

# Engaging all young people in meaningful learning after 16: A qualitative study

Laura McLarty and Rhetta Moran

Dubit

RAPAR

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## **Glossary**

DCSF – Department for Children, Schools and Families

e2e – Entry to Employment programme

EMA – Education Maintenance Allowance

ESOL – English for speakers of other languages

FE – Further education

GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education

IAG – Information and Guidance

LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender

NASS – National Asylum Support Service

NEET – Not in Education, Employment or Training

NVQ – National Vocational Qualification

QCA – Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

RAPAR – Refugees and Asylum seekers Participatory Action Research

the Commission – Equality and Human Rights Commission

YOI – Young Offenders Institution

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## **Executive summary**

### **Introduction**

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (the Commission) is committed to hearing 'new voices', especially those that are not always heard. In 2008, the Commission designed a project for 'new young voices' consisting of three new research studies, two young people's debates and an adult specialist event. Dubit was commissioned in November 2008 to undertake a qualitative study to complement the other two research studies: a quantitative survey with young people and literature review to include interviews with key stakeholders.

This report highlights the findings of the qualitative research study into young people's experiences of learning before and after the age of 16 and how they feel this can be made more engaging. This is timely, given the introduction of the 2008 Education and Skills Bill that raises the compulsory age of learning to 17 in 2013 and 18 in 2015.

Existing studies tend to focus on particular groups of young people, generalise across young people, or miss out the perspectives of certain marginalised groups. This study was designed to capture a wide range of young people's voices in the 14-18 year old age group, especially those who are less likely to be included. This study includes young people who are: mothers, young offenders, from different ethnic groups (including white and ethnic minorities), disabled, refugees, seeking asylum, Gypsies and Travellers, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT), Not in Education and Training (NEET), and from diverse religious and socio-economic backgrounds, including white working class young men. The study employs a rich and innovative range of qualitative approaches, designed to maximise the participation of young people.

It is crucial that sufficient consideration is given to young people's current experiences, including the benefits of learning and the barriers faced by 14-18 year olds living in England. Moreover, it is very important that young people in this age group are able to highlight practical solutions they feel will help engage others their age in learning in ways that are both meaningful and empowering, providing a lasting outcome of better employment prospects and a good quality of life.



## Summary

Qualitative research does not enable us to generalise to all young people. Nevertheless, the study highlights some important findings that shed light on how a wide range of young people engage in learning. Importantly, the research reminds us that young people learn and progress in different ways. The findings suggest that some young people follow traditional linear pathways through learning after 14, making incremental progress and achieving specific learning outcomes. The pathways of other young people, meanwhile, become, or are already, chaotic and fragmented, and continue to be so unless addressed. An understanding of these different pathways is fundamental to increasing engagement in learning after 16.

Disruption, class sizes, teaching and learning styles and appropriate finance for learning were cited as factors affecting engagement in learning from a wide range of young people.

The study suggests the need to review how young people are supported to engage in learning. Young people reported that there is an academic and vocational divide, with the former signalled as the 'first class' trajectory and the latter for those 'less bright', therefore inferior. The majority of those involved in the research felt they were not given the full picture of the range of academic and vocational learning options available to them after 16. The importance of good advice and support from careers/Connexions advisers, teachers and parents is paramount and the influence of peers is important.

Young people more generally suggested the following solutions to more meaningful engagement in learning after 16: better information and advice on full range of learning opportunities after 16; widening the range of vocational options; clearly linking vocational courses to employment outcomes and widening the availability of the education maintenance allowance (EMA). Disengaged young people stressed the following solutions: reduction in class sizes; availability of hands-on practical learning from age 12 and delivery of learning in community/youth based settings. Young refugees seeking asylum advocated addressing trauma as a barrier to learning.

## **Main findings**

### ***Learning styles***

The research reminds us that young people learn in different ways and have different learning styles. This is fundamentally important in understanding and increasing engagement in learning. Young people will be more likely to be engaged if there are optimum opportunities to learn in ways that suit the strengths of the young person.

### **'Traditional'/linear and 'non-traditional' chaotic/fragmented pathways**

The study suggests that young people fall into three broad pathways through learning, though these are not mutually exclusive. Firstly, some young people were able to follow a traditional linear pathway through learning, progressing incrementally from 11, 14 and after 16. These young people will predominate in academic pathways, including further and higher education. Secondly, some young people's routeways were already fragmented and chaotic by the time they reach 14. These young people reported limited scope for re-engagement after 16 – meaning they were unlikely to easily follow traditional linear learning routeways thereafter. These young people may have been participating in learning after 16, undertaking basic Entry to Employment programmes, in work without training or were NEET. Thirdly, there are young people who may struggle with the traditional pathway through learning in schools, though are not characterised as chaotic and fragmented. They can become more easily engaged, or can experience episodes of disconnection, that may result in eventual disengagement. Learning provision tends to work from the assumption that young people will follow traditional linear learning pathways. Approaches to engagement in learning for all will need to consider the range of pathways.

### **Factors affecting meaningful engagement in learning**

A range of factors appear to impact upon engagement learning, according to young people themselves.

### **Class sizes**

Regardless of whether their own pathway appeared to be linear or more disconnected, the young people talked about the negative impact of large class sizes on the quality of learning. They suggested that large class sizes influence the teacher's ability to effectively control the class, leading to poor concentration and further intensifying feelings of boredom. Those who had experienced smaller class

sizes within a secure setting or a Pupil Referral Unit claim this had impacted positively on their learning and in many cases was the first time they had felt fully engaged and able to learn.

### **Teaching and learning styles**

Young people who were not enjoying, or did not enjoy their school experience, especially those who were NEET, young offenders and white working class men, were particularly negative about particular types of teaching styles. Many of these young people were frustrated with what they saw as regular reliance on worksheets. Listening, reading and copying down modules or sections of text books was felt to be repetitive and can result in young people becoming disillusioned regarding the value of what is being taught. The problem of repetition and over reliance upon copying and listening, was also identified by those engaged in schools, or already in further or Higher Education. Some young people struggled with the required pace of learning that is expected in lessons and, in some cases, reported very limited support with this. Others experienced frustrations where the pace was felt to be too slow for their individual abilities.

### **Disruption**

One of the main themes emerging from the research is the negative impact of disruption within the classroom environment. This was consistent for many young people across all the groups consulted. Young people suggested that their engagement could be interrupted and that others may join in the disruption. For those disrupting, the consequences could increase disengagement.

### **The curriculum**

A small number of young people talked about the curriculum and their difficulties in dealing with the leaps in expectation between the key stages. By their early teens, some young people were ill-prepared for the demands that were placed upon them as they started preparing for their GCSEs. Some young people detected a disconnection in the learning experience between the ages of 14 and 15, where prior to this age expectations were felt to be too low and then subsequently leaping to an unrealistically high level without sufficient preparation for that step-change.

### **Violence and bullying**

Some young people, including several from the displaced persons groups (migrant workers, refugees seeking asylum and refugees) experienced the threat and reality

of direct violence, either in the classroom, or the wider school environment. This could disrupt engagement in learning. A small number of young people had experienced ongoing bullying. Young people described developing strategies to cope. However, in a few instances none of those strategies appeared to work, and, as a consequence, the desire to learn had ebbed away.

### **Assumptions about ‘learning’ after 16**

The majority of young people involved in this research interpreted ‘learning’ post-16 as academic and confined to school or college. When discussing the impact of the 2008 Education and Skills Bill and the change in the compulsory age of learning, they assumed that this means that 16 year olds will have to stay in school and complete academic qualifications until they are 18. The fact that this can include any provision linked to a qualification had to be reinforced during the research process to make sure that the young people understood. This indicates that young people associate ‘learning’ after 16 as academic and achieved only through schools and colleges. Broadening the concept of learning after 16, and ensuring young people are aware of the variety of learning pathways, will be required.

### **Availability of financial support**

It is important to note that none of the young people suggested that a lack of money had prevented them from accessing learning or continuing their involvement in the first instance. However, all groups of young people highlighted the importance of money to enable them to effectively engage in learning over a sustained period of time. For most, this was a matter of accessibility, as money provided them with the opportunity and the means to participate. It also created an opportunity for high quality learning which may not otherwise have been available to them. Concern about the range and type of options available appeared to have been partly informed by personal experience and the socio-economic context of some families. Young people who were living independently and having to pay living expenses, or work to help subsidise the family, felt they would struggle with continuing their engagement in learning if they were not able to benefit from financial support. Some young disabled people, and those who need help with additional English, suggested that financial support should follow the individual rather than be attached to the course of study.

### **The academic and vocational divide**

The academic and vocational divide is apparent in the study. This manifested itself in a number of ways. Young people in the research had absorbed strong messages

about academic options/pathways and vocational options/pathways post 16. The academic pathway was signalled as the 'first class' option and was equated with 'success'. Post 16 pathways through further and higher education and the links between academic achievement and employment were thought to be more clearly mapped out. Vocational pathways were seen as the second class option and less valued than the academic pathway. They were assumed to be for 'less academic' young people (meaning, 'not bright') and were equated with failure. Post 16 pathways through further education, work and training and links between vocational achievement and employment options were thought to be less clearly mapped out. These messages appear to be powerful in schools and impacted upon the young peoples' engagement in learning in a number of ways. Academic options/pathways post 16 can work very well for those who were already engaged, allowing them to continue a clear, linear route. However, it was more difficult for these young people to fully consider vocational options and pathways. Conversely, academic options/pathways post 16 may not work for those less engaged/disengaged. The emphasis on the primacy of this pathway and the perceived inferiority of other pathways could intensify feelings of disengagement, demotivation and failure. The remaining options were seen to be vocational, or to drop out of education altogether, with a resulting lack of engagement and limited opportunities.

All young people stressed that they needed comprehensive advice and information on ALL learning options post-16, including academic and vocational options, and would benefit from seeing the whole picture.

### **Vocational options and learning**

Many who feel they did not benefit from a structured school classroom environment – especially those who are NEET, Travellers, white working class men and young offenders, say they would prefer the opportunity to obtain more 'hands on' vocational experience.

Some young people had undertaken vocational courses with a hope that this would further their chances of employment in their chosen field, with no guarantee in their minds that these would appeal to employers. The course selected was not always directly relevant to their chosen career. Experiences of work placements had not always been positive and relevant. Those on other vocational courses at college were keen to see an increase in the range and frequency of placements available. Young people in each of the groups highlighted that a greater choice of placement options would provide more meaningful learning.

Young people involved in the research were not clear about the extent to which employers attach value to vocational qualifications. Many appeared to be completing Apprenticeships and courses at college as a result of their own intentions to find work in their chosen field, supported in some cases by family and friends. However, this determination was not usually informed by knowledge that these would appeal to potential employers, but rather a 'hope' that this would result in progression. Knowledge and understanding of what Apprenticeships involve was uneven across the groups involved in the research. Those who were excluded and/or disengaged from education, including those who were NEET, Travellers, young offenders and also working class white men to some degree, felt unsure about what an Apprenticeship actually involves.

### **Support**

It is clear that unprompted, young people perceived support for learning to be available for those who have done something wrong, or who have additional educational needs. The study unpicks the range of dimensions of support highlighted as important by young people. In practice, this includes support from parents, other family members, peers, school staff, college staff and other practitioners including Connexions and careers advisers. The degree of 'appropriate' support on offer was perceived by young people in all the groups to be central to a positive and 'successful' learning experience and to influence the likelihood of young people staying in some form of learning after 16.

The research highlights the importance of recognising that some young people will require varying degrees of targeted support that is appropriate to their needs. Young people in the research who had become disengaged from the education system displayed a lack of confidence in their own potential and abilities, and held the view that routes for further learning were more or less closed to them. Young refugees and people seeking asylum described a constant fear of imminent removal from the UK and a culture of blame towards their parents. Young disabled people required teachers and tutors to understand their access needs in order to engage in subjects and learning environments of their preferred choice. Some people needed the right access to English language support to facilitate greater engagement in learning.

The role of teachers and careers advisers is particularly important in facilitating engagement in learning. However, the impact of parents, families and other young people should also not be underestimated. The study reveals the importance of recognising how external factors in young people's lives can affect their engagement in learning, either temporarily, or in the longer term. Positive support and advice from parents and other family members appears to be one of the most significant

contributory factors that enabled the young people to feel more confident and decisive about their learning routes and the eventual outcomes.

Young people involved in the research in each of the groups suggested that one-off meetings with careers advisers or Connexions officers, with limited scope for follow-up meetings to explore their options.

Young people in the research who were NEET, or who had been NEET in the past, including those serving sentences, highlighted a lack of knowledge about what their options may be for future learning. They also believed that because they had dropped out of school, certain pathways were now closed to them. Targeted careers advice and support is especially important for this group.

## **Solutions**

A number of key solutions to increased engagement in learning after 16 have been highlighted by young people involved in the research. Some of the solutions are more general, whereas others are specific to certain groups including those who are NEET, young offenders, white, working class young men and refugees seeking asylum.

