in the last SSLS cohort gained Higher pass(es) at school, which could represent a very crude indicator of school completion. The proportions completing college and training programs could be estimated by multiplying the percentages in these programs at age 16–17 (9% and 8%: see Table 6.1) by the respective completion rates reported above (70% and 50%). This yields a total completion rate of about 63% of the cohort (53% + [9% × 70%] + [8% × 50%]). This is the percentage of the cohort who 'complete' some form of

education and training. It is an underestimate, partly because the figures in Table 6.1 already exclude a substantial proportion of those who dropped out of college and training programs, and partly because it takes no account of part-time education and training, or of programs entered after the first post-compulsory year. Moreover, it fails to respect the logic of the system, which treats all post-compulsory learning as valid regardless of its level or duration.

The SSLS evidence on patterns of participation does not provide a clear basis for choosing among the three explanatory frameworks discussed earlier. This is hardly surprising, because each of these frameworks was developed to explain such patterns, and especially to explain social inequalities. Thus, the cultural theories framework argues that the cultural distance between the school system and young people varies with social background: the school system legitimates and validates the cultural capital of the dominant classes. It also argues that youth sub-cultures are socially variable, and cultural pressures for early leaving are strongest in the case of white, working-class males. Rationalist theories attribute inequalities in participation to the different goals, resources and opportunities of young people from different backgrounds. And developmental theories note that poverty and social deprivation, and related experiences such as dependence on social care, frequently give rise to developmental trajectories characterised by educational failure and dropout.

The growth in participation can similarly be attributed to either cultural or rational factors, although it is less likely to have a developmental explanation. Thus, it could reflect the growth of cultural capital among young people,² changes in youth sub-cultures and past educational reforms which reduced the cultural distance between schooling and young people. Rising levels of parental education explain some (but not all) of the rise in attainment and participation, and increasing proportions of SSLS sample members who stay on at school say that they do so partly because of an intrinsic interest in their subjects (Paterson & Raffe, 1995). However, SSLS sample members also give strongly instrumental explanations for their decisions. The growth in participation could also reflect the changing balance of opportunities and incentives created by rising compulsory-school attainments, the collapse of the teenage labour market, more flexible educational pathways, increased opportunities in higher education and a growth in occupations requiring higher-level qualifications. Such factors create the 'context' of education which, over several decades of SSLS research, has been shown to be a major determinant of the success or failure of educational reform (Raffe, 1984).

If empirical data fail to differentiate among the explanatory frameworks, this may be because, at least in part, they describe different aspects of the same processes. Sub-cultures may mediate the influence of opportunity structures and their situational logic on young people's choices, culturally conditioned behaviours may give rise to developmental problems, and rational action may be one element in

²However, more determinist interpretations of cultural theories suggest that the total stock of cultural capital is fixed. Goldthorpe (2000) makes this point to argue that cultural-capital theories cannot account for educational expansion.

a culturally shaped repertoire (Hatcher, 1998). The OECD review's analysis combines all three explanations. It attributes working-class disengagement and failure to the academic Scottish curriculum, to weak intrinsic and extrinsic incentives, and to low self-confidence and self-esteem, and it argues that these three processes reinforce each other.

Nevertheless, the three theoretical frameworks point towards different policy responses to the problem of low participation. The following sections describe current Scottish policies, grouped according to whether the underlying strategy most directly addresses cultural, rational or developmental determinants of low participation. These are described respectively as culturalist, rationalist and developmentalist strategies, although these terms are not used in official documents, and many current policies combine elements of different strategies.

Culturalist Strategies

Culturalist strategies aim to reduce the cultural distance between potential early leavers and the education system by changing the culture of the former or (more realistically) by changing the curriculum, pedagogy and culture of the latter. Young people may become disengaged well before the end of compulsory education: culturalist strategies therefore seek cultural change in compulsory schooling as well as in post-compulsory education and training. Most of these interventions have much broader objectives than raising participation.

An example is *A Curriculum for Excellence*, one of the flagship programs of the current government, which aims to transform the curriculum for 3- to 18-year-olds so that all young people become 'successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society and at work' (Curriculum Review Group, 2004, p. 12). These 'four capacities' are to be developed through changes in pedagogy and school organisation, as well as in curricular content; the reform is premised on a concept of curriculum, which embraces interdisciplinary learning, the ethos and life of school as a community and opportunities for personal achievement, as well as curriculum areas and subjects (Scottish Government, 2008b). The reform is more advanced in primary than in secondary schools, and details of how it will work in the 'senior phase', which covers learning between the ages of 15 and 18 whether at school, college or elsewhere, are still being worked out. In 2008, the government announced a new entitlement: all young people are entitled to a senior phase of education in which they continue to develop the four capacities and which, among other things, 'prepares them well for achieving qualifications to the highest level of which they are capable' (ibid., p. 15). The model for planning this entitlement, under the title *16 + Learning Choices*, 'envisages all young people, well in advance of their school leaving date, being made an offer of an appropriate, attractive place in learning post-16' (ibid., p. 4).

The OECD (2007) review of Scottish schooling commended the vision of *A Curriculum for Excellence* and its potential to effect the cultural change, which it

judged necessary. However, it criticised its separation from other relevant curriculum initiatives, and especially from *Skills for Work* courses which, although formally subsumed within *A Curriculum for Excellence*, had in practice developed as a parallel but separate initiative. *Skills for Work* courses were introduced as pilots in 2005 and ‘rolled out’ nationally in 2007. They offer applied and experiential learning in particular occupational areas, mainly for 14- to 16-year-old school pupils, usually provided in partnership with a college (occasionally with an employer). Each course is similar in volume to a single Standard Grade subject. The courses appear to recruit middle- and lower-attaining students, although there are no reliable data on this. Evaluations show generally favourable reactions from learners and teachers, with positive effects on self-confidence, self-esteem, motivation and vocational skills and knowledge (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education, 2007; Spielhofer & Walker, 2008).

So far, there is no evidence of the impact of *Skills for Work* courses on post-compulsory participation. Of course, they were not designed primarily to increase post-16 participation – their formal objective is to develop general ‘employability skills’ – but they are part of a general move to broaden and diversify the curriculum, with the expectation that this will stimulate engagement and learning among a wider range of young people. *Skills for Work* courses also reflect a tendency in recent Scottish debates to see vocational learning as the solution to problems of engagement and participation. Policy-makers in Scotland, as in many other countries, see an expansion of vocational learning and an improvement in its status as a means to expand participation in post-compulsory learning as well as to achieve the desired curriculum diversity and cultural change. This approach receives *prima facie* support from the trend for countries where more upper-secondary students take vocational programs to have higher total participation or graduation rates (Leney, 2004; Lamb, 2008).

Apprenticeships are often seen as a way of attracting young people and raising participation. They offer applied and ‘relevant’ learning, in a cultural setting very different from school, through which young people acquire an occupational identity and adult status. Scottish Modern Apprenticeships are seen to be successful and improving (CPC, 2006; Scottish Executive, 2006b). However, their quality is uneven and they are subject to important supply constraints. The history of work-based training in Scotland since the 1980s reveals a tension between quality and quantity, and a related tension between the goals of social inclusion and of economic development (the same tensions are identified elsewhere in the UK: Fuller & Unwin, 2003). Apprenticeships tend to be successful under specific sectoral and labour-market conditions, and they cannot be expanded indefinitely to sectors or labour-market contexts where these conditions are not satisfied. The cognitive and behavioural demands of many apprenticeships make them less suitable for the lowest qualified school leavers, and their recruitment tends to be skewed in favour of white males. They are an important component of a diverse learning system but they cannot be used as the principal means of attracting and motivating young people who would otherwise drop out of learning.

