

# Keeping young people in learning until the age of 18 – does it work?

Evidence from the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) in England

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Implemented ten years ago in England, the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) placed a duty on young people to remain in learning (although not confined to staying on at school) until their 18th birthday.

This research project provides the first detailed examination of the design, implementation and impact of the RPA on participation, retention and achievements in post-16 learning and subsequent labour market outcomes.

Going beyond pure impact evaluation, we explore the design of the policy from conception through to implementation and assess the extent to which the policy has achieved its objectives.

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## Policy context

For the last 30 years, the UK has had a persistent problem of young people disengaging from education and training at the earliest opportunity, affecting national productivity and contributing to a relatively high and stubborn NEET (not in education, employment or training) rate among 16-18-year-olds.<sup>1</sup> In 2008, the NEET rate for England was 10.3%, and had changed little since 1995, when it was 9.2%.<sup>2</sup> As part of the response to this, the 2008 Education and Skills Act included provisions for a future government to raise the age until which young people would remain in learning to 18.

Historically, the rationale for increases in compulsory education requirements for young people centred on the argument that a prolonged period in education or training could improve their qualification attainment and acquisition of skills, as well as their future employment and earning potential. An existing body of research examining the effects of the most recent raising of the school leaving age (RoSLA) to 16 in the UK in 1972 has established that the cohorts of young people affected by this reform did see a positive impact on their qualifications, employment and earnings as a result of the additional education they received. In recent years, a number of countries have raised their participation age, arguing that it would improve economic output and performance, and help to narrow social and economic inequalities. As such, the RPA policy was seen as a way to boost the UK's education and training performance in comparison with other OECD countries and to improve young people's economic and social outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

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## Policy design and implementation

The 2008 Education and Skills Act stipulated that, from 2013, as part of the RPA, young people who had reached the age of 16 and who had not acquired a Level 3 qualification would have a legal duty to participate in education and training until the end of the school year in which they turned

1 Dept. for Education (2024). <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-in-education-and-training-and-employment/2023>.

2 Dept. for Education (2010): Participation In Education, Training And Employment By 16-18 Year Olds In England. SFR18/2010. Available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-in-education-training-and-employment-by-16-to-18-year-olds-in-england>

3 Dept. for Education and Skills (2007). Raising Expectations: staying in education and training post-16. Norwich: Cm7065, March.

17. From 2015, this duty would apply until young people reached their 18th birthday. This was to comprise:

*‘appropriate full-time education or training; a contract of apprenticeship; or part-time education or training towards an accredited qualification as part of a full-time occupation or alongside an occupation of more than 20 hours a week.’<sup>4</sup>*

The RPA emanated from a raft of policymaking over a ten-year period, which had focused on expanding educational opportunities for young people. This included: the piloting and national rollout of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), which offered financial incentives to young people from lower income families to boost participation, retention and achievement rates in full-time learning; the setting up of the Connexions Service, which focused on offering support to the under 18s NEET group; Tomlinson’s 14-19 Curriculum Review; the introduction of National Diplomas, which offered general/technical learning opportunities; and the expansion of apprenticeships and alternative vocational routes for disengaged students.

However, the RPA was implemented in a very different policy environment. Post-2010, the RPA was stripped of its original design and supporting systems, including numerous related policy ‘building blocks’ (*inter alia* EMAs and the Connexions Service), and duties on employers to comply. Significant changes were made to school management responsibilities too. The policy was also affected by vague enforcement duties and austerity measures, particularly cuts to local authority (LA) budgets.

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## Methodology

Our research project adopted a mixed methods approach. We used a large, linked administrative dataset covering all pupils in state schools in England in the years immediately before and after the introduction of the policy. This data analysis was complemented by ten interviews with the ‘policy architects’ of the RPA, as well as a policy and literature review. Six case studies were designed to examine RPA implementation in contrasting localities. The areas chosen were Blackpool, Bristol, Norfolk, Sunderland, Wandsworth and Worcestershire. We conducted a total of 78 interviews with a range of stakeholders, including representatives from local/combined authorities, schools and colleges, training providers and employers, as well as 28 individual interviews and 17 focus groups with young people (aged 16-24). The fieldwork was conducted between March 2024 and February 2025.