### *Better information and advice on full range of learning opportunities after 16 –*

Young people would like to see a range of academic and vocational opportunities being made available to all - regardless of their abilities, aspirations and considered careers - as they feel that only then will they be able to make an informed decision as to the best routes available to them. This full range also needs to be supported by funding that is both appropriate for individuals and relevant to the current socio-economic situation.

### *Widening the range of vocational options –*

Most young people involved in the research considered vocational options to be of significant value, but only where these covered a sufficient range, were relevant to their particular goals and included quality work experience with appropriate employers. Some expressed cynicism as to whether these options were relevant to the specific occupational area they were personally interested in. They were also unsure of the usefulness of placements, citing a perceived lack of structure and limited opportunities to get a real taste of the world of work.

### *Clearly linking vocational courses to employment outcomes –*

In addition, this research suggests that young people prefer to have clear information on the direct benefits of vocational options – specifically how this links to their

chances of finding work. For example, this may cover a specified route such as 'if you complete an NVQ Level 3 in X, you will be able to apply for a X position once you finish or you can then apply for an X Apprenticeship which will provide you with the skills you need to apply for a Level 4 job in X job role'.

*Widening the availability of the EMA –*

Awareness of the EMA was very high amongst the young people involved in the research and most understood its purpose and how to apply for an Allowance. The majority would like to see this made available to ALL young people, regardless of their background, to allow everyone an equal chance in accessing the opportunities that would be of greatest benefit for them. The majority of young people felt that £30 is not enough to cover these expenses. A raise to £45 or £50 was seen as more appropriate to adequately support attendance in learning on a weekly basis.

*Reduction in class sizes (disengaged young people) –*

Many of those who become disengaged from school before the age of 16 felt that the most effective way for them to learn is through smaller class sizes – a maximum of 10 per class. They felt this would enable them to work at their own pace and receive the one-to-one support they would need to allow them to progress.

*Availability of hands-on practical learning from age 12 (disengaged young people) –*

Most who had become disengaged explained that they started to struggle and become disenchanted at around 13 and 14 years of age. Because of this, they felt it is important that more options for vocational tasters and different routes of learning are offered to people at this age or even before, to help ensure people stay engaged and value the idea of furthering their knowledge and understanding. These options need to include time out of the classroom, either in the school grounds or in different environments such as college or the workplace. They feel it is crucial that they engage in 'hands on learning' and obtain a greater variety of experience to help ensure they stay engaged until 16.

*Delivery of learning in community/youth based settings (disengaged young people) –*

There is potential for disengaged young people to become further engaged or re-engaged in learning where this is delivered in local community sites such as youth centres and community projects. Many who were NEET, white working class men, young offenders - as well as travellers - said this appealed to them and others in similar circumstances as it would involve more flexible learning where they could design their own timetable. In addition, they felt that those delivering the learning would be more likely to understand the challenges they face in terms of the communities around them and the perceived risks of staying in learning.



*Addressing trauma as a barrier to learning (refugees seeking asylum) –*

None of the young refugees seeking asylum were able to project clearly about their futures and, prior to the study, had never been invited to share their educational aspirations more broadly. They described a constant fear of imminent removal from the UK, self-blame and blame towards their parents for their current situations. They were also frustrated with the UK system and at parents and teachers for appearing to ignore the impact upon their learning aspirations of not getting National Insurance Numbers or receiving the EMA when they are 16, and being in families that are denied the right to work, like their non-asylum friends.

This research demonstrates the important role young people can play in further informing the development of practical solutions to ensure that learning post-16 is as engaging as possible. Analysis of the data identified that, irrespective of their individual demographics and educational biographies, the young people in this study had overwhelmingly similar perspectives about what works – and what does not work - within the educational experience of young people, and how to improve it in the future.

## **Implications**

This research has highlighted a number of findings that are significant for future planning about how to improve the engagement of young people in learning post-16.

There is a strong need to improve the association between learning and route ways that are not academic, may be less formal or linear and apply to those who are not doing so well. This can also equal success.

Widening the range of vocational options available and opportunities for hands on learning and work placements will be crucial to the success of engaging young people in learning after 16.

Ensuring all have access to the same 'menu' of academic and vocational opportunities and providing more evidence of the quality and relevance of different routes with mapped out pathways to employment outcomes, will be important.

The concept of support for young people can be developed and improved in general, and through targeted approaches to groups of young people.

Reviewing funding arrangements is recommended. The young people felt that all should be able to access the EMA and the amount of money provided should be

## ENGAGING ALL YOUNG PEOPLE IN MEANINGFUL LEARNING AFTER 16

increased to £45 or £50 per month. Consideration should be given to funding individuals, rather than courses.

Careers advice and Connexions support should be strengthened, so that it is not one off and should be followed up to enable young people to develop their options. Targeted advice and support for young people who are NEET, or have been NEET in the past, is essential.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background**

The genuine and meaningful engagement of all young people in education is a prerequisite for reducing inequality and improving life chances. This report outlines the findings from qualitative research by Dubit and Refugees and Asylum seekers Participatory Action Research (RAPAR). The study was commissioned by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (the Commission) in reaction to the landmark 2008 Education and Skills Bill. In 2013, this Bill will raise the age of compulsory learning for young people from the age of 16 until their 17<sup>th</sup> birthday and, by 2015, their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

The Commission is also committed to hearing ‘new voices’, especially those that are not always heard. As highlighted in the reform document (DCSF 2008, p.12) ‘there is no group whose view is more important than the young people themselves’. The ‘new young voices project’ explores how to engage all young people in England in meaningful learning after the age of 16. Central to the project is to understand more about how a wide range of groups of young people engage or disengage, by listening to what young people themselves have to say. The project consists of three new research studies, two young people’s debates and an adult specialist event. A representative quantitative study and review (including stakeholder interviews) of all that is known about engaging young people in meaningful learning were also commissioned, to complement this research.

### **1.2 Policy context**

Young people are currently faced with a number of different options for pursuing education once they reach 16. The Government has put into place certain programmes and initiatives that aim to cater for diverse learning styles and to provide a range of different learning environments. Perhaps the most significant is the current commitment to extending the availability of vocational learning through the 14-19 agenda, including the introduction of the new Diplomas to complement Apprenticeships and widen the number of opportunities to obtain work related knowledge and skills.

‘Delivering 14-19 Reform: Next Steps’ (DCSF 2008, p.4) outlines the three main goals of this agenda that support the aims of the Children’s Plan, namely:

- To ensure that all young people participate, until at least their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, in education that stretches and challenges them to achieve their potential and go on to further or higher education or skilled employment;
- To give young people the knowledge and skills that employers and the economy need to prosper in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; and
- To close the achievement gap so that all have an equal opportunity to succeed, irrespective of gender, race, disability or background.

In addition to Every Child Matters, the Children's Plan and introduction of the new Diplomas, key policy drivers impacting on young people's learning provision include: AimHigher; the Apprenticeship programme; and performance indicators for Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG).

Most importantly, the DCSF recognise that some groups are still finding it difficult to access appropriate opportunities, with 'too many young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)', with poor qualifications and limited chances of employment. The first two of its four main priorities are to provide 'a high quality and valued learning route for every young person, that enables them to participate, achieve and progress' and 'the right support that integrates all services for young people so that they can make the most of their opportunities and choices' (DCSF 2008, p.21).

It is evident that young people who are poor, disabled, from ethnic minorities and teenage mothers are disproportionately likely to be NEET (EHRC 2009).

### **1.3 Aim and objectives**

The overall aim of the project was to:

Explore how to engage ALL young people in meaningful learning after 16 in England, through listening to their voices.

The following objectives were integral to the project:

- Build a picture of the key influences affecting young people's decisions to participate and engage in learning after 16.
- Consider the value placed on learning and how it influences aspirations.
- Identify barriers (social, cultural, structural, attitudinal) to engagement in learning.
- Understand to what extent young people have been able to discuss and negotiate their experiences and future choices and whether this makes a difference to the likelihood of them participating and engaging in learning after 16.

- Highlight their views on the quality of education and training options available
- Understand how young people consider the costs, benefits, returns and risks in participating in learning after 16.
- Highlight practical measures and solutions young people would recommend in order to ensure ALL young people are effectively engaged in meaningful learning after 16.

In addition, The Commission wanted to gain a greater understanding of how inequality affects engagement in learning. The brief was to include evidence from a wide and diverse range of young people. Existing studies tend to focus on particular groups of young people, generalise across young people, or miss out the perspectives of certain marginalised groups. This study considers the views of young people from specific groups. It includes young people who are mothers, young offenders, from different ethnic groups (including white and minorities), disabled, refugees, people seeking asylum, Gypsies and Travellers, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT), Not in Education and Training (NEET), and from diverse religious and socio-economic backgrounds, including white working class young men.

### **1.4 Report structure**

This report is structured in the following way. Chapter 2 outlines the methodology adopted for this work, including how young people were recruited and engaged in the research, the characteristics of respondents and how the resulting qualitative data was analysed. A critique of the methods employed is also included here.

Young people's experiences are discussed within the context of teaching and learning in Chapter 3, including defining the types of learning experience and the importance of funding to support learning. This section also reviews teaching and learning styles, disruption in schools, views of college and the perceived suitability of different options available after 16.

Chapter 4 explores the support available to young people on an individual level, covering care on an emotional level and practical learning support. Key comments from young people centre on the support available for those who are NEET, young offenders and white, working class men, to re-engage in learning and the appropriateness of support for disabled young people. Language support and the recognition of tensions outside of learning are also covered, along with the significance of support from parents, families and other young people, as well as Connexions and careers advisers, especially in the context of academic versus vocational provision.

Key solutions to ensuring learning is more engaging and meaningful have been mentioned by young people across all groups involved in the research. These are outlined in Chapter 5. This section also includes their recommendations that appear to be specific to certain groups. Chapter 6 summarises the main findings from this qualitative research in terms of the experiences of young people and the implications of these for future development of provision – which are crucial to ensuring greater integration and inclusion of all groups in learning from 16 to 18.

Please note that a list of abbreviations/acronyms and references are appended to this report.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The first stage of this research built upon these main objectives by constructing a core discussion schedule that specified what issues would be explored using a range of data creation methods: audio-recorded, face-to-face and virtual focus groups, video diaries, and one-to-one, in-depth discussions.

By opting for such a range, the approach sought to maximise the opportunities for young people to engage as appropriate for them. A key ethical consideration for the study team was to ensure sensitivity and comfort for young people when discussing potentially negative and distressing experiences. Support organisations who assisted in setting up some of these groups were also consulted for advice on the most effective means of communicating with participants that would be conducive, and even enjoyable, for those involved. This created a number of different formats for the production of data and analysis that can be discussed further with the Commission.

### **2.2 Recruitment**

Young people were recruited through a variety of avenues:

- **Dubit's informer panel**  
A panel of young people who opted to complete online surveys and participate in other research methods such as online focus groups or face-to-face focus groups, as well as video diaries. Dubit has strict procedures in place to ensure this panel is not over-used.
- **Support organisations**  
Dubit worked with a number of different support organisations to ensure involvement of specific groups. These included: a disabled young people's forum; an LGBT youth group; Young Offenders Institutions/Secure Units; and locally based charitably-funded projects. Through workers in the Manchester City Council Youth Service, RAPAR was given access to Young Travellers who comprised a focus group.
- **Online focus groups**  
Dubit has used its expertise in interactive 3D chat technologies to develop a unique facility for online focus groups - a virtual 'room' where participants become online characters or avatars. In this environment, young people feel more comfortable and

more likely to speak out and give a true opinion than in a face-to-face encounter. This is also a useful tool when consulting with young people across a large geographical area.

Participants are given a user name and password. They are able to adopt a character, enter a 3D room and then enter discussions with a moderator and other respondents. A full transcript is available immediately after the session. Each focus group lasts for one hour.



- Video diaries  
Young people who agreed to provide diaries were briefed verbally over the telephone and were provided with a specification for topics they could talk around, based on the core discussion guide. In most cases they filmed themselves using a web-cam although a few asked a family member or friend to use a hand-held camera to help them produce the footage.
- Peer-led focus groups  
Focus groups with young people who are refugees seeking asylum, refugees granted asylum, or from European migrant worker families were conducted by three young people, drawn from these respective groups, whose parents had some prior involvement with RAPAR, either as leaders/volunteers in RAPAR, or as clients. The Peer Researchers learned how to conduct their focus groups through a tailored programme developed by RAPAR.



Each of the three peer researchers individually completed their personal responses to the core discussion schedule prior to participating in a series of group learning sessions with the two other peer researchers. These sessions were about how to improve the tool for their purposes and, thereafter, use it effectively. This process involved establishing ground rules for working together as a research group before developing a shared understanding about what 'research' actually involves, how much time they would need to devote to their own learning processes prior to the focus groups, how they would actually find young people to do it, and the range of barriers and fears that those young people may have to overcome in order to become able to participate and, thereafter, contribute fully in the discussion.

The peer researchers developed targeted recruitment leaflets, hard copies of which were circulated through their social networks, including their schools and colleges, and electronically, through RAPAR's own displaced persons communication networks. As awareness about the opportunity for involvement developed, the peer researchers identified what the leader of each focus group would need to do - and how their fellow peer researchers could support them - to ensure that all the data generated was captured in an accurate way. In summary, this process created specific and additional outcomes to this research project that include the building of researching capacities by three young people from these groups and the formation of a new entity: Young RAPAR.

