



## **ESRC FUNDED SEMINAR SERIES**

How to motivate (demotivated) 14-16 year olds,  
with special reference to work related education and training  
London School of Economics 19 September 2003

Aspects of why and how in work-related learning and inclusion: perspectives from  
inspection

September 2003

## **SECONDARY EDUCATION DIVISION**



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‘Aspects of why and how in work-related learning and inclusion: perspectives from inspection’  
John Mattick HMI

### Introduction

1. I am grateful to the LSE and ESRC for an opportunity to share some of the evidence stemming from HMI inspection in this area.
2. Ofsted has taken interest in work related learning of 14-16 year olds over a number of years and has published several times over the past ten years or so. Through these reports HMI have, where necessary, expressed their concerns about achievement, retention in learning, development of social competencies and the preparation of young people to access work and secure for themselves a worthwhile life chance.
3. Evidence from a succession of reports suggests that vocational and work related learning strike a chord with the developing aspirations of many young people in the later stages of secondary education. Where curriculum programmes are well conceived, attuned to aptitude, relevant, astutely managed and accredited by worthwhile qualifications there are quite frequently gains in achievement, social development and – in relation to the main focus of this series of seminars – re-engagement in learning.
4. It would be rash and unfounded for any to assume too much about this: ‘quick fix’ simple-to-implement solutions do not exist. Gains that can be identified call for levels of commitment, clarity of planning and effectiveness of communication comparable to educational development generally. All education providers and planners need to keep in view the clear fact that a vital contribution, that of employers, is voluntary.

### How and when has Ofsted been involved in WRL?

5. In 1996 we published ‘A Review of Vocational GCSE courses<sup>1</sup>’. This survey coincided with our inspection of the GNVQ programmes then being developed. Taken together the surveys provided evaluation across a broad range of qualifications available to young people – although it has to be said that neither reviewed the complete range of approved qualifications that were actually available for use.
6. Among its findings, the Vocational GCSE courses report showed:
  - that schools could successfully mount broadly based courses, in areas such as business studies or media studies, but many struggled to maintain the more specialised programmes in disciplines like horticulture or catering, more could have been accomplished had they collaborated with colleges, but that was rare

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<sup>1</sup> A Review of Vocational GCSE courses Ref: 79/96/NS, {the definition of ‘vocational’ led to a selection of existing titles from the then DfEE approved qualifications list}

- these courses were not ‘easy options’ – an area we investigated quantitatively by comparing pupil attainments and using comparator subjects;
  - that some young people were highly motivated by the vocational strand in their curriculum and achieved their best grade in a vocational subject
  - the young people who were attaining least in school were unlikely to attain markedly better in these courses than in much of what they attempted
  - work experience was a useful contextualising influence through key skills, personal values, economic understanding and citizenship
7. Two years later HMI published ‘Work related aspects of the curriculum in secondary schools<sup>2</sup>’. This report drew together evidence about vocational courses, careers education and guidance, work experience, work related learning in national curriculum subjects, pupils’ economic awareness and evidence about teaching and staff development and the impact of school business partnerships. The report began to address issues of definition, and sought to describe the territory more systematically than had earlier reports.

8. Some of its ideas have become well established

*WRL activities should develop:*

- *An awareness of the diversity of industry and what it does so that pupils gain insights into the relevance and applicability of their work in school to the world of work*
- *High standards in key skills and an understand the significance of them to employers*
- *An understanding of basic economics and how industry contributes to the nation’s prosperity and how the, as future employees, can contribute to the economic success of the country*
- *A knowledge of the range of employment available to them; the prior attainment needed and the skills demanded, to enable them to make informed career choices; and the skills to plan effectively for lifelong learning*
- *An understanding of the day to day expectations made of an employee and their responsibilities and rights in the workplace*

9. The report was clear that:

- almost all secondary schools take steps to prepare young people for adult life, but only about a quarter of schools had a well-coordinated and coherent programme
- Pupils respond enthusiastically, develop sound work habits and understand the world of business
- Active application of key skills in work related contexts improves the clarity with which they are perceived by young people and the regard in which they are held
- Careers education and guidance were satisfactory in only eight in ten schools
- Work experience develops pupils’ understanding of the everyday expectations of employers and of responsibilities in the workplace, often it helps pupils formulate their future career path
- About three quarters of work experience placements are well matched to pupils’ interests and two-thirds provide an appropriate level of challenge

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<sup>2</sup> Work related aspects of the curriculum in secondary schools, Ofsted 1998

10. In parallel with these reports, was a series about the General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQ), and in 1999, Ofsted published 'Part One General National Vocational Qualification Pilot: Final Report<sup>3</sup>'.