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4 Education and Skills Act 2008, c. 25, Explanatory Notes. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/25/notes/division/5/1/1/1>

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## Key findings

Analysis of administrative data shows that RPA has had limited impacts:

- **Year 12:** levels of sustained participation initially increased slightly with RPA to 17 but then actually reduced when the participation age increased to 18; there was a shift away from further education (FE) and into school; there was also an increase in mid-year dropout from participation, particularly among those in FE.
- **Year 13:** contrasting with year 12, there was a reduction in school participation in addition to a reduction in FE participation, so overall participation in education and training fell; employment slightly increased, but we also see a slight increase in sustained NEEThood, and an increase in starting learning but dropping out, again particularly from FE.
- Overall, the participation picture suggests some improvement in initial engagement but also increased dropout in both year 12 and year 13.
- **Qualifications:** there was an increase in the proportion attaining grade 4 or above (grade C or above pre-2017) in GCSE English by 18, and evidence of small improvements in employment and earnings at age 20.
- **Heterogeneity:** boys drive the increase in overall participation in year 12, as they increase school participation, offsetting the fall in FE, whereas for girls the reduction in FE participation is larger than for boys in both year 12 and 13. White students are driving increases in overall participation and school participation, particularly in year 12, while black students are the only group moving away from school and into FE. Similarly for year 13, black students are reducing school participation much more than other groups, while they increase persistent NEET rates and dropout from participation in both year 12 and 13. White students are behind the increase in English GCSE attainment. At the same time, all groups see similar earnings and employment gains by age 20. Focusing in on the impacts among low attainers at Key Stage 4 (GCSE) we see similar patterns overall but with slightly larger effects and some positive impacts are sustained, i.e. school participation is increased in both year 12 and year 13, and sustained employment increases markedly in year 13. Outcomes are generally more positive for low attainers in year 12 but in year 13 we see similar sized effects to the population in terms of non-sustained participation and dropout from FE.

Evidence from six local authority case studies from around the country finds:

- Most young people make a post-16 transition *but* large numbers drop out and fail to re-engage in learning/work or connect with local support services until they hit the benefit system at 18.

- Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) is currently inconsistent in quality, with non-academic routes unevenly covered.
- There is a lack of support and availability of options for young people who wish to access post-16 work/apprenticeships, and for their employers.
- Cuts to local authority budgets have undermined local collaborative work to deliver their RPA duties, leading to a reduction in their capacity to offer support services to disadvantaged groups of young people and to those who drop out of post-16 education, employment or training (EET). Furthermore, data collection and tracking are hindered due to significant reductions in staffing. Destination data are collected via 'snapshot' annual surveys, which are prone to misreporting and inaccuracies. Moreover, timely reporting to LAs of student dropouts from post-16 learning from schools, colleges and training providers is often lacking. This presents itself as a further delay in identifying and supporting young people who have become NEET.
- Lack of funding has led to cutbacks in flexible entry level vocational and 'taster' programmes, which are often a re-engagement option for disengaged groups. Those remaining are often full to capacity, with additional students filling waiting lists.
- The English and maths resit requirement is difficult to deliver (especially in FE colleges and by training providers), with maths staff recruitment and retention particularly problematic. There is also an over-reliance on GCSE teaching, instead of offering functional skills programmes.
- Youth poverty is a significant issue, which causes young people to choose to participate in unsuitable school or FE courses, in order for their household to retain child benefit (CB) payments, thus militating against choosing what may be more suitable apprenticeship or work-with-training routes for which the CB is withdrawn. Families/carers of NEET young people (under the age of 18) do not continue to receive CB. Young people under the age of 18 are unable to claim independent welfare support unless they are estranged from their family or have a long-term sickness/disability and therefore have no requirement to access support services (if they are available/accessible). This hinders early intervention to identify and support their needs.
- Multiple barriers hinder young people's participation:
  - Structural barriers: youth poverty; lack of access to education, employment and training opportunities, including dedicated support and placement services, and a lack of affordable transport, particularly in rural areas, limiting access to opportunities.
  - Institutional barriers: a lack of wellbeing/mental health services support in schools and colleges, lack of staff to help identify and re-engage those who drop out, lack of opportunity for starting courses partway through the year, which leads to a dire need for much earlier intervention

to curb rising rates of youth unemployment/inactivity. The current requirement to resit maths and English, which focuses on GCSE retakes and not teaching functional skills within vocational learning, is expensive, difficult to resource due to teaching capacity and has poor returns in terms of qualification outcomes.