### **2.3 Characteristics of the respondents**

The respondents were a mix of females and males, aged between 14 and 18 years, and from the following, cross-cutting, categories:

Young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, based on their own definitions of their ethnicity. The range of ethnicities included in the research covered: Asian Pakistani; Asian Indian; Chinese; Black Caribbean; and Black African.

A variety of different religious identities were included, covering young people who considered themselves to be: Sikh; Jewish; Christian; Buddhist; Hindu; Muslim; and Pagan.

Young people who consider themselves to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) were involved via an outreach project which they attended as a means of socialising, but which also offered them advice and support.

Disabled young people consulted for this research represent a range of mild to moderate physical disabilities and learning difficulties as well as significant health problems. The term 'disabled young people' is used throughout this report as those involved in the face-to-face focus group preferred this term to 'young people with disabilities'.

Young offenders are those currently within a secure setting. Dubit conducted face-to-face research with 17-year-old females in a secure unit and 15-17 year old men in a Young Offenders Institution (YOI).

Dubit worked with a charitably funded project to identify young men in their local community who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). This project also identified some white working class men with very few or no GCSEs who had begun a structured Entry to Employment (e2e) programme involving CV writing and development of basic literacy and numeracy skills.

The involvement of white working class men who have limited qualifications is by no means intended as a comment on the typical circumstances of this group, but rather serves to highlight any barriers that may be specific to them and others within this demographic. This is specifically to assist the Commission in identifying practical solutions to ensure all can be engaged in meaningful learning after 16.

Young refugees seeking asylum are those in families where their parent/s are currently inside the National Asylum Support Service (NASS).

Young refugees who are in families that have been awarded some form of leave to remain by the Home Office and therefore have the right to work and are no longer supported by NASS.

Young people from migrant worker families where their parents have come to the UK from another country, most often a European State, in search of work.

Young travellers from families where, traditionally, they have lived in trailers and moved around the UK and Ireland. The term 'Young Travellers' is used throughout this report as those involved in the face-to-face focus group consistently described themselves using this term, rather than 'gypsy'.

In addition, the young people who provided video diaries included one young person from a low socio-economic grouping as well as ethnic minority groups and disabled young people.

## ENGAGING ALL YOUNG PEOPLE IN MEANINGFUL LEARNING AFTER 16

All young people were rewarded for their time and for giving their views on this subject. Parental consent was obtained for all those aged under 16 before they were able to participate in the research. The demographics of individuals/groups involved appear in the table below.

Please note that data collated from research with refugees, those seeking asylum and children of European migrant workers were recorded using a researcher group session reading and annotating/amplifying a full transcription.

**Table 1: Demographics of individuals/groups**

Individuals/ Group	Data Creation Method	Numbers Engaged	Current Situation	Area	Age Range	Gender
Young refugees seeking asylum	Face to face, tape- recorded, noted and fully transcribed focus group led by young person seeking asylum peer researcher and supported by 2 other peer researchers, lead RAPAR researcher and interpreter for young Turkish participant	7	Afghans who came in 2007; Pakistanis who came in 2005; Zimbabwean who came in 2005; Turk who came in 2006 x3 school, x3 college, x1 age disputed and therefore never schooled in UK	North West	15-17 years	4 male 3 female
Young refugees	Face to face, tape- recorded, noted and fully transcribed focus group led by young refugee peer researcher and supported by 2 other peer researchers, lead RAPAR researcher and RAPAR masters student placement	6	Pakistanis who came in 2001 granted in 2008; x1 Congolese who came in 2005, granted in 2005; x1 Refugee Congo, came in 2002 granted in 2008; Somalis came in 1991, granted in 1993 x3 school, x2 college, x1 university	North West	14-18 years	2 male 4 female
Young people from migrant worker families	Face to face, tape- recorded, noted and fully transcribed focus group led by young migrant worker peer researcher and supported by 2 other peer researchers, lead RAPAR researcher and RAPAR Masters student placement	6	Polish came in 2004; Nigerian came in 1993; Czechs came in 2006; Slovak came in 2006 x6 school	North West	14-18 years	5 male 1 female

ENGAGING ALL YOUNG PEOPLE IN MEANINGFUL LEARNING AFTER 16

Individuals/ Group	Data Creation Method	Numbers Engaged	Current Situation	Area	Age Range	Gender
Young travellers	Face to face, tape- recorded, noted and selectively transcribed focus group led by lead RAPAR researcher, supported by young adult from travelling community and RAPAR Masters student placement	7	All from Dublin families, have lived in Manchester between 2 and 11 years x3 x3 are NEET, remainder school	North West	14- 18 years	5 male 2 female
Religious backgrounds	Online focus group	6	x4 school, x1 school and part- time job, x1 college	UK-wide	14-18 years	2 male 4 female
Ethnic minority backgrounds	Online focus group and video diaries	8	x2 school, x1 college, x2 university, x 1 university and part-time job, x2 Apprenticeships	UK-wide	16-18 years	6 male 2 female
Disabled young people	Face-to-face focus group and video diaries	8	x4 college (x1 includes work placement), x1 school, x1 day centre, x1 waiting to be placed on a college course, x 1 stays at home, no education	North West	16-21 years	3 male 5 female
Young mother	Video diary	1	x1 in full-time employment	Yorkshire & the Humber	20 years	1 female
LGBT	Face-to-face focus group	9	x5 school, x3 college, x 1 part-time job	Yorkshire & the Humber	14-17 years	4 male 5 female
White working class	Face-to-face focus group	5	All on e2e scheme, all previously NEET	North East	16-17 years	6 males
NEET	Depth interviews	5	All currently not in employment, education or training	North East	16-21 years	5 males

Individuals/ Group	Data Creation Method	Numbers Engaged	Current Situation	Area	Age Range	Gender
Young offenders	Face-to-face focus group and depth interviews	11	All currently in a secure setting	Yorkshire & the Humber	15-17 years	5 male 6 female

## 2.4 Data analysis

The research questions that informed the construction of the core discussion guide formed the overarching analytical framework. Within this framework, the transcripts from the focus groups with refugees seeking asylum, refugees and from migrant worker families were read and re-read to produce an initial analysis table. This was presented to the peer researchers for their critique before being shared with Dubit. A similar analytical treatment was employed for all the other focus groups and one to one interviews and was combined with viewings and re-viewings of the video diaries footage. Thereafter, a preliminary findings presentation that identified all the themes that had emerged across the dataset was presented to the Commission.

This process of constant comparative thematic analysis (Glaser 1965) across the complete dataset to the point where all the themes were described, and the complete range of perspectives on those themes were included, formed the basis from which the lead researchers jointly constructed the findings contained in this report.

## 2.5 Critique of methods employed

All research approaches have their strengths and weaknesses. In this study, the use of multiple recruitment and data creation methods, as originally detailed by Denzin in his typology of triangulation (Denzin 1970), secured the involvement of young people from a wide range of current circumstances.

The research followed the social networks of specific organisations (Coleman 1958) dedicated to working with members of the particularly vulnerable groups in order to recruit them to the study, for example young offenders in secure settings, NEET and/or seeking asylum. This may have resulted in certain types of people coming forward to the exclusion of others, that is, those who are not connected to an organisation in some way. Such biases however, must be set against the challenge of establishing a degree of trust that can overcome barriers to the meaningful involvement of such young people in an education-focussed research study. This is especially the case when those young people are acutely aware that they

themselves have already been identified – even labelled – as either educationally or socially ‘difficult’, or from a social group where the credibility of their identities is currently being investigated inside the asylum system and their future safety remains completely uncertain.

Any constant comparative qualitative data analysis process is always influenced by the beliefs and experiences of the analysers (Becker 1970). However, in this study, these limitations are ameliorated by three factors: the relative independence of the overarching analytical framework that was constructed out of a thought-through set of research questions; a single core discussion guide that was preliminarily tested for its reliability and validity; and complete transcription processes that contemporaneously captured most, if not all, of the actual data created by the young people and thereby allowed the analysts to identify that the tool appears to have succeeded in achieving data saturation (Guest, Bunce and Johnson 2006).

### **3. Scoping the pathways of learners**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The findings suggest that many young people have stops and starts throughout their educational experience: for example they may drop out, come back and change their minds. The research reminds us that young people learn in different ways and have different learning styles. This is fundamentally important in understanding and increasing engagement in learning. Young people will be more likely to be engaged if there are optimum opportunities to learn in ways that suit the strengths of the young person. The findings also indicate that it is important to conceptualise the range of trajectories young people inhabit when moving through education from secondary school and beyond. Young people are likely to follow different pathways through learning and greater flexibility of provision is required if greater engagement in learning after 16 is to be achieved.

#### **3.2 Young people follow three broad pathways through learning**

The analysis suggests that young people fall into three broad pathways through learning (see Figure 2) and this may be helpful when thinking about how to improve engagement in learning:

1. Traditional linear learning pathway
2. Neither traditional linear, nor chaotic and fragmented pathway
3. Chaotic and fragmented 'non-traditional' learning pathway

These are not mutually exclusive. The young people taking part in this research tended to be clustered into pathways one and three.



**Figure 2 Defining 'traditional'/linear and 'non-traditional' chaotic/fragmented pathways**

<b>Age 14</b>	<b>Age 16+</b>
<p><b>1. 'Traditional linear' learning pathway</b>                      These young people are following an incremental linear route that started at 11 and are able to make fairly well informed decisions about their future learning.</p>	<p>These young people will predominate in academic routeways, including further and higher education.</p>
<p><b>2. Neither 'traditional' linear, nor 'non-traditional' chaotic and fragmented learning pathway</b>                      These are young people who may struggle with the traditional pathway through learning in schools, though are not characterised as chaotic and fragmented. They can become more easily engaged, or can experience episodes of disconnection, that may result in eventual disengagement.</p>	<p>These young people can inhabit the range of post 16 routes.</p>
<p><b>3. Chaotic and fragmented 'non-traditional' learning pathway</b>                      These young people struggle with the structured learning environment of schools and are becoming detached, especially when their difficulties and assumptions are not addressed.</p>	<p>These young people may be participating in learning after 16, undertaking basic Entry to Employment programmes, in work without training or are NEET.</p>

### **3.3 Traditional, linear progression with a specific pathway**

In most cases, these young people were those in the research who were working towards or who had successfully obtained GCSEs, with a view to continuing into further and higher education. They tended to have clarity about their chosen occupation and, perhaps most importantly, were confident about their own abilities to the extent that they believed that they will succeed and find rewarding careers. Their positive experiences of learning appeared to correlate with high levels of self-esteem and cultural backgrounds where education is valued. This included those for whom individual aspiration was instilled from parents and other family members, including those from a higher socio-economic status and learners from specific religious

backgrounds. However, parental influence was also seen as negative by some young people who felt this increased the pressure upon them to perform well as learners.

There are some positive examples of young people experiencing quality careers information and advice. However, there were relatively few descriptions of unequivocally useful interactions with careers guidance.

Young people in this group also raised specific concerns about the quality of the teaching they received and the extent to which all are treated equally within the learning environment, especially the classroom. Notably, they were as likely as young people who had more fragmented pathways to report cases of feeling emotionally and physically unsafe in school and other settings. However, given the fact their learning had not actually been interrupted, they appeared to find ways to manage feeling unsafe. For people who had a more linear experience of learning, it is not clear if the option of vocational pathways was relevant or significant. This may be because in general, they were following more traditional academic routes where vocation does not feature.

### **3.4 Fragmented pathway with limited scope for re-engagement**

This second broad group consistently reported feeling disengaged from learning. In fact, some of these young people had left school as early as 14 and, in one instance of a young refugee seeking asylum, had never been to school at all. They appeared to find it difficult to keep up with the pace and content of what was being delivered or, conversely, found the pace too slow, and they described feeling bored and dissatisfied. These experiences were reported across most groups of young people involved in the research but tended to be more prevalent where specific circumstances such as problems at home, disabilities, learning difficulties, including English as a first language had not been adequately supported. These issues were particularly prominent in the refugee group, discussions with people seeking asylum, those who are NEET and white, working class young men.

Another common issue is that their abilities to concentrate were interfered with through the disruptive behaviour of others, both inside and outside of the classroom. In some cases, this results in individuals joining in with such behaviour for 'something to do'.

Many of these young people also reported that they were not benefiting from a prescribed style of teaching that expects them to listen and record information. They would rather learn through interactive learning styles - wherever they are. Many of

these young people described having low self-esteem and a real uncertainty about their capabilities, or access to further learning opportunities. Indeed, some were unsure about whether they would qualify for these opportunities if they have limited or no qualifications and felt this was almost a case of whether they were 'allowed' to continue learning. In a few cases, they disclosed having been told there were no further opportunities available to them. Where this had happened, it had contributed to a strong feeling of helplessness. In some instances there was also a perception that appropriate careers advice is limited or even completely absent.