11. The report emphasised that:

- ... the (GNVQ) course is highly motivating for the great majority of students taking it
- that between less than 60 per cent and up to 80 per cent of work (according to discipline) was satisfactory
- the ...courses.. had a beneficial impact on students' ability to cope with the demands of independent working (post-16) but worryingly,
- despite the fact that they are well motivated by the course, too many students at both levels (intermediate and foundation) failed to achieve the award or gain unit accreditation.

### **What are the clear directions coming from the evidence?**

12. Taken together these reports suggested that young people are very often motivated by learning that is:

- *vocationally orientated*
- *connected to realistic work settings where*
- *concepts and knowledge are put into real-life effect in day to day activities*
- *skills are exercised and developed further*
- *students can and are expected to take some responsibility for their work*
- *connecting qualifications to work related learning is valid (but is professionally demanding on those who teach and supervise the students)*

13. More recently Ofsted has published 'Extending Work related learning at Key stage 4<sup>4</sup>'. This survey coincided with changes then being made to statutory arrangements for the national curriculum. Through the mechanism of disapplication, students aged 14-16 could discontinue study of any two subjects from science, modern foreign languages and design and technology in order to increase the emphasis in their curriculum on work related learning. The schools visited were chosen from national records of those exercising this flexibility.

14. There was great variety, such as students taking courses at colleges of further education, training providers and extended periods of work experience commencing in Year 11 or being increased from lower level during Year 10. In addition to visits to schools, HMI made a series of follow-up visits accompanied by members of a panel of employers.

15. Ofsted data allows forecasts of achievement outcomes in GCSE (only GCSE at the moment) on the basis of achievement in key stage 3. By collecting data from schools about students' attainment in GCSE, their attendance in years 10 and 11 and key stage 3 tests, analysts portrayed the outcomes for young people and compared them with forecasts.

16. The evidence showed that achievement was above forecast for around a third of the young people, and about half improved their attendance. Many of the young people were lower-

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<sup>3</sup> Part One General National Vocational Qualification Pilot: Final Report, Ofsted ISBN 0113501056

<sup>4</sup> Extending Work related learning at Key stage 4, Ofsted 2001, reference HMI276

attaining at key stage 3, but interestingly (worryingly) some of these had made little progress since key stage 2, or even achieved lower test scores at age 14 than they had attained when aged 115.

17. Although there are no national records of school attendance cross referenced by year group, it is known (from inspection evidence and unauthorised absence records) that attendance declines over years 10 and 11. Hence, a curriculum intervention that reversed this common trend among half the young people is interesting and consistent with the evidence for increased motivation and commitment stemming from well managed work related learning. The report summarised:

- *around half improved their attendance compared with the previous year*
- *around a third attained higher GCSE grades than predicted by their attainment at key stage 3, although most still attained well below the national average*
- *a minority completed a vocational qualification, helpful to them in securing progression into further education and training*
- *around six in ten continued into full-time education after 16*
- *many improved their communication skills in speaking and listening (though writing remained weak)*
- *social skills and self-confidence often improved and*
- *their understanding of career opportunities and pathways improved*

18. The Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) was unavailable then. This data may now provide a real insight into the extent that all young people progress over time and shed light on instances where their progress stalls or reverses (though the contributory factors and underlying causes will need separate investigation).

19. In the last few months Ofsted has published ‘Key Stage 4: toward a flexible curriculum<sup>6</sup>’. This report addressed curriculum broadly and in doing so looked at similarities that might exist when the curriculum becomes more flexible and provides greater opportunity for young people to develop in areas of strength, in courses containing several associated subjects and when their learning focused strongly on basic skills – ‘consolidation’. It saw in the finesse of some key stage 4 curriculum planning in schools, opportunities created where learners with aptitude in languages or performing arts or science increased the proportion of their curriculum in these fields, and achieved, sometimes strongly, above prediction.

20. Relatively small quantities of pupil-level achievement data broadly confirmed previous findings, that well configured work placements do indeed contribute to re-engagement and improving performance. Interestingly, the pupils whose curriculum developed through ‘consolidation’ (essentially additional learning in basic subjects) did not appear to attain better than expected.

21. This report also looked at the provision for some very needy young people who, far from flourishing at school, were disconnecting, being wilfully elusive – possibly condoned in this – and falling away in attendance or off rolls entirely, some 10 000 each year.

22. The young persons involved, though not attending school, perhaps not even having a school place, in some instances might be provided for by colleges, training providers or a

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<sup>5</sup> The basis for better-than-forecast achievement is the DfES Autumn Package.