Another way to boost vocational provision is through expanding full-time programs at college. However, as we have seen, Scottish colleges already provide a

range of vocational programs. Simply providing such programs is not sufficient to guarantee high participation. Moreover, evidence from other countries suggests that vocational programs may not be the most appropriate ways to engage the most disaffected young people (Steedman & Stoney, 2004). This is supported by the experience of *Skills for Work*: participation in these courses requires (for instance) a certain level of maturity, and colleges have resisted their use as ‘dumping grounds’ for problem students.

16+ Learning Choices proposes ‘a new focus ... on those young people for whom school is not the right option post-16’ (Scottish Government, 2008d, p. 2). It aims to include not only ‘vocational’ college and training programs, but also non-formal learning opportunities in community settings, including programs run by voluntary organisations, youth work and volunteering schemes. It argues that such opportunities, backed up by intensive advice and guidance, may be more appropriate for the most vulnerable young people at the greatest risk of dropping out. It proposes to place these options on an equal footing with formal learning opportunities, with the same level and consistency of financial and other support.

Rationalist Strategies

Rationalist strategies aim to change the balance of opportunities, incentives and costs in order to make participation a ‘rational’ choice for more young people.

One rationalist strategy focuses on the opportunities, incentives and costs which arise from the organisation of the education system itself. An example is ‘pathways engineering’, which tries to structure educational pathways to encourage participation (OECD, 1998). This typically involves making the system more flexible, designing post-compulsory programs on which low-attaining students have a higher probability of success, and increasing the range of destinations to which each pathway may lead. Measures of pathways engineering in Scotland have focused in particular on the qualifications system and the ways in which it structures access and progression. A series of reforms since the 1980s have created a more flexible, unified and seamless qualifications system, which embraces vocational and academic learning and facilitates access, transfer and progression. The SCQF is an outcome of these reforms (Raffe, 2007). They have created a more open system, but their impact on participation and progression, especially among young people, has been relatively modest. Young people with low prior attainments have continued to experience high failure rates on the new progression pathways, and the ‘intrinsic logic’ of a unified qualifications system has proved weaker than the ‘institutional logic’ in which it is embedded (Raffe et al., 2007). And improving pathways to educational qualifications may be an ineffective rationalist strategy if the labour market offers little incentive for young people to achieve these qualifications.

A second rationalist strategy focuses on opportunities, incentives and costs that arise from outside the education system, and especially from the labour market.

Like pathways engineering, this strategy often targets vocational programs. The evidence base for rates of return to Scottish programs is weak, but it is possible that the recent increases in college participation reflect positive labour-market returns (Gasteen et al., 2003). One way to increase labour-market returns to vocational programs is to enhance their quality and ensure that they meet current employment needs. Successive governments have sought to do this through a variety of measures, although ‘employer engagement’ remains one of the unsolved problems of Scottish (and British) education and training policy (Scottish Government, 2007c). *More Choices More Chances*, the report which outlined the Scottish government’s NEET strategy, requires local authorities to lead partnerships of providers, employers and other agencies to coordinate opportunities and support for at-risk school leavers in their areas (Scottish Executive, 2006a). A more radical way to increase the labour-market returns to learning is to increase the utilisation of, and demand for, the skills that are acquired. This is the current policy of the Scottish Government (2007c) but it has relatively few policy levers to give it effect.

Participation decisions may also be influenced by more immediate financial considerations. Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) of up to £30 per week are available to 16- to 19-year-olds from low-income families in full-time education. An evaluation of the first pilot EMAs estimated that they increased participation rates by 7 percentage points overall, and by 9 percentage points among young people from low-income families (Croxford et al., 2002). A subsequent evaluation suggested that increased participation was also reflected in increased attainment (Croxford et al., 2004). However, arrangements for financial support vary across different learning options, potentially influencing educational choices in favour of the options that pay best rather than those that best meet young people’s learning needs. Moreover, support tends to be less available and less predictable for participation in the non-formal learning opportunities which may be most appropriate for disengaged young people. The government recently consulted on ways to reduce these inconsistencies (Scottish Government, 2008d).