### **3.5 Summary**

The analysis reveals the importance of understanding the range of learners, their learning styles and pathways to progression. Learning provision tends to work from the assumption that young people will follow traditional linear learning pathways. The evidence suggests that some young people experience fragmented and disconnected pathways and others are somewhere in between, or can move into either pathway. Those who experience fragmented and disconnected pathways are unlikely to follow traditional linear learning pathways after 16. Young people are likely to follow different pathways through learning, and greater flexibility of provision is required if greater engagement in learning after 16 is to be achieved.

## **4. Factors affecting meaningful engagement in learning**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Qualitative research enables the identification of insights and nuances into the learner experience. Although this data does not provide quantifiable evidence of the across the complete range of young people, it does highlight some key tendencies in terms of the way in which those who took part in the research are able to engage in learning, which can be relevant to a wider set of young people. Importantly, the constant comparative analytic process identified that, irrespective of their individual demographics and educational biographies, the young people in this study have overwhelmingly similar perspectives about what is right – and what is wrong - with young peoples' educational experiences and how to improve them. The barriers they experience up to the age of 16 do appear to influence how effectively they are able to engage in further learning after this stage. In this chapter the key issues that many young people describe as influencing their ability to effectively engage in meaningful learning are defined.

The following discussion presents structural barriers or opportunities, and reactions to these barriers and opportunities by young people themselves, their teachers, their families, their friends and/or people in the wider society.

With the exception of the young travellers and the white working class groups, at least some of the young people from all of the other groups reported mainly positive experiences in the learning context, being able to develop their educational plans and go some way towards achieving their educational aspirations.

### **4.2 Class sizes**

Findings from the research indicate that those who struggled with a structured form of listening and recording in the classroom and college felt they were not receiving as much support for their individual learning styles as they would like. Young people with these difficulties were present in each group consulted for this research, suggesting that this is an issue for many aged 14-18. Most negative accounts described feeling bored because the pace of teaching is too slow or too fast and, if the issue of teaching pace remains unaddressed, disengaging from the topic. Participants attributed this, in part, to large class sizes: the perception was that a lack of opportunity for one-to-one working leaves the single teacher unable to effectively teach a class of 30 pupils with different skills and abilities. Further, the sample did not expect teachers to be able do this.

Regardless of whether their own pathway appeared to be linear or more disconnected, young people talked about the negative impact of large class sizes on the quality of learning. They understood that class size influenced teachers' abilities to effectively control the class, leading to poor concentration and further intensifying feelings of boredom. However, there was also a recognition that some students cope with even high levels of disruption.

*'Everyone would be messin' but there is always one or two in the corner, working away.'*

(Male, 15, young traveller, not in school since 13)

Those who experienced smaller class sizes within a secure setting or a Pupil Referral Unit claimed this had impacted positively on their learning and in many cases was the first time they had felt fully engaged and able to learn. This suggests that some young people benefit from the level of attention and minimised disruption that appears to be offered by reduced classes. The quote below highlights one of the key points made by young offenders currently in secure units or Young Offenders Institutions.

*'I'd say it's better now [learning]... You learn a lot more here to be honest... Like I said before, the classes are smaller.'*

(Female, 17, young offender)

### 4.3 Exclusion units

Many of the young people in this study referred to the existence of exclusion units within their school-based learning environment. In this research, these units could be: places that they could be sent to, away from the classroom and from the school; and/or a space in the school that they knew existed because fellow students were sent there from the classroom. Their design appears to vary, ranging from small isolation cubicles, to open plan rooms where people who have been excluded are placed together. The length of time spent in these environments also ranges from a few hours, such as isolation in a separate room in school, to a few months away from school in a Pupil Referral Unit.

For some, these environments were quieter. They could concentrate and the presence of one or two teachers offered greater personal attention. A few felt that this contributed to a positive learning experience, particularly those units that do not exceed a maximum of 10 pupils.

*'Big classes... can be hard for them to teach a whole room of kids... Maybe there are not enough teachers for 30 kids... You get those kids in bigger classes who are a bit slow and then they have to catch up. I think the kids that are a bit smarter get tired of waiting.'*

(Female, 17, young offender, secure unit)

*'It was better [in the Pupil Referral Unit]. It was a smaller group, two teachers and you just went in and did your work and if you ever needed help there were staff there to help you with your work. There were seven or eight in a class at most.'*

(Male, 17, NEET)

But for others, the excluded setting concentrated their problem. For some, going there would not resolve the issue that led to them being there, rather they felt they were being punished. For others, being put in a place where there were other young people who were also feeling distressed, perhaps for a large part of the school day, reinforced their sense of being isolated with their problem.

*'Sometimes put in that room. Don't like that room. For example if you have a problem in the third lesson, you stay in the exclusion room until the end of school – too long. Sometimes there are other disruptive children in that room.'*

(Male, 15, refugee seeking asylum, year 10, state school)

#### **4.4 Teaching and learning styles**

At least some young people in all of the groups consulted for the research did recognise the value of teaching and felt they had benefited from learning. Both educational and personal development were outlined as benefits of learning.

*'No-one really wants to go to school but you understand why you do it and it does help a lot... The teachers as much as some kids hate them, at my school especially, even though you get some rowdy pupils, the teachers are all really good and I've learned an awful lot from them.'*

(Male, 15, ethnic minority, at school, video diary)

However, young people who do not/did not enjoy their school experience were particularly negative about particular types of teaching styles. Many of these young people were frustrated with what they saw as regular reliance on worksheets. Listening, reading and copying down modules or sections of text books was felt to be repetitive and could result in young people becoming disillusioned regarding the

value of what was being taught. Some of those with mild learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, found that their learning challenges are actually reinforced by reliance on such teaching styles.

The problem of repetition and over reliance upon copying and listening was also identified by those already in further or Higher Education.

*'Some teachers like keeping your attention...they just drone on and on and on. There is nothing interesting, they get a textbook, read it out and say "copy what I am reading". But the fact that I could not keep up with his speaking also meant that I fell behind.'*

(Male, 17, LGBT, at college)

*'I got bored at school, even though the classes were sorted into ability. I didn't like lessons as such. I found them really repetitive or moved too slowly.'*

(Female, 18, ethnic minority, at university, video diary)

The young people identified that, whatever the teaching styles adopted, if students were struggling to keep up, the drive to complete the lesson as planned may take precedence over individual student needs. Any subsequent opportunity to go back and revisit the subject appears to be dependent on whether individual teachers are actually prepared to work with students in their own time, that is, in breaks during the day, or after school. Many of the young people in this study reported that some, but not all, teachers would do this.

#### **4.5 Disruption**

One of the main themes emerging from the research is the negative impact of disruption within the classroom environment. This is consistent for many young people across all the groups consulted. Young people suggest that their engagement can be interrupted and others may join in. For those disrupting, the consequences can increase disengagement.

##### *Noise and distracting behaviours*

When asked why they think people stop being interested in learning, many young people reflect on how some pupils' behaviours and noise levels can interrupt lessons. This can be demotivating if it is not addressed effectively. Some say this has impacted on the extent to which they are able to learn in lessons.

Accompanying this view is a perception that teachers are not necessarily able to deal with disruption in appropriate ways, because they do not have access to either sufficient resources or the right training to equip them with the skills to address this. As a result, the disruption continues. Some of those who reported particularly negative experiences of school had either led the disruptive behaviour or eventually joined in because they felt bored and disenchanted.

*'It's discipline isn't it, kids mess about... Maybe kids get away with too much in classes.'*

(Female, 17, young offender, secure unit)

*'It's just what happens I mean you get those who are keen to learn and stuff but then you get those who just don't care.'*

(Male, 18, ethnic minority, undertaking an Apprenticeship)

### *Those who 'disrupt'*

The research highlights examples where the experience of school is leaving some young people feeling so alienated from education that it seems pointless to keep on trying. Some young people who struggle with the style of teaching in school have become disruptive – and as a result – are excluded or placed in isolated learning environments. In the research, these young people tended to be in the LGBT group, NEET, young offenders and white working class young men.

Some young people highlighted feelings of frustration where they had been asked to repeat a topic or lesson that they believed they had already covered, or if, because of language barriers, they simply could not understand. The young people in the research who experienced this were mainly: those in the LGBT group; young offenders; refugees; young people seeking asylum; young migrants; those who are NEET and white working class men who reported that they had 'been told to carry on and get on with it', which exacerbated their feelings of helplessness.

Such frustration was perceived as disruptive and many young people in the research had been thrown out of the classroom. In some extreme cases, young people were once again actively separated from others in their class for prolonged periods of time.

*'I was sat in a little box on my own and they gave me loads of worksheets to do – it wasn't very good – you're not going to learn anything are you. It was supposed to be for four months but you are not going to learn anything sitting in a box. It's all in one*



*room but they section it off with boards so you can't see anyone or talk to anyone.'*  
(Female, 17, young offender, secure unit)

The main outcomes from such experiences included young people deciding not to attend school at all or leaving half-way through the day because they felt they were being pushed to one side and ignored. Others persevered, but still failed to be entered for their GCSEs or, if entered, to achieve any useful exam results, resulting in a need to re-take their exams at college. At this point, young people felt that confidence and motivation was key to ensuring that they stay active and continue to engage with learning.

*'Sometimes you have to go around different lines like I did. I failed my tests and I took another route you know. It always leads you where you want to be. If I did not have the confidence then I would just be like a lazy boy lying in the bed and don't know what to do.'*

(Male, 18, migrant worker family, second year in FE College)

#### 4.6 The Curriculum

A small number of young people talked about the curriculum and their difficulties in dealing with the leaps in expectation between the key stages.

*'When you go to key stage three, when you go from two to three there is not that much of a big difference. But when you go to key stage four – GCSE – the jump from year nine to 10 it is a massive jump, if you look at the books you read or the stuff you learn in school it is something like you are in a proper new world. So maybe when somebody is coming all the way from nursery to year nine they have a bit of a relaxing inside of them. So they go into year 10 they get all this education so they might have a bit in their mind that when they go to college or university it is going to get even harder so they might want to stop there.'*

(Male, 16, refugee, year 11, state school).

By their early teens, some young people are ill-prepared for the demands that are placed upon them as they start preparing for their GCSEs. Some young people said they had detected a disconnect in the learning experience between the ages of 14 and 15, where expectations were felt to be too low prior to this age and then subsequently leaping to an unrealistically high level without sufficient preparation for that step-change. It may be that this change is then deflecting young people away from believing that they will be able to cope with the learning demands that come with further and higher education.

#### 4.7 Stereotyping

The young people in the research asserted that teachers are basically fair.

However, young people talked about examples of stereotyping in schools. Some young people raised concerns about attitudes towards young Muslims.

*'In high school there was a girl who was disruptive in class and the teacher took her outside and said "You shouldn't be doing this, you're Muslim".'*

(Female, 18, refugee, at university)

Young people talked about gender bias that endures in some subjects.

*'Women might be a little bit stereotyped to say that "oh building it's more manual it's definitely a strong job" but it is also the academic way. You can have a class full of boys in a physics class and you can have one girl and it is assumed not to have as high a rank academically as well...'*

*'That is similar to my sociology class right now there is only three boys now. In maths the most time it is with the boys but in science – biology and chemistry – it is mostly with the girls.'*

(Exchange between male aged 16 and female aged 17 in refugee group)

#### 4.8 Violence and bullying

Some young people, including several from the displaced persons groups (migrant workers, refugees seeking asylum, refugees) experienced the threat and reality of direct violence, either in the classroom, or the wider school environment. This can disrupt engagement in learning.

*'When we first started college, five people got thrown out for fighting and stuff. That disrupts things for other people.'*

(Female, 16, LGBT, at college)

*'It can frighten and make you stop 'cos if it happens, there are people in the classroom every day that you are with, you spend six hours each day with them. If they bully you or try to harm you this would be the main thing that would stop you from going to school, because you would be able to stay calm in the classroom without thinking about what is going happen in the next minute.'*

(Female, migrant worker family, 17, first year FE College)

A small number of young people had experienced ongoing bullying. Some described developing strategies to cope. However, in a few instances none of those strategies appeared to work, and, as a consequence, the desire to learn had ebbed away.

*'Every single day I got beaten up by boys, can't do nothing about it... At breaktime when you are walking around, it's too big school. X used to walk around with me, people come, push me, punch me, get away with it, what can I do? I was the only one. They had their back-ups and everything. I did beat up some guys as well, because I was too fed up. They've been living in the city, they was born in the city, they know many guys [more] than me. I had only three friends in my school. Me myself I don't want to study. I didn't even do my year 10 mock GCSE properly. In year nine I did, like I wanna do something, by the time I was in year 10 I was fed up of studies. I don't want to study now I am in year 11.'*

(Male, 16, refugee seeking asylum, year 11, state school)

#### 4.9 Assumptions about 'learning' after 16

The majority of young people involved in this research interpreted 'learning' post-16 as academic and confined to school or college. When discussing the impact of the 2008 Education and Skills Bill and the change in the compulsory age of learning, they assumed that this means that 16 year olds will have to stay in school and complete academic qualifications until they are 18. The fact that this can include any provision linked to a qualification had to be reinforced during the research process to make sure the young people understood. These findings indicate that young people associate 'learning' after 16 as academic and achieved through schools and colleges.

*'I think it's a good idea to encourage more people to continue and finish A-level so they have a better chance of securing a job in the future but... not everyone is suited to education after GCSE and it may not be motivating to young people.'*

(Male, 18, ethnic minority, at university)

*'I think it will be alright because it will keep people off the streets.'*

(Male, 16, white, working class, on e2e scheme)

The analysis suggests that this is a result of messages received in school about the importance of academic courses as a vehicle for achieving a successful career.

#### 4.10 Money

All groups of young people highlighted the importance of money to enable them to effectively engage in learning over a sustained period of time. For most, this is a matter of accessibility, as money provided them with the opportunity and the means to participate. It also created an opportunity for high quality learning which otherwise may not have been available to them.

Concern about the range and type of options available appears to be partly informed by personal experience and the socio-economic context of some families. Some young people wondered whether the options would be sufficient for their individual needs, preferences and circumstances.

*'My family is working class so working class and middle class families might have different priorities for their children. Like working class families might be concerned with bringing money into the household whereas maybe middle class families they have different priorities because they don't need the money.'*

(Female, 18, refugee, first year university student)

##### *The need to cover expenses*

The combination of limited funds and sparse advice on the options available creates a significant barrier to young people's involvement in learning. It is important to note that no comments were made to suggest that a lack of money had prevented them from accessing learning or continuing their involvement in the first instance.

However, young people who are living independently and having to pay living expenses or work to help subsidise the family felt they would struggle with *continuing* their engagement in learning if they were not able to benefit from financial support. Those responsible for living costs tended to be those who were already disengaged from learning, including those who are NEET or on basic Entry to Employment programmes. These young people claimed they were ensuring their basic human needs are fulfilled through working and claiming benefits to supplement food and utility bills. Although most young people consulted for the research did not report such extreme experiences, there was a general perception that young people will become more vulnerable to financial difficulties and will be more at risk of dropping out of learning in the current economic climate.

##### *Education Maintenance Allowance*

Awareness of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) was very high when discussing the importance of money in accessing learning. Many received this or

knew others who did. The findings suggest the EMA has impacted in three ways: a) ensuring more young people participate in learning after 16; b) increasing choice of learning providers, allowing them to consider a wider range of options that may include greater travel costs or moving away from home, which otherwise may not have been possible; and as a result, c) improving the quality of learning received. In a few cases, this will make the difference between continued engagement in learning and leaving learning altogether.

*'I think things that would risk my education in the future is my money worries as I will be worried how my family will cope with me staying on for a longer amount of time without bringing in some money to help, although now with developments like the EMA, I would think of that risk as being lowered very effectively. That has enabled a lot more people to stay on and cope with travel costs and book costs and equipment.'*

(Female, 16, disabled young person, at school, video diary)

There is a strong feeling across all groups that the EMA is almost a necessity. Although this is 'better than nothing' there was generally a feeling that £30 a week is not sufficient to cover rising costs. In fact, most felt the amount offered could be increased to £45 or £50. This was considered to be a more realistic figure and was consistently mentioned across all groups of young people consulted for the research. This concern was most prevalent amongst groups who had become disengaged.

*'I think it should be more, should be about £45-£50.'*

(Male, 16, white working class men, on e2e scheme)

*'If you live by yourself, you will need it for that... £30 is not enough, especially when you live on your own and you've got to pay the bills.'*

(Male, 17, white working class men, on e2e scheme)

*'There shouldn't even be a limit on it, unless you have a job yourself.'*

(Male, 17, LGBT, at college)

There was also a perception from a few young people that colleges can provide additional funding on top of the EMA weekly allowance, although they felt this was not necessarily provided by all institutions. They saw this as a very welcome addition.

*'You can get 'young learner's support fund' as well if you get EMA. You can get £40 so an extra £10 a week but it might just be our college that does it.'*

(Female, 17, LGBT, at college)

Without funding in place, many stated they would need to work on weeknights and weekends to support themselves and ensure they could continue to attend learning. A few young people also mentioned that the weekly income on Apprenticeships is not sufficient to cover living expenses. In fact, a few felt this 'low' pay constitutes cheap labour for companies.

*'The pay could be better but you can't expect much when you are learning.'*

(Male, 18, ethnic minority, completing an Apprenticeship)

*'But that's just slave labour... It's an extra tenner a week but you're doing a proper job.'*

(Male, 16, young offender, Young Offenders Institution)

However, many in the ethnic minority group and from different religious backgrounds would still go into further learning after 16, if financial support was not in place. For them, availability of the EMA has simply made living a bit easier.

*'No, I would have stayed in full time education anyway but I guess it makes things easier.'*

(Male, 16, ethnic minority, at school sixth form)

*'I had always planned to say on post-16 but for some people I know it has [made a difference].'*

(Male, 18, ethnic minority, at university)

*'I would say it hasn't influenced me but it definitely made college a bit easier, financially.'*

(Female, 18, ethnic minority, at university)

Access to funds can also directly impact on the quality of learning received. A few mentioned that they were attending, or would be able to attend, what they perceive to be better provision as a result of financial support. A common example was the feeling that they could be more selective as to which colleges, training providers or workplaces they attended rather than just going to the site closest to their home, which is often the cheapest option.

*Availability of the EMA to displaced young people*

The EMA was viewed as a very positive support mechanism and the denial of this support to refugees seeking asylum is perceived as extremely unfair by the people affected in this way. Unlike all other young people, young refugees seeking asylum do not have the right to access the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) when they are entering Further Education (LSC 2007/8). Theoretically, the educational needs of young refugees seeking asylum will be met in the area to which they are dispersed, and as a matter of policy, dispersal will be temporarily deferred where there is a dependent child who has started the final school or college year leading up to their GCSE, AS or A level exams, or equivalent (Home Office 2008).

Recent investigation into access to education and its quality indicate that there are significant problems being experienced by both refugees seeking asylum and young travellers (Anderson, Claridge, Dorling and Hall 2008). Indeed, the inaugural meeting of the Taskforce on Traveller Education at the Parliament Building in Belfast was only held in November 2008, revealing the relative newness of moves to develop UK policy relating to the education of young people who are travellers (Taskforce on Traveller Education 2008).

Children of all migrant workers have the basic right of access on the basis of equality of treatment with nationals of the State concerned, according to the United Nations International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers, 1990), to which Britain however, is not a signatory.

*Funding dedicated to specific support needs*

This research has highlighted the importance of funding to enable young people to physically access learning as well as fully comprehend and participate, through support with English and with learning difficulties. This is of specific concern to young disabled people and to people whose mother tongue is not English.

A few mentioned that access to this support should follow the individual rather than be attached to the course. This may be used to further fund their access needs and could involve the help of a personal assistant, care for their personal and medical needs and the use of a scribe or interpreter. This money could also include making laptops and specialist equipment available. Attachment of this funding to individuals would allow young people to choose the courses they want to do, rather than their preference being subject to the extent of support or additional funding available to the college or other learning provider.

*'If there is a person with an impairment on a course, the course gets more funding but that funding is not in place for the young person, it's for the course. But I think it should be there to fund my access needs.'*

(Female, 18, disabled young people, at college)

#### 4.11 FE College

Most of the young people involved in the research construed college as an important contrast to the compulsory school environment, in that they were perceived to offer freedom, flexibility and the opportunity to be treated as an adult. Most of those who were at college themselves were very positive about the experience and felt that this was a step forward towards their independence as individuals, their own maturity and a chance to succeed.

*'It's right good at our college, all our teachers proper help us out.'*

(Female, 17, LGBT, at college)

*'You get a lot more independence at college than a sixth form.'*

(Male, 16, LGBT, at college)

Young people who had become disengaged from school before 16, including those who are NEET, young offenders, travellers and working class young white men, saw college as a golden opportunity for further advancement, especially due to the independence on offer and what they saw as a more flexible way of learning. However, they also felt this was a path which was now mostly closed to them. This was especially the case for those who had not yet achieved any GCSEs, or only a few Level 1 qualifications and therefore felt they were very far off achieving this goal. Considering the amount of learning hours and commitment it would take to obtain additional qualifications to get there, in this sense, the gap is almost too wide.

*'X college would be my choice, in my opinion... You get treated like a person there not like at school... you get treated like a real person rather than getting shouted at.'*

(Male, 16, NEET)

Although most disabled young people echoed the views that college is a great way to orientate and have more freedom in learning, they also reported that the difficulties with their learning support could mean that the college experience had been a great deal more challenging than they originally envisaged. Generally this was because of a lack of tutor experience and confidence in dealing with their



additional needs, which resulted in them changing courses – and in some cases – changing colleges.

#### 4.12 The academic and vocational divide

The academic and vocational divide is apparent in the study. This manifests itself in a number of ways. The ‘big’ messages young people in the research absorbed from school about academic options/pathways and vocational options/pathways are summarised below:

##### Academic

- First class option
- Signals ‘success’
- Post 16 pathways through further and higher education more clearly mapped out
- Links between academic achievement and employment more clearly mapped out

*‘[Why are degrees important?] You get better jobs and qualifications and you get paid more.’*

(Female, 14, religious backgrounds, at school)

*‘It [degree] shows to future employers that you are passionate about what you want to do and that you’ve worked hard for it.’*

(Female, 17, religious backgrounds, school sixth form, part-time job)

##### Vocational

- Second class option
- Less valued than academic pathways
- Are for ‘less academic’ young people (meaning, ‘not bright’) and equal failure
- Post 16 pathways through further education, work and training less clearly mapped out
- Links between vocational achievement and employment options less clearly mapped out

These messages are powerful in schools and impact upon engagement in learning in a number of ways:

1. Academic options/pathways post 16 can work very well for those who are already engaged, allowing them to continue a clear, linear route. However, it is more difficult for these young people to fully consider vocational options and pathways.

2. Academic options/pathways post 16 may not work for those less engaged/disengaged. The emphasis on the primacy of this pathway and the perceived inferiority of other pathways can intensify feelings of disenchantment, demotivation and failure. The remaining options are vocational, or dropping out altogether with a resulting lack of engagement and limited opportunities.

Many who felt they did not benefit from a structured school classroom environment – especially those who are NEET, travellers, white working class men and young offenders, said they would prefer the opportunity to obtain more ‘hands on’ vocational experience. They reported that they did not learn best through listening and recording information - and would rather be in a different setting other than school or college, applying their knowledge and ‘learning while doing’.

Some of the young people’s experiences tend to be as follows:

- They undertake vocational courses with a hope that this will further their chances of employment in their chosen field, with no guarantee in their minds that these will appeal to employers;
- The course selected is not always directly relevant to their chosen career;
- Experiences of work placements are not always positive and relevant.

Those on other vocational courses at college were keen to see an increase in the range and frequency of placements available. Young people in each of the groups highlighted that a greater choice of placement options would provide more meaningful learning. A few also suggested a staggered approach that spreads out placements across the year, providing a more engaging experience that sustains interest in that subject and balances out the intensity of study. Again, this is about providing a range of different learning environments on an ongoing basis.

*'Work placements are a good idea but I think a person should be put into the best place possible.'*

(Male, 17, ethnic minority, at school sixth form)

*'It was an accountants department, all professional accountants and I was there for two weeks. They had been doing the work for 20 years and I was there for two weeks. How can I understand?'*

(Male, 16, refugee seeking asylum, year 11 state school)

*'When I did my media studies, I went to Granada Studios. If they had spread that out throughout the course I think it would have spurred people to stay on because some people dropped out because it was just too much.'*

(Female, 18, disabled young people, at college)

Young people involved in the research were not clear about the extent to which employers attach value to vocational qualifications. Many appeared to be completing Apprenticeships and courses at college as the result of their own intentions to find work in their chosen field, supported in some cases by family and friends. However, this determination was not usually informed by a knowledge that these will appeal to potential employers, but rather a 'hope' that this would result in progression.

### *Diplomas*

Awareness of the new Diploma is limited. Only a few of the young people consulted in each of the groups mentioned Diplomas as an option post-16. When prompted, some had heard of these but generally there appears to be a poor understanding of the subjects covered and what is involved, as well as confusion over how much work experience is actually provided. Most were not sure whether this route was available through their own school or college. There was also uncertainty as to whether this is available to all pupils.

### **4.13 Apprenticeships**

Knowledge and understanding of what Apprenticeships involve was uneven across the groups involved in the research. Those who were excluded and/or disengaged from education including those who are NEET, travellers, young offenders and also working class white men to some degree, felt unsure about what an Apprenticeship actually involves. Cynicism was also in evidence about the quality of what is on offer. For some there was a feeling that quality Apprenticeships are not available to everyone and can be difficult to secure. Those with prior experience of this type of

learning reported particular challenges from the physical environment and from their personal interactions with others, rather than issues with the format of the programme. Examples included difficulties in completing interviews where acceptance on a placement with an employer is on offer and feeling unsafe as a result of bullying in the workplace. In many cases, these feelings were further exacerbated by a low self-esteem and a general lack of confidence in learning in a different environment.