<sup>6</sup> Key Stage 4: towards a flexible curriculum, June 2003, HMI 517

wide range of services in the voluntary sector. Some of these young persons are disadvantaged by pressures over which they have little or no influence as evidenced by entitlement to free school meals, mobility, additional learning needs or the circumstances causing them to live in public care. Some may be in the orbit of the youth justice system or be young parents or carers.

23. The report has much to say about this, and work related learning may be part of some solutions There are unresolved issues in this field about curriculum, regulation, teaching and learning and accountability. The field seems to have received little research attention and the need to clarify and develop practice may be largely unmet.

#### **What contributory factors are there?**

24. The report shows that effective practice leading to the gains described for a sizeable proportion of the young people needs a group of factors simultaneously influential in planning:

- *Work-related learning is part of the curriculum as a whole*
- *co-ordinated opportunities for WRL are provided through subject teaching and vocational courses, links with local industry, careers education and work experience.*
- *And connected with single or successive work placements in which learning objectives are defined in advance.*
- *Well-designed programmes of extended work-related learning offer nationally recognised vocational courses leading to qualifications alongside the National Curriculum*
- *The programmes use disapplication judiciously, maintaining continuity in the teaching of core subjects and in pupils' general participation in school life. Learning from work experience is recorded and recognised and related to learning in school.*
- *The programmes stress the development of key skills and personal attributes. Work placements encourage personal effectiveness and provide opportunities for pupils to take responsibility and show enterprise.*
- *Careers guidance is augmented by mentoring. Learning targets are set, reviewed with pupils and progress reported to parents.*

#### **What issues did these reports raise?**

There are probably seven that might top an agenda for the time being:

##### **1. Awards and accreditation:**

25. The cornerstone of qualifications system for 14-16 year old students is the GCSE, and the range of areas has been, and continues to be extended, adding to their vocational relevance; (eight new titles in 2002, two in 2003, and probably others annually until 2005)
26. A broad range of national vocational qualifications (NVQ) and other vocationally related qualifications (VRQ) exist and a sample of these is accessible to students pre-16. It is desirable that the range available pre-16 be extended to meet aptitude, interest and progression opportunities, in part because the current range is far from representative or coherent and may have progression barriers as well.

27. At present there is a strong implied message about the social worth of GCSE versus other qualifications stemming from the fact that the former are reported publicly in school performance tables, whereas the latter have no comparative points score associated with them. Clearly in the eyes of pupils, parents and employers this is anomalous and likely to influence the degree of commitment to achievement in one accreditation system rather than another.
28. Harmonising awarding systems is technically tricky, but a more flexible curriculum that allows or encourages greater diversity would seem to need it.
29. Changing awarding systems also might influence what defines a school 'subject'. Thus we now have science and applied science, ICT and applied ICT, and engineering as a member of the design and technology group of subjects. Flexibility in the curriculum seems certain to influence or perhaps 'liberalise' the definition of studying a particular subject area.
30. It is, of course, vital that the direction of development is through the diversification of the definition of 'subject' as this is the long-established basis for curriculum and for induction into learning. Brigading together disciplines deemed 'vocational' as if separate and distinct from all subjects will merely serve to cement difference rather than bring home clearly to young people the relevance to doing of learning. Arguably, in a knowledge based economy learning and doing grow more closely together.

## **2. Planning by schools, colleges, training providers and voluntary sector**

31. Each of the reports cited argues that thorough planning is essential if learners generally, and especially those who need different learning opportunities are to thrive and 'unlock potential they didn't even realise they possessed'.
32. This is time consuming and relies on relationships between schools, colleges, training providers and voluntary sector partners. Objectives for courses, programmes and events need to be clear. Students benefit when their learning has clear goals, toward approved qualifications that have currency. It is likely that disadvantaged young people are more mobile, locally or regionally, and the security of valid transferable qualifications is essential and planning must recognise this.
33. There are issues about pedagogy and learning styles. It is clear that individuals flourish, or sometimes languish in part according to the approaches to learning available for them. The needs of disconnected young people probably stand in need of analysis, and professional exchange parallel to those prevalent in relation to learning and training generally.
34. The planning need to be astute in listening to what the young people say themselves about what they are hoping for and need; there has to be good communication with parents, including where necessary an encouragement to them to value education more. Plans need to be on place to celebrate achievement and build self-esteem and confidence.
35. Part of the planning requires agreement over costs. In general provision for more needy young people incurs greater expense. Sources need to be identified and (often) bids submitted or other episodic funding sources accessed, such as SRB, ESF, or one of the

DfES programmes. In turn this requires lead-in times so that, particularly, voluntary sector and private training providers can plan in advance.

36. There are also questