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Response to the House of Commons Education Committee Inquiry: The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

Summary

- Our submission draws the Committee's attention to new research evidence on the likely impact of COVID-19 on post-16 transitions for young people whose expected GCSE attainment will be below the 'expected' threshold of Grade 4 or above (formerly C), particularly in English and maths.

- Our research suggests that these young people will face increased difficulties in making successful transitions this summer.

- These young people are more likely than other learners to be from disadvantaged families and to have special educational needs. They are also less likely to be confident and purposeful about their post-16 routes. They usually cannot continue learning in their secondary school and are faced with a complex and locally variable array of 'choices'.

- Pro-active interventions by schools, colleges and training providers in the spring and summer of Year 11 (including school and home visits, open days and interviews) can be critical in ensuring these young people move into a suitable post-GCSE pathway. Informal networks are also important, particularly in relation to apprenticeships, which are perceived to be poorly advertised, hard to find out about and hard to access.

- These activities will have been severely disrupted by lockdown and ongoing restrictions. On-line substitutes are important and should be facilitated but they will by-pass some of this group and can only be a partial answer.

- There will be extra demands on schools, colleges and training providers and local authorities in the summer of 2020 and continuing into the autumn, to identify and support young people who are at risk, have gone missing, or who have made a false start on an inappropriate pathway. Government needs to make sure these organisations have extra capacity to be proactive in contacting young people to offer support, information and guidance. Local government needs to make sure it has robust data to enable the tracking of school leavers during the summer and autumn of 2020.

Introduction

1. We are a research team based at the Universities of Manchester and Aberdeen[1]. We are currently undertaking [research funded by the Nuffield Foundation](#)[2] on the opportunities for and trajectories of 16 to 18 year olds in England who have not achieved Grade 4 or above (formerly C or above) in English and Maths at GCSE.

2. We have conducted analysis of the National Pupil Database for five annual cohorts (2013-2017), collated local data on opportunities and entry requirements in seven localities within Greater Manchester and the North of Tyne combined authority areas, and held focus groups and interviews with young people, as well as speaking to careers advisers and professionals working in colleges, local authorities and other relevant organisations.

3. The research was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic (in 2018-early 2020). It describes what normally happens to young people in Year 11 and therefore it highlights some of the difficulties that the 2020 cohort are going to face in these non-normal circumstances.

4. Our findings support the point made by David Johnston MP at the [Education Committee's session with the Secretary of State on 29th April 2020](#) that being out of school during spring and summer of 2020 will be challenging for young people who are making a transition from school to post-16 learning. It will be particularly problematic for young people whose expected GCSE attainment in English and Maths is below the 'expected' threshold of Grade 4 or above (formerly C) which enables access to 'A' level or Level 3 vocational courses and many apprenticeships.

5. This submission summarises some of the key findings.

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[2] The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Nuffield Foundation.

Young people with lower attainment at age 16 are particularly vulnerable

6. In normal circumstances, lower GCSE attainers are less likely to make secure and successful transitions at 16 than their higher attaining peers. In 2018, 97 per cent of those who had achieved Grade 4 in English and maths GCSE made a sustained transition to post-16 education, training or employment. Among those who had not achieved this benchmark, only 88 per cent made a sustained transition.[3]

7. They also tend to be more disadvantaged in other ways than those who do reach Grade 4 in English and maths at GCSE. In 2019, 23 per cent of those without Grade 4 in English and maths were eligible for free school meals compared to 9 per cent of those who did achieve Grade 4 in both subjects.[4] This is particularly the case for the lowest attainers - those with neither 9-4 grade in English and maths nor five good grades in other subjects.

8. For the first time, our research shows the heterogeneity of attainment within the group of young people (42.5 per cent of all the Key Stage 4 cohort in 2017) who do not achieve a GCSE Grade 4(C) in English and/or maths at 16. We divided these into nine types based on their overall attainment profiles. Over a fifth (22 per cent) had five GCSE or equivalents at grades 9-4, although not in either English or maths or both. Another 52 per cent had some GCSEs or equivalent at this level, as well as passes in other subjects at lower grades.

9. Yet, failure to make the grade in these two subjects tends to mean young people are much more likely to be labelled as 'low attainers'. As a result, they face more complex transitions than their higher attaining peers. They have a greater likelihood of moving to a new institution (i.e. going from school to a general FE college, sixth form college or workplace rather than being allowed to continue in a school sixth form). While 54 per cent of those who achieved A*-C in English and maths transitioned into a school sixth form after Key Stage 4 in 2015, only 17 per cent without A*-C in English and maths did the same, leaving the vast majority to make a transition to a different institution[5]. They face a greater array of courses and

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[3] DfE (2019) Destinations of KS4 and 16 to 18 students 2018: key stage 4 national tables, table NA22b. Of the remaining 12 per cent, 10 per cent are known not to have made a sustained transition, and 2 per cent had no recorded activity in the data meaning it cannot be determined whether they made a successful transition.

[4] DfE (2020) Key Stage 4 Performance, 2019 (revised): Table CH1: GCSE and equivalent entries and achievements of pupils at the end of key stage 4 by pupil characteristics. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/key-stage-4-performance-2019-revised

[5] Velthuis, S., Lupton, R., Thomson, S., Unwin, L., 2018. The characteristics and post-16 transitions of GCSE 'lower attainers.' Inclusive Growth Analysis Unit, University of Manchester, Manchester

apprenticeships, and a lot of local variation. Access to information, advice and guidance, and to work experience, will have been very variable[6].   The latest State of the Nation report by the Careers and Enterprise Company shows that only 21 per cent of schools have a stable careers programme and only 20 per cent address the needs of all pupils[7].