*'I went for an Apprenticeship with [company] but I failed my interview so I didn't get it... He asked me what my attendance was like so I told him the truth and told him it was really bad and he asked me why I thought he should give me the Apprenticeship and I said I don't know. I knew I wasn't going to get it then.'*  
(Male, 17, white working class men, on e2e scheme)

Those who assumed there is only a limited range of opportunities were perhaps lacking knowledge about the full range of different occupational areas that are available. However, young people from other groups such as those from different religious backgrounds and ethnic minorities who are completing Apprenticeships also mentioned that the range could be widened so that they can be seen as an option for anyone, regardless of their career aspirations. There was also the suggestion that schools could provide more information about how these can help young people achieve their aspirations and can take a step forward towards employment.

*'[Would you consider doing an Apprenticeship?] No... It's not seen as something very respected... and I also I want to be a journalist so it's not very relevant.'*  
(Female, 17, religious backgrounds, school sixth form and part-time job)

*'[Need] more info in schools about apprenticeships... There should be more support and information in school.'*  
(Male, 17, ethnic minority, completing an Apprenticeship)

For the young people from other countries, there was a consistent view that it is important to acquire qualifications that can be recognised in other parts of the world and that A' levels would do this, whereas other options, such as Apprenticeships, would not be transferable.

*'Best option is to go to college because you will be getting an education and you will also be capable to manage different situations if you go to another country. If you do an Apprenticeship in the UK and then you go to another country, any country, the Apprenticeship will not help you. Education helps you wherever you go.'*

(Male, 16, refugee seeking asylum, year 11 state school)

#### 4.14 Online learning

The study team also explored other methods of engagement including the potential of online learning to help involve young people who are over 16. Experiences of this are very limited and mainly confined to highly motivated and confident individuals who were already following clear, linear learning routes, including some of the young people with disabilities, those from different religious backgrounds and ethnic minorities. In the main, this tended to be young people who had already completed some learning online as part of a lesson/module in school, college or university and who therefore felt comfortable with this medium.

Some young people felt that wider provision of online learning would not help them because they knew they were not disciplined enough to complete large sections of work at home or without intervention. Others were not aware of how online learning works or found this difficult to imagine if they had not experienced it before. These appeared to be particular issues for those who are NEET; young offenders; travellers and white working class men.

A few who had tried this at school and college found it too simplified and basic and felt this was not sufficient to enable them to further their learning.

*'I don't go on the Internet, can't be bothered but some of my mates have a computer.'*

(Male, 18, NEET)

*'I think the online learning is very simple and it's not that complicated – even at GCSE I am thinking “why am I doing this?” ... Even when I was doing my A-levels it was still probably not at the level as GCSEs.'*

(Female, 17, LGBT, at college)

#### 4.15 Summary

In this chapter the key issues that many young people describe as influencing their ability to effectively engage in meaningful learning have been defined. These include

the importance of money to help improve accessibility to learning choices post 16, difficulties in dealing with disruption in the classroom and in college, and matching their preferred learning styles to structured learning environments. There also appears to be uncertainty around the quality, range and usefulness of vocational courses in facilitating outcomes that are both valued and effective. Although qualitative research cannot suggest with certainty that these are issues for all young people in England, these points were made by at least some people in each of the groups consulted for the research. This suggests that these are issues that impact on a wide range of young people and how they engage in learning.

The research has also provided insights into particular issues that appear to be affecting certain groups of young people. These include some reports from those who are NEET, offenders and refugees seeking asylum, that isolation in the classroom through exclusion and the use of exclusion units, has exacerbated existing issues that have resulted in disruption – including a clash between learning styles and the structured environment – as well as furthering a sense of helplessness in their learner experience.

## 5. Support explored

### 5.1 Introduction

The young people in the study were enabled to explore the concept of ‘support’ for engagement in learning. It is clear that unprompted, young people perceived support for learning to be available if someone has done something wrong, or if someone has additional educational needs. This is an important insight. The study therefore unpicked the range of dimensions of support perceived by young people. Listening to how they interpret this is vital in furthering their engagement in learning. The degree of ‘appropriate’ support on offer was perceived by young people in all the groups involved in the research to be central to a positive and ‘successful’ learner experience.

This chapter elaborates upon young people’s definitions of what support means to them. In practice, this includes support from parents, other family members, peers, school staff, college staff and other practitioners including Connexions and careers advisers.

### 5.2 Disabled Young People

There appears to be a mismatch between the attention and support young people would like to experience in schools and that which actually occurs. Those at risk of being disruptive and even excluded from school, reported a lack of support when they struggled with their work. However, the majority of disabled young people strongly felt that too much attention was directed towards them because of their additional learning needs, and this usually resulted in unnecessary levels of attention being focused upon them. This was perceived to arise from a combination of a lack of teacher and tutor confidence in their interactions and over-generalisations about what any particular disability may mean for their learning relationship. In some cases, this had led to young people changing courses because they were unhappy with the level of support they received.

*‘I tried four different subjects and I would tell tutors about my disability. The issue was that they would draw too much attention to me in the class, would look at me too much so other students were thinking you know ‘why is he looking at him’ and it was embarrassing.’*

(Male, 18, disabled young people, NEET)

This is an issue that many other young people were aware of. They commented that disabled young people may experience particular types of attention that prevented them being treated equally. This could be beneficial or it could be detrimental.

*'In high school there was a disabled – in a wheelchair. Miss didn't really acknowledge him as much as she did us. I found that she didn't really ask him questions or anything like that and every time I saw him he didn't really have any friends or anything... I don't know what his story was.'*

(Female, 17, refugee, college)

*'There were disabled people but everybody used to help them. To me they seemed like extremely popular people.'*

(Female, 18, refugee, university)

*'Maybe [they stop learning because] they have learning difficulties.'*

(Male, 14, religious backgrounds, at school)

Some young disabled people reported that lack of understanding of their disability from college tutors could significantly impact on their learning routes and the extent to which they felt they could succeed. Some young disabled people had had to change courses to find one with the provision they required, even if that meant they ended up studying something different and not their first choice.

*'In one of the courses I was doing I had to quit half way through because the tutor didn't really understand my learning difficulties... The course I am on [now] is better because I am getting the support I need. The tutor understands my needs and everything.'*

(Female, 19, disabled young people, at college)

Some young people reported that school teachers and college tutors make decisions for them regarding the subjects they would like to learn and how they would like to continue learning. Some found this very frustrating as they felt unable to make their own decisions. Examples provided mainly centred on choices for GCSE and the disconnect between those selected for them and the subjects they were interested in.

*'I didn't get to pick mine [GCSEs]. I was ill one day and they just went 'you're doing your maths, English, IT and Art. I wanted to do CDT.'*

(Male, 17, disabled young person, at college)



Young people in this group also pointed out that they did not all appear to be treated equally in terms of when they were able to leave school and go to college or pursue other options. A few individuals at special schools have not been given the choice of going into college at 16 and would stay in school until they were 19. Many young disabled people knew others who were still at special schools, whereas they had been able to move on to college. This has resulted in confusion and lack of clarity regarding why some have different options available to them compared to others.

*'My brother has had to stay at x until he is 19.'*

(Female, 18, disabled young people, at college)

*'I would have loved to have stayed at x until I was 19... When I was younger, the law was you had to graduate when you were 16.'*

(Female, 21, disabled young people, at college)

### 5.3 Displaced young people

Across the displaced persons' groups (migrant workers, refugees seeking asylum, refugees and travellers) young people described how their mother cultures and wider social forces here in the UK, expressed through the media as well as in the school and street, affected their learning.

While young people in these groups felt separated from their mother cultures, the majority perceived those cultures as valuing learning and education very highly. As a result, there were strong levels of motivation to overcome whatever odds that may present and to succeed educationally.

All the displaced peoples' groups described racist ideas, profiled through the media and expressed in the schools and on the streets, as very frustrating. This racism presents them in ways that they thought were simply untrue and they felt that they had to continuously demonstrate the baselessness of the stereotypes.

*'You do this and this and what are you actually doing here, you are taking stuff from us, when we are actually not. We are exactly the same, we pay the taxes, we pay exactly the same as they do. So we are not different really we are just from a different place. Yeah they can be really mean because of that. It is just that we are... look at us not in a bad way because we didn't come here to make a mess. May be the situation back in the country it was hard so some people came here to have a better life, to change their life so they should also not think what they think without knowing – they need to find out first, what do we think.'*

(Female, 17, migrant worker family, first year FE College)

## 5.4 Learning English

All of the young people who enter the British education system with a language other than English as their mother tongue described struggling to learn for at least the first year, and most often, without any appropriate additional support.

*'They found me someone who was speaking French – another girl in my class – but her French was not the same because she was from a different country – Sierra Leone. I found it really hard in my first year I had hardly no friends because no-one could speak with me in French and I was not speaking. It was lonely sometimes. They found for me a teacher who was French and she was helping me. Sometimes she came to class and would translate what the teacher was saying in a science lesson. Not every time. Sometimes she was busy so I have to go alone. I was watching what they were saying but I could not understand nothing.'*

(Female, 18, refugee, second year FE College)

In the face of the obstacles to learning English, all of these young people demonstrated a resilience and tenacity that comes from their understanding that English language and literacy is vital for their ability to survive and progress inside the society. They observed that their disadvantage was responded to differently from young disabled people, with whom they identified. In one extreme example of failure, a young woman was left for four years, from year 10 to year 13 before she was, eventually, given access to an ESOL Level 1 course. For another respondent, his desire to learn English could only be addressed outside of school.

*'Have learned English from Dad and younger sister (aged 12 years). Home office has disputed my age. We applied, but the Home Office disputed my age – said you are over 18.'*

(Male, 16, refugee seeking asylum, never been to school)

## 5.5 The impact of events and experiences outside of school

Young people in all groups consulted for this research commented that schools are not as effective as they could be in identifying why some pupils are struggling to learn. They talked about how schools can become more proactive in the way that they address these issues. The struggle to engage in learning may be about problems at home, pressure from other family members, or involvement in drugs and alcohol – all of which can be significant barriers to their development. Examples

included where pupils had to spend time at home to care for someone in their family or find work to supplement the family's income.

*'I'd want someone to ask me why first [why struggling with their work]. It might not be because it's difficult but because I have family problems or something.'*

(Female, 18, religious backgrounds, at university)

*'I learnt how to fight [at school]... They need to help people, they need to help their family so they don't have the time... If someone dies in the family and you become the primary carer. I dropped out of school to help my Mum.'*

(Female, 14, LGBT, part-time work, no current education)

In other instances, young refugees seeking asylum recognised that the continuous stress of their circumstances was either directly disrupting their education, because they were physically moved from one city to another by the Home Office, or indirectly doing so through the continuous fear and uncertainty that they and their families were living with.

*'Sometimes it depends on the family, if you are getting a good atmosphere at home there then you can study in a good atmosphere in the family...Financial crisis or other legal stuff... I have an opinion because in the last two or three months before I got a letter from the Home Office saying that we are going to send you to the original country that you come from. That's the main reason my Mum and Dad gets upset. My Dad is suffering from many diseases, sometimes I am getting worried about him, about my mum, so I can't concentrate on my studies sometimes. That's the main thing sometimes we get this depression in the mind.'*

(Female, 17, refugee seeking asylum, first year FE College)

## 5.6 The influence of other young people

Young people involved in the research experienced both positive and negative peer pressure from friends and fellow students. There was a perception that some groups were treated differently because of a specific characteristic that placed them in that group. As highlighted earlier in this section, views about some disabled young people being treated differently as a result of their disability was mentioned by all groups of young people involved in the research, including most of the disabled young people.

Research participants from ethnic minority backgrounds highlighted that they felt young people with a minority sexual orientation may be treated differently to others

their age. They stated the importance of receiving fair treatment and support from teachers as a result. A few did feel that this bullying takes place.

*'Like with gay people some people still have an idea that they [are] dirty and that they aren't as good as other people... I think if people are bullying you it makes the experience more difficult.'*

(Female, 18, ethnic minority, at university)

*'It may do in school situations in class etc but the teachers should not have a change in teaching them. They may find it harder if under peer pressure.'*

(Male, 18, ethnic minority, at university)

However, young people within the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) group did not raise negative learning experiences associated with their sexual orientation, but rather issues associated with struggling with the pace of the work and/or disruption in school and college – issues mentioned by young people in all of the groups. A few involved in the research from other groups suggested this may be because teenage years are an especially sensitive time for everyone and that individuals may hide their sexual orientation from their peers.

*'I think it especially affects them at this age as it is a time when people may be coming out and may feel ashamed of themselves, like they are going to get picked on, so they hide it. But if they hide it and it then gets found out, it sometimes ends up worse for them.'*

(Female, 16, disabled young person, at school, video diary)

Some young people who recently arrived in the country described not really having school friends. They discussed education with their personal friends who were all outside of school. Young people described their friends in the school environment as offering a combination of positive peer pressure and support, and 'physical back up' in school. This positive experience extended to fellow pupils who were not personal friends but who compounded individual motivation to succeed by being seen to strive and perform to the best of their abilities at school.

One refugee, from a fragmented educational background, talked about their experience of drug pushing in school and its impact on learning. This description was verified by the other focus group members and by the peer researchers from the two other displaced persons groups. It is included here.