- Social and personal barriers: lack of support for increasing numbers of students with mental health challenges, and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); caring responsibilities for family members, hindering young people's ability to continue in learning.

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## Where do we go from here?

Ten years on, the challenge for this research was to determine the impact of introducing policy to raise the participation age in learning in England to 18. Our quantitative analysis finds that there was a limited impact of the RPA on overall participation in post-16 education and training. Our qualitative evidence highlights how the RPA was operationalised in local areas that had been hit by austerity measures and significant changes to school management arrangements, which impeded local delivery of the RPA. In addition, roles and responsibilities were 'fuzzy', especially in relation to young people's duty to participate in post-16 learning. We have identified shortfalls in funding, policy drivers and infrastructure that adversely affect post-16 tracking arrangements, support services and the availability of post-16 provision to meet all needs.

Despite the challenges facing case study areas, there were identifiable areas of good practice. Firstly, in areas where there was a synergy and commitment between local providers to work together – with tangible efforts to reduce competition between them – the post-16 offer was more coherent and there were noticeable efforts made to identify and meet gaps in provision. Also, CEIAG provision was better coordinated when local partnership working, data sharing and knowledge exchange were visible. Secondly, there were examples of effective good practice of working with students who had previously disengaged from mainstream education in PRUs (pupil referral units) and some training providers. This approach centred on individualised targeted work with young people with the aim of designing and delivering bespoke post-16 transition plans. Arranging and accompanying young people on visits to colleges, setting up and monitoring work experience placements and helping with job applications often formed part of this offer. Finally, in some case study areas, strenuous efforts were made by local authority staff to contact young people who had become NEET. Staff were not only located in offices in areas of high deprivation but actively engaged in outreach work, which included home visits and regular

contact with parents/carers.

It could be argued that we do not need (or did not need) legislation or the RPA, when most young people across the UK make a successful post-16 EET (education, employment or training) transition and, in any case, many 'choose' to stay in full-time learning. However, this negates responsibility for a vexing and persistent issue for policymakers, that is those who become NEET or enter precarious work between 16-18 years of age and who disproportionately come from disadvantaged backgrounds. It also fails to shine a spotlight on those who drop out from learning between the ages of 16 to 18 and the benefits accrued from early intervention. The scarring effects of early leaving and youth disengagement are well documented in the academic literature.

Finally, it is notable that there was a great degree of consistency in the issues identified by local stakeholders and organisations and those raised by the young people interviewed. Indeed, it was acknowledged by many, that, since the RPA is in statute, we do have a duty to encourage and extend young people's participation in learning until the age of 18, although not through compulsion.

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## Policy recommendations

- The **duties and responsibilities attached to the RPA** should be reassessed to ensure that all groups of young people are supported, regardless of their post-16 destination.
- Much closer alignment between the **Department for Education (DfE), Skills England and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)** is needed, especially in relation to tackling the NEET agenda and to improve young people's access to training and work.
- **Strategic Authorities** should be given statutory responsibility for RPA duties, including tracking all 16-18-year-olds in their area.
- The level of resources given to **LAs** should be increased to enable them to fulfil their current RPA duties.
- **Post-16 destination data collection and sharing methods** must be reviewed to improve tracking, early intervention measures to support young people and data accuracy.
- An assessment of the returns derived from the current post-16 **maths and English** resit model should be commissioned, in order to determine whether

the current policy and its delivery mechanisms provide value for money and meet their original objectives.

- To tackle **youth poverty** and ensure that financial incentives do not drive choices at 16, **Child Benefit** should remain payable to all young people until the age of 18, whatever their status.
- Improvements to **CEIAG provision** must be made, in particular by addressing widespread inconsistencies in accessibility and delivery.
- To reduce post-16 dropout from full-time learning, **post-16 common application procedures** (similar to the university application process) and **attendance performance measures** should be introduced.
- Support must be provided for the expansion of **mental health services** within schools and colleges, and greater support for young people with **SEND** to meet increased demand for services.

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