Information, advice and guidance services frequently form part of rationalist strategies on the basis that rational decision-making requires good information. The current all-age guidance service, Careers Scotland, was established in 2002, and in 2008 it was brought into a new organisation with wider skills-related responsibilities. Enhanced information, advice and guidance will form an element of *16+ Learning Choices*, possibly following a model of ‘activity agreements’ already piloted in England.

The SCQF provides a potential basis for introducing what Scotland has lacked since 1950 – a Graduation Certificate to mark the completion of upper secondary education. The OECD review recommended that a flexible Graduation Certificate be introduced at different levels to recognise learning at school, college and the workplace. Such a certificate would not automatically result in increased participation: its design would need to be sufficiently flexible to attract low-attaining young people and offer reasonable prospects of success, but not so flexible as to undermine the currency of the award and its value, compared with the existing qualifications. The government has formally rejected the OECD recommendation

(Scottish Government, 2008a), but some commentators, including the present writer, have suggested that the idea deserves further consideration.

Developmentalist Strategies

Developmentalist strategies focus on the most vulnerable young people and on those who drop out, or are at risk of dropping out, because of specific developmental and social problems. Young people who drop out, and especially those who become NEET, are disproportionately likely to have low self-esteem and self-efficacy, low social, personal and cognitive skills, family problems, and/or a history of offending, alcohol and drug use or teenage pregnancy (York Consulting, 2005). Not all these problems are strictly described as ‘developmental’, but they all invite responses which focus primarily on the individual and his or her problems, rather than on the education system and its cultures and opportunity structures.

Interventions in pursuit of this strategy are diverse, reflecting the diversity of individual young people and their needs. Many are local programs organised by voluntary organisations; relevant national programs are also diverse and flexible in their targeting, content and organisation. They tend to involve a variety of agencies, reflecting the variety of problems faced by the young people concerned (family, education, housing, employment, physical and mental health, addiction, and so on). Effective partnership working is an important (if, in practice, variable) component of developmentalist approaches. Another important component is a Key Worker who provides a single personal contact point for the young person concerned, and can help to coordinate the work of different agencies on their behalf. Many interventions focus on employability and employment as their main objectives rather than continued participation in education and training.

In 1999, a government-appointed committee reviewed the needs and provision of services for 16- to 24-year-olds with additional support needs (Scottish Executive, 1999). It identified gaps in the existing provision and inadequate coordination among the variety of agencies involved and made a number of recommendations, including the proposal for Key Workers. Careers Scotland played a leading role in taking these recommendations forward; a series of local Inclusiveness Projects were introduced, and subsequently absorbed into mainstream provision. Careers Scotland is also responsible for programs such as *Activate*, which aims to boost core skills and employability skills for at-risk young people in their final year of compulsory education. Other programs designed for young people in this group are local and organised by, or in partnership with, voluntary organisations. However, as a recent study to inform the curricular response to the NEET problem concluded, ‘curricular solutions cannot fully address social problems’ (Finlay et al., 2008, p. 9).

Get Ready for Work is a work-based program (previously part of Skillseekers), which offers varying forms and amounts of support for young people who require additional support to enter employment. It is intended that many of these young people should progress to mainstream work-based training programs, but evaluations

have criticised the small proportions of leavers who actually make this transition (Smart Consultancy and Eddy Adams Consultants, 2006).