*'People been smoking, that's the biggest thing, at the small age, when I was year nine. Some people from year 11 bringing it into the school. Smoking weed, bring it to school, want it in front of you, they want it in front of the new generation. They want you to become proper gangsters like they are, so they start smoking and start drinking, start stealing stuff and all those things. But the year 11s don't want the schooling anymore. I've seen it in my school.'*

(Male, 16, refugee seeking asylum, year 11 state school)

### **5.7 The significance of support from parents and families**

Positive support and advice from parents and other family members appeared to be one of the most significant contributory factors that enable young people to feel more confident and decisive about their learning routes and the eventual outcomes.

Although present amongst different groups of young people who are fully engaged in learning, this influence appeared to be strongest in discussions with those from different religious backgrounds and different ethnic minority backgrounds. A specific cultural/faith influence in terms of aspirations and expectations was evident here. Young people from Asian backgrounds were seen by all in this group to have the strongest pressure from parents to perform well at school, especially in completing subjects in science and law so that they would be able to enter a profession as a doctor or a lawyer.

*'Pressure from your parents and family and the faith they have in you makes me want to do well for them and for me to make them happy.'*

(Female, 15, religious backgrounds, at school and part-time job)

*'If you are taking the risk to go to college... your family are kind of depending on you to make a success of things and they are making ends meet because they are focused on you and they don't want ... they are kind of putting that hope into you... you are going to have a huge pressure like if you fail ... letting them down.'*

(Female, 17 refugee, 1<sup>st</sup> year FE college)

*'Our religion is learn - Sikh means to learn. In our religion it is important to learn because if we want to spread our religion...'*

(Male, 16, refugee seeking asylum, age disputed and so denied school place)

*'There was only one white person in our science class...whereas in media studies it was basically all white people and I think that is because the British culture is doing whatever you want that makes you happy, whereas with the Asian culture it's more*

*about doing something that takes you far, gives you social status and gives you money and you will be happy. Even if that is not what you want to do, you will still have a good life.'*

(Female, 18, ethnic minority, at university, video diary)

In the majority of cases, young people from ethnic minority backgrounds and religious backgrounds saw this pressure as motivating and a healthy factor that helped to drive forward their learning and enabled them to succeed.

However, alongside pressure from families to attain in particular areas of study, there could also be a deep-seated parental expectation that, once 16, the young person would leave school to go and work. Young people in this study were aware of what they had to do in order to resist that parental pressure.

*'They [parents] thinking I should be working. It's not on them what I want to do. It is on me. I want to learn.'*

(Male, 16, migrant worker family, year 11)

*'If you want to do something – nobody can stop you doing certain things. Parents expect from you – not just me but everybody – to do certain things but then you have to say no, I cannot do it because that would affect my learning.. in such a way.'*

(Male, 18, migrant worker family, at college )

Some of the young people from particular groups, namely those from ethnic minorities, including refugees seeking asylum and migrant worker and religious backgrounds, highlighted the significance of social class in influencing learning. They felt that families from higher socio-economic groups were more supportive and more likely to instil higher aspirations in their children – and as a result – were more likely to influence the teaching and the level of support on offer. Equally, the ability to buy private education.

*'I think class can have a massive effect on the kind of education you get. Friends I know who went to private schools...they seem to get a better education and the school has more contact with parents. The middle class tend to have more interest in what their kids do and if they have a bad teacher they are more likely to complain, whereas when people are from working class, parents are too busy or they have been brought up not knowing that books and exams are a way to improve yourself.'*  
(Female, 18, ethnic minority, at university, video diary)

*'I guess those that can afford private education receive better teaching.'*  
(Male, 16, school sixth form, ethnic minority)

### **5.8 Careers advisers/Connexions**

Most young people involved in the research in each of the groups could remember seeing a careers adviser or someone from Connexions, or having the opportunity to do so. However, in practically all cases, this was a one-off meeting with limited scope for follow-up. Most did not consider this advice to be particularly useful, because the advisers did not appear to really listen or to understand how young people think about planning for careers. Consequently, some young people perceived these advisers to be disinterested in them. And in reaction to this perceived lack of interest, young people did not appear to be concerned about there being no further opportunities for follow up meetings in order to develop their options. They often preferred to or fell back on discussing their options with family and friends.

*'We did have a Connexions officer in Year 11 but he wasn't very good.'*  
(Female, 17, religious backgrounds, at school sixth form and part-time job)

*'We can go to Connexions in our school but I have never been and out of school I have my friends and family.'*  
(Female, 14, religious backgrounds, at school)

*'I make my own decisions, but agree that family and friends can help support them.'*  
(Male, 18, ethnic minority, Apprenticeship)

### **5.9 Advice and support for those already disengaged from learning**

Young people who are NEET, or who had been NEET in the past in the research, including those serving sentences, highlighted a lack of knowledge about what their

options may be for future learning. They also believed that because they had dropped out of school, certain pathways were now closed to them.

*'I haven't been to school for years actually...I got kicked out when I was in first year of my seniors. I got sent to jail though didn't I... When I first got released before they wouldn't have me back... The most education I have done is since I have been locked up.'*

(Female, 17, young offender, secure unit)

*'I don't think I'll be able to go to college now... When you leave school you don't get the chance to go to college. I got told by the college people because I haven't got any grades.'*

(Female, 17, young offender, secure unit)

This perception appeared to be impacting on behaviour. Some of these young people had held back from making any further enquiries as to what learning options were available and, instead, saw finding work as their only option. This may be because they perceived the course and subject options open to them to be far removed from their aspirations, making the pathways back to learning seem personally irrelevant. For some NEET young people, participating in this research study itself had become an opportunity to begin to explore re-entry into learning.

*'Like, I haven't anything at all. I was out since I was 13. Can I get to college? Can I get in and learn something with no qualifications like? Would they let me in? Cos I want to go – but how can I do it?'*

(Male, 16, traveller, NEET)

There were very few examples where these groups of young people were actually in settings where they could receive adequate advice and information. Those who had offended in the past appeared to be slightly better informed about the role of the adviser. This is because they had had better contact with Connexions during their time in a secure setting.

*'I had one Connexions adviser but I didn't really get on with him. I never really went to school to be honest.'*

(Male, 16, NEET)

Local projects and secure settings appear to be more effective at exploring the range of vocational options available to these young people as a means to improve their knowledge and understanding, obtain qualifications and ultimately find work. In many



cases, this was the first time they had been given the full picture in terms of the practical courses available to them. This was seen as positive, even though this was more a menu of realistic opportunities borne out of necessity, to help place people on a path into employment.

Some young people who have previously been NEET re-engage in learning through Entry to Employment (e2e) projects as the result of direct interventions. The findings from this research indicate that this is mainly the result of outreach work in local communities, by: social workers; youth workers; and other activities delivered by local learning providers or charity projects rather than the result of specific careers advice.

*'Not many people know about places like this [outreach project]. Before people leave school they should get leaflets saying you could go here or you could go there and show the places they can go to. We got on pathways and that's how we found out about this. That's what everyone gets.'*

(Male, 16, white working class men, on e2e scheme)

## 5.10 Summary

It is clear that unprompted, young people perceived support for learning to be available only to those who have done something wrong, or who have additional educational needs. The study unpicks the range of dimensions of support highlighted as important by young people. The degree of 'appropriate' support on offer was perceived by young people in all the groups involved in the research to be central to a positive and 'successful' learner experience.

Young people may need individual support on an emotional level about their learning; and secondly – and this is not mutually exclusive – young people want relevant, practical learning support. In this study, specific points are made on the significance of the teacher/tutor/careers guidance role in helping to ensure a smoother transition to opportunities post-16.

## **6. Engaging all in meaningful learning**

### **6.1 Introduction**

Young people were asked to identify practical solutions that can be introduced to help ensure all young people are engaged in meaningful learning after 16.

This chapter highlights the main points emerging from these discussions. Young people in all of the groups highlighted the solutions outlined in sub-sections:

- Catering for the range of learning styles
- Support
- Careers advice covering the full set of options
- Widening the range of vocational options
- Linking vocational options to employment outcomes
- Widening the availability of EMA
- Reducing class sizes (disengaged young people)
- Availability of hands-on practical learning from age 12 (disengaged young people)
- Delivering learning in community/youth based settings (disengaged young people)
- Addressing trauma as a barrier to learning (refugees seeking asylum)

A set of additional actions are included for certain groups, solutions which they felt would enable them to become more actively involved in learning that was relevant to their needs. Unless otherwise stated, the term 'disengaged young people' includes: those who are NEET; white working class men; and young offenders.

### **6.2 Catering for the range of learning styles**

For the majority of young people consulted, solutions need to cater for a greater range of learning styles, through offering flexibility in the ways in which this is made available.

In addition to flexible teaching to fit with the range of learning styles, it was also suggested that pupils are provided with more choice in terms of learning

environments. The core part of this was perceived to be time outside of school settings, with placements in colleges and in the workplace at younger ages.

*'They need to give people more choices. If people are having trouble learning at school, part-time timetables and then a course outside of school. There are quite a few people at my school that are doing college as well as school but they are not offering it to everyone.'*

(Female, 14, LGBT, part-time job, not in education)

*'I can only do hands on things really... If they had more courses at school like mechanics and painting and decorating I can guarantee people wouldn't get into trouble... because most lads like to do stuff like that... If you want to do mechanics you have to get kicked out of school so you can do a motor project.'*

(Male, 18, NEET, offended in past, left school at 14)

### **6.3 Support**

Young people suggested that more attention should be paid to the range of factors that cause them to disengage. This involves noticing the signs of detachment and disengagement. This also means making it clear to young people that they will receive support, even if they are not 'in trouble', or have additional learning needs. Getting support right for young people is crucial and this involves understanding what young people contend with across their school/college experiences, the influence of other young people, families and communities.

### **6.4 Careers advice covering the full set of options**

Many young people felt they were not given the full picture in terms of the range and types of academic and vocational options available to them once they reached the age of 16. All groups raised this as a key issue. There was a perception that schools select routes for people that nearly always involve academic qualifications.

Even those who were following clear, linear pathways to learning and who were happy with the opportunities available to them, were mindful that both they and others may benefit from a wider set of opportunities, helping them to achieve their aspirations and find employment. For them, it was about explaining what is available apart from academic qualifications and providing enough information to allow young people to weigh up the positive and negative aspects of each option.

*'[I would tell people] Do you know that there are other options besides A Levels?'*  
 (Female, 17, religious backgrounds, school sixth form, part-time job)

*'[They should be saying] What you can choose, good and bad points and how it will help.'*  
 (Female, 14, religious backgrounds, at school)

## 6.5 Widening the range of vocational options

Young people feel that raising the compulsory age of learning will only succeed in effectively engaging all people if a larger number of vocational opportunities are made available and if schools consider these as equal to academic qualifications. A perception of limited choice is a common theme emerging from this research, with most young people in all groups reporting that they felt they were only party to a restricted menu of potential choices when in school. Those who were following more linear pathways appeared to be well-informed of the academic options available to them and were fully conversant as to which degrees and types of further study were most appropriate to help them get ahead in their chosen field. However, they felt they were not usually given an opportunity to consider appropriate vocational routes. Young people undertaking Apprenticeships tended to have a good understanding of how this training would prepare them for the 'world of work' and help them to find employment. Although a knowledge of the full range of academic and vocational options available to them may not have influenced their chosen path, most young people felt everyone has the right to be able to benefit from the 'whole picture'. This was seen as especially important for those they saw as not fitting with the school system and who struggle with that particular style of learning.

Most young people involved in the research perceived vocational options to be of significant value, but only where these cover a sufficient range, are relevant to their particular goals and include quality work experience with appropriate employers. Some expressed cynicism as to whether vocational options are relevant to the specific occupational area they are personally interested in. They were also unsure of the usefulness of placements, citing lack of structure and limited opportunities to get a real taste of the world of work.

*'I think there should be more free periods at A Levels, so it would be more like uni, and you would have more chances to get work experience.'*  
 (Female, 17, religious backgrounds, at school sixth form and part-time job)

*'You can get a job and learn in that job... Like McDonalds have the best training...'*  
 (Male, 16, LGBT, at college)

### **6.6 Clearly linking vocational options to employment outcomes**

Following on from this, the findings indicate that young people prefer to have clearer information as to the direct benefits of vocational options and how this links to their chances of finding work. For example, this may cover a specified route such as 'if you complete an NVQ Level 3 in X, you will be able to apply for a X position once you finish or you can then apply for an X Apprenticeship which will provide you with the skills you need to apply for a Level 4 job in X job role'. Those involved in the research felt this would provide them with confidence that this route would help them reach their career goals. In turn, this may improve the likelihood of take up and help ensure sustained attendance on these courses.

### **6.7 Widening the availability of EMA**

Awareness of the EMA was very high and most young people in the research understood its purpose and how to apply for an Allowance. The majority would like to see this made available to ALL young people, regardless of their background, to allow everyone an equal chance in accessing the opportunities that would be of greatest benefit for them. This view was also informed by their reactions to the rising costs of travel and living costs in the wake of the current economic climate – a time when people's chances of participating may be reduced even further. The majority of young people involved in the research felt that £30 is not enough to cover these expenses. A raise to £45 or £50 was seen as more appropriate to adequately support attendance in learning on a weekly basis.