10. Although some of these young people are just as likely as higher-attainers to be purposeful about their future pathways[8], our research suggests that for many 'lower attainers' the GCSE year in particular is associated with anxiety and a sense of failure. This is despite the fact that they may have achieved Grade 4/C or above in some subjects – the power of achievement in English and maths overrides all other subjects. Some will reach the end of Year 11 with no firm plan about what to do next. Motivation and confidence to investigate, select and apply for post-GCSE opportunities may understandably be low. In interviews we conducted with young people, many spoke about feeling demoralised because of having 'failed', or being about to fail, their GCSEs, and this impacted on their capacity and motivation to make a decision about what to do next. For instance, one young person said that around the end of year 11 she *"wanted to get out, really. I didn't have anything planned for when I left school, at all. Because I knew I was going to fail my GCSEs and everything, so I just didn't have anything planned. At all."*

Pro-active interventions by schools, colleges and training providers in the spring and summer of Year 11 can be crucial for successful transitions

11. In our interviews we heard numerous accounts of how critical the spring and summer of Year 11 can be in helping learners make their post-GCSE transition. They revealed how school teachers and staff in colleges and independent training providers had steered, pushed or dragged young people into post-16 opportunities. For example, one young man said he "*wasn't' even gonna go to college, I was just going to chill out at home... so my high school teacher she came to my house and said come on, you're going to college*". Another said their 'choice' of a course at an adult education

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[6] Moote, J., Archer, L., 2018. Failing to deliver? Exploring the current status of career education provision in England, Research Papers in Education. Research Papers in Education 33, 187–215. Houghton, A.-M., Armstrong, J., & Okeke, R. I. (2020). 'Delivering Careers Guidance in English Secondary Schools: Policy Versus Practice'. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *0*(0), 1–17. 3

[7] Careers and Enterprise Company, 2019. State of the Nation 2019: Progress towards the Gatsby Benchmarks in England's secondary schools and colleges in Local Enterprise Partnerships.

[8] Swift, J., & Fisher, R. (2012). Choosing vocational education: Some views from young people in West Yorkshire. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, *17*(2), 207–221. 0

centre was made when a member of staff "*rang me, cos I came here before. So she rang us back saying do you want to come to this one? So I thought I might as well.*"

12. College open days were also particularly important for some young people because they presented concrete opportunities to which they could respond rather than having to do a lot of investigative work and decision-making themselves. One of our interviewees said, "*I came here (college) one day, and then they just started, they said, do you want to apply for here, sort of thing. And she was just going on about cabin crew. And I was like okay, that's fine*". Visits to colleges give young people an opportunity to be in the physical college space and see if it is an overall good fit for them. Interviews are common in subjects like performing arts or for very low level courses and can help young people make a connection and make their mind up.

13. Visits to schools by colleges and training providers were also important to those who were reluctant, nervous or demoralised. For example, we interviewed one young man who had a clear career aspiration (to join the fire service), supported by relevant volunteering experience, but had been paralysed by anxiety over GCSE exams from making any applications. An adviser from a local college visited his school and convinced him to come to an open day, which led to a suitable course.

The importance of informal networks, especially for apprenticeships

14. Other studies have pointed to the importance of young people's families and social networks in the making of post-16 'choices'[9], and our research supported this. We found that information about apprenticeships was particularly hard to come by for these young people. They received very little information about apprenticeships in their school careers advice sessions. Some knew of the formal mechanisms, such as government websites, but their perception was that apprenticeships were poorly advertised. They spoke of the importance of their own networks in finding out about and securing an apprenticeship. For example, one of our interviewees described how a family friend had told her mother about an opportunity in a local nursery – an opportunity that she would not have otherwise known about. The spread of this type of informal knowledge about local opportunities depends in large part on chance

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[9] Mangan, J., Adnett, N. & Davies, P. (2001). Movers and stayers: Determinants of post-16 educational choice. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 6(1), 31–50. Heath, S., Fuller, A. & Johnston, B. (2010). Young people, social capital and network-based educational decision-making. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 31(4), 395–411. Snee, H. & Devine, F. (2014). Taking the next step: Class, resources and educational choice across the generations. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(8).

encounters, which have been made much less likely due to the social distancing measures currently in place.

15. Our detailed examination of entry requirements for post-16 courses and apprenticeships also revealed that whether young people were eligible for these was not always clear. In the seven localities we examined, around 10 per cent of course entry requirements and around 25 per cent of apprenticeship entry requirements were vague – including phrases such as 'is desirable' and 'would be ideal' which made it unclear if candidates without these would be accepted. Our interview data shows that networks can help to circumvent this lack of clarity as someone connected to the course or apprenticeship can advise the young person if they are a good fit.

Implications

1. Many of the formal activities and informal networks which are crucial for this vulnerable group will have been severely disrupted by lockdown and social distancing measures. For example, they cannot attend open days, meet college staff, have teachers visit their home or college staff visit their school. Parents and siblings are much less likely to be having chance conversations in their local neighbourhoods which may lead to an apprenticeship vacancy being identified. On-line substitutes (e.g. virtual open days) are important and should be facilitated, but they will by-pass some of this group and can only be a partial answer. The current inadequacy of the ways in which post-16 opportunities are advertised will become more evident without the types of personal support described here.

2. This will put successful post-16 transitions at risk for many young people. This is in addition to the predicted negative impact on the availability of apprenticeships which is not the subject of our work but has been recently covered here.

3. In the summer and autumn of 2020, there will be extra demands on schools, colleges and training providers and local authorities to identify and support young people who are at risk, have gone missing, or who have made a false start on an inappropriate pathway. Government needs to make sure these organisations have extra capacity to be proactive in contacting young people to offer support, information and guidance. Local government will have to make sure it has robust data to enable the tracking of school leavers during the summer and autumn of 2020.

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