Evaluations and reviews of ‘developmentalist’ initiatives confirm the value of the Key Worker approach and, related to this, the need to support clients through advocacy and the need for different support agencies to be coordinated. Other themes include the importance of a progression focus, the need to expect setbacks and to have a strategy for dealing with them, and the need to involve young people in the design of interventions (Eddy Adams Consultants and Smart Consultancy, 2005; SQW, 2005; Scottish Executive, 2005). The current *16 + Learning Choices* consultation proposes to make such opportunities available as part of a more coherent package focused on the delivery of an individual entitlement. It aims to put all options on an equal footing, with the same level and consistency of financial and other support. ‘[L]earning which might previously have been described as an “alternative” curriculum offer must be considered just as mainstream as Highers are for those young people who remain at school’ (Scottish Government, 2008d, p. 2). It also asks whether some particularly vulnerable young people might benefit from a ‘broker’ to negotiate on their behalf for opportunities which are not currently available (Scottish Government, 2008d).

Discussion

Many of the policy measures reviewed in this chapter operate at the system level: they aim to change the curriculum, provide new programs and qualifications or new mechanisms for coordinating the supply of learning opportunities. Some focus on the institutional level, at least in the sense of promoting particular types of institutional provision (through colleges, apprenticeships or the voluntary sector). Others focus on the individual, for example, by providing financial support, increased information, advice and guidance or key workers. The difference between these three levels does not correspond very closely to the distinction between culturalist, rationalist or developmentalist policy strategies. It is not possible, from this brief review, to conclude which of these strategies has been most effective. All three may be necessary components of a concerted effort to reduce dropout and raise participation in post-compulsory learning.

Different strategies may be more effective in different contexts and for different groups. It is probable that as participation has risen over time, a larger proportion of those who continue to drop out do so for reasons labelled in this chapter as ‘developmental’, suggesting that developmental strategies become more important. Nevertheless, studies of early leavers and NEET young people consistently draw attention to their heterogeneity (Finlay et al., 2008). *More Choices, More Chances* distinguished between the ‘hardest to help’ NEET young people and an intermediate group who were ‘quietly disaffected’, for whom less intensive interventions could make a ‘massive difference’ (Scottish Executive, 2006a). It is possible that this latter group would be more likely to respond to culturalist or rationalist strategies.

Moreover, an emphasis on all three strategies helps to challenge the individualistic focus of many policy documents, including *More Choices, More Chances*. Disengagement and dropout are not just individual problems; they also reflect broader social trends as well as problems in the school system and its relationship to the labour market and other social institutions, which are addressed by the culturalist and rationalist strategies.

Our framework also helps us to question another tendency in Scottish policy debates: the tendency to see vocational learning as a simple remedy for the problems associated with low participation. In the first place, this review has raised the question of supply and demand: Scotland already offers a diverse range of post-compulsory vocational opportunities, but this supply does not create its own demand. Conversely, the supply of some vocational opportunities, especially those based in the workplace, may be severely constrained. Second, vocational learning should not be used as shorthand for curricular diversity. The features that make many ‘vocational’ interventions effective have little to do with their vocational content. Third, genuinely vocational programs are unsuitable ways to engage young people who have important developmental issues. And fourth, if vocational programs expand faster than the labour market’s demand for their qualifications, the incentive to participate will diminish. Vocational learning has an important role both as a component of general education and as a principle for organising some learning pathways, but its potential contributions to the problems discussed above are both specific and limited.

I have suggested that developmental explanations for low participation may have become more important over time, as total dropout rates have fallen. Subject to this, 3 decades of SSLS-based research on the range of participation decisions – including decisions on the choice of program as well as whether to participate or not – point to the importance of rational factors in explaining broader patterns and trends in participation. If this analysis is still valid, an important reason for high dropout in Scottish education may be the polarised demand for skills from an ‘hourglass’ economy. Unlike successive UK governments, the Scottish government has accepted the argument that the solution to the skills problem lies as much with the demand for skills as with their supply, and has set the policy goal of increasing the utilisation of, and demand for, skills. It has few policy instruments for doing this, but even if it is only partly successful, this could be an important means by which participation in post-compulsory learning is raised.

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