### **6.8 Reduction in class sizes (disengaged young people)**

Many of those who become disengaged from school before the age of 16 felt that the most effective way for them to learn was through smaller class sizes – a maximum of 10 per class. They perceived that this would enable them to work at their own pace and receive the one-to-one support they need to allow them to progress.

### **6.9 Availability of hands-on practical learning from age 12 (disengaged young people)**

Most who have become disengaged explained that they started to struggle and become disenchanted at around 13 and 14 years of age. Because of this, they felt it is important that more options for vocational tasters and different routes of learning

are offered at these ages or even before, to help ensure people stay engaged and value the idea of furthering their knowledge and understanding. They felt that a greater choice of vocational options must be available at an earlier age – at 12 and 13. These options need to include time out of the classroom, either in the school grounds or in different environments such as college or the workplace. They felt it is crucial that young people engage in ‘hands on’ learning` and obtain a greater variety of experience. Young people suggest that in turn, they will feel more engaged and will be more likely to stay on in school or some type of learning until they are 16.

Those who left school before 16 were keen to take this one step further and commented that young people should be able to leave school at a younger age and enter a structured work scheme - like an Apprenticeship - where they can develop skills knowledge and abilities through practical application in the ‘world of work’. According to some young people, any structured learning environment is going to be difficult for them and may even feel like an emotionally or physically threatening experience. In these instances, a complete break from the system was seen as the most positive way of ensuring their engagement and positive progression.

*‘Because some people just don't fit the school system well so there's no point them staying on.’*

(Female, 18, religious backgrounds, at university)

*‘If people were allowed to leave at 14 and if there were more options you wouldn't get as many people in here [young offenders institution].’*

(Male, 16, young offender, left school at 15)

### **6.10 Delivery of learning in community/youth based settings (disengaged young people)**

Young people involved in this research felt there is potential for them to be further engaged or re-engaged in learning where this is delivered in local community sites such as youth centres and community projects. Many who are NEET, white working class men, young offenders - as well as travellers - said this would appeal to them and others in similar circumstances as it would involve more flexible learning where they could design their own timetable. In addition, they felt that those delivering the learning would be more likely to understand the challenges they face in terms of the communities around them and the perceived risks of staying in learning.

However, this would need to involve a specific site that is solely for learning and that does not interfere with spaces already used for leisure. There was a general perception that places that are used for socialising and leisure activities are already

very limited and as such should be protected. Research participants were also concerned that this space would not be respected, leading to definite disruption if formal learning is introduced where people usually spend time relaxing and also already learning in informal ways.

### **6.11 Addressing trauma as a barrier to learning (refugees seeking asylum)**

None of the young refugees seeking asylum were able to project clearly about their futures and, prior to the study, had never been invited to share their educational aspirations. In response to that invitation, they described a constant fear of imminent removal from the UK, self-blame and blame towards their parents for their current situations. They also expressed anger at the UK system and at parents and teachers for appearing to ignore the significance of not getting National Insurance Numbers or receiving the EMA when they are 16, like their non-asylum friends, and being in families that are denied the right to work, upon their learning aspirations. There was a shared desire for future collective opportunities, outside the formal educational setting, to further explore their emotional reactions to their situations and how those emotions impact upon their learning abilities. As an immediate response, RAPAR has supported a core group of young people to launch Young RAPAR.

## 7. Conclusion

This final section considers the main findings from the research in terms of how best to ensure learning up to 18 is sufficiently engaging and meaningful for all, regardless of background, ability and preferred learning style.

Due consideration is provided on the experiences of learning up to 16, the suitability of options after 16 and realistic expectations about engaging groups in provision. Most importantly, this concludes how the overall experience can be improved for young people.

### 7.1 Conclusions

The research highlights that although young people have very different experiences, these can be conceptualised as two different pathways: one that follows a relatively clear, linear route with a set of relatively clear outcomes at the end and others that follow fragmented, disconnected pathways that provide limited scope for re-engagement. In general, young people reported experiences and outcomes that related to either type of learning route.

The findings suggest that this is not due to an attitudinal or behavioural issue on the part of the young person, but rather the impact of structural factors such as a prescribed teaching style and the significance of support from others. With the exception of the young travellers and the white working class men groups, at least some of the young people from all of the groups involved in the research had been able to progress successfully into further learning, regardless of difficult experiences.

Key points that emerge from this research are outlined below.

*Availability of a larger number of vocational opportunities is key to meaningful engagement*

Young people felt that raising the compulsory age of learning will only succeed in effectively engaging all people if a larger number of vocational opportunities are made available *and* if schools consider these as equal to academic qualifications. A perception of limited choice is a common theme emerging from this research, with most young people in all groups reporting they feel they are only party to a restricted menu of potential choices when in school. Those who are following a clearer, more linear route appeared to be well-informed of the academic options available to them and are fully conversant as to which degrees and types of further study were most



appropriate to help them get ahead in their chosen field. However, they felt they were not usually given an opportunity to consider a vocational route. Young people undertaking Apprenticeships tended to have a good understanding of how this training will prepare them for the 'world of work' and help them to find employment. Although a knowledge of the full range of academic and vocational options available to them may not have influenced their chosen path, most young people felt everyone had the right to be able to benefit from the 'whole picture'. This was seen as especially important for those they saw as not fitting with the school system and who struggle with that particular style of learning.

There was also a perception across all groups that not all options are available to all people. Most young people have commented that not all qualifications are accessible to them and that others their age are offered a set of opportunities that do not follow a certain pattern. This lack of information on all the options appears to have actually prevented engagement in further learning and led to frustration and feelings of helplessness, especially for those who are already disengaged and removed from the learning process and the prospect of progression.

According to research participants, the limited availability of consistent careers advice and lack of opportunity to make informed decisions is further compounded by the less positive attitudes of teachers and schools towards the value of vocational qualifications. The view amongst a few in all groups that teachers are simply not interested in young people's personal success seems to be influenced by perceived priorities about school targets and promoting a more 'respectable' academic route into further and higher education. The implication that a vocational path equals failure is an attitudinal response that has been long entrenched and in that sense can become a structural barrier to success.

Although young people have suggested additional practical solutions to enable meaningful learning, a more urgent action would appear to be the illustration of *all options to all pupils*. This improved knowledge, and indeed resulting empowerment, may allow for greater confidence amongst young people in selecting the options that are most suitable for them personally. It may also boost the take up of vocational routes, including Apprenticeships and the new Diplomas that are designed to 'accommodate a wide range of aspirations' (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) 2008, p.2), allow for progression to Apprenticeships and [be] challenging for all learners (QCA 2008, p24).

This belief that all young people should be able to choose from all potential routes is also underpinned by a perceived necessity for funds that can support these actions. This is a crucial consideration for some: it can make the difference between young

people choosing not to engage in further learning and further development and securing their participation.

*Some young people struggle to fit with the education system*

Specific consideration needs to be given to young people who struggle with the structured school environment before they reach 16 and even before 14. The research appears to highlight that for some, changes in learning delivery need to be more significant and focused outside of school, perhaps resulting in direct work placements at 14 with a one-day release (as is offered through existing Apprenticeships). This is a requirement that the new Diplomas may not realistically be able to deliver within the general requirement of 10 days of work experience pre-16. Crucially, this work placement provision at 13 or 14 could allow young people to develop skills in ways that work best for them, rather than offering structured learning including workshops and online learning that may fail to engage their attention. This could act as a preventative measure to help reduce the burden on schools in organising programmes to re-engage pupils once they have become disenchanted with the system.

This option may be seen to be more viable in the current economic climate as this can allow employers to take on new employees and deliver work based training full-time with the support of a learning provider, rather than providing work placements or part-time work for a few days a week. The need for this is also supported by evidence that those with poor qualifications are usually only eligible for learning options at 16 that offer limited potential for furthering their future earnings (The Economist 2008, p.29). Otherwise, raising the compulsory age of learning may be delaying an unsatisfactory outcome for these young people. However, young people involved in this research also felt that a bigger priority is to ensure the quality of work placements are improved as negative work experiences can be a significant barrier to a positive learning outcome.

*Learning environments and support roles have a significant impact on the quality of learning*

The learning environment and support roles of Connexions/careers advisers and others should not be underestimated in terms of their potential impact on young people's self-esteem and capacity to learn. Whether they personally experience a linear or a more fragmented learning path, most young people involved in the research claimed they had been directly or indirectly exposed to disruptive behaviour in the classroom and within the wider school setting. They did not necessarily assume that most teachers can address such problems in meaningful ways within

this environment, where the combination of rigid curricula, tests and targets, class size and range of need in that class can often inhibit effective one to one teaching and learning. In fact, they did not feel it is the teachers' responsibility to do so. As a result, young people themselves develop their own range of coping strategies that work to greater or lesser degrees and, if they reach a college environment, felt that these problems mainly dissipate. This clearly highlights a number of concerns in terms of the perceived value and security in learning pre-16, yet also outlines much more positive views of the college experience.

*Young people have extensive insight into the issues impacting on their learning*

Young people are incredibly insightful about the issues they and the young people around them face. As such, their views are extremely valuable to the process of ensuring that learning does indeed become more engaging and fulfils the commitments of the Children's Plan. In this study, young people's capacities for describing and analysing the barriers to learning they face, and their requirements to stay in engaged in learning, indicate that there is tremendous potential for finding solutions if young people themselves are placed at the centre of such a process, and supported to fully engage with it. The Children's Plan clearly states that 'services need to be shaped by and responsive to children, young people and families, not designed around professional boundaries' (DCSF 2008, p.4).

*Advice from Connexions/careers advisers could be improved*

There was some dissatisfaction with careers advice in schools across all groups of young people consulted in this research, and as a result, low expectations of the range of services offered, with young people preferring instead to consult with family, friends and other sources. While most of the young people in this study who are in year 10 and above and still in school had received advice from Connexions and/or the careers service, there were markedly few examples across the dataset of satisfaction with that intervention at school. Sessions were reported as being insufficiently tailored to the specific needs of individual young people and rarely followed through. As an alternative, young people were keen to find out about their future options through direct contact with people who are already in work and through work-related experience.

## **7.2 Implications for future engagement of young people**

This research has highlighted a number of findings that are of significance for future planning about how to continue the engagement of young people in learning and

indeed how to further define or develop additional measures towards this aim. These can be summarised as follows:

- Young people from all groups felt that all should be able to access the EMA and the amount of money provided through this should be increased to £45 or £50 per month.
- Disabled young people especially were keen to ensure funding for learning accompanies the individual and not the institution, to allow for greater access to preferred opportunities and to cater for different learning styles.
- Vocational courses were not as valued as academic courses by teachers and careers guidance staff, adding to a general perception that vocational courses are equivalent to a less successful learning pathway and therefore 'failure'.
- Young people who are NEET or have been NEET in the past, also including young offenders and white, working class men, highlighted a lack of knowledge of what their options may be for future learning and felt that these options may well be closed off to them.
- A lack of support from tutors and their limited confidence in dealing with different disabilities can provide a further barrier to disabled young people accessing their preferred provision.
- Widening the range of vocational options available will be crucial to the success of engaging young people in learning after 16. Much of this can be improved through providing more detailed information, with aims to: a) ensure all have access to the same 'menu' of academic and vocational opportunities; and b) provide more evidence of the quality and relevance of different routes, especially outlining the expected employment outcome for each.

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This report presents the views, experiences and aspirations of a wide range of young people aged 14–18, including those not usually heard, regarding how they can be more meaningfully engaged in learning after 16. The findings emerge from a rich range of qualitative approaches designed to maximise the participation of young people.

#### WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN ON THIS TOPIC:

- The majority of existing evidence covers engagement in learning for young people in general, with a growing body of knowledge on young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).
- Engagement is not a simple choice for all young people. Young people can feel disengaged from learning for various reasons, and this can be mild or severe.

#### WHAT THIS REPORT ADDS:

- It reminds us that young people learn and progress in different ways. Some young people follow traditional linear pathways through learning after 14, making incremental progress and achieving specific learning outcomes. The pathways of other young people meanwhile become, or are already, chaotic and fragmented, and continue to be so unless addressed.
- Disruption, class sizes, teaching and learning styles and appropriate finance for learning were cited as factors affecting engagement in learning from a wide range of young people.
- A review of how young people are supported to engage in learning is required. Young people reported an academic and vocational divide, with the former signalled as the ‘first class’ trajectory and the latter for those ‘less bright’, therefore inferior.
- Receiving the full picture of academic and vocational learning options available after 16 and good advice and support from careers/Connexions advisers, teachers and parents is paramount.
- Young people generally suggested the following solutions: better information and advice on a full range of learning opportunities after 16; widening the range of vocational options; clearly linking vocational courses to employment outcomes and widening the availability of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA).
- Disengaged young people stressed the following solutions: reduction in class sizes; availability of hands-on practical learning from age 12 and delivery of learning in community/youth based settings. Young refugees seeking asylum advocated addressing trauma as a barrier to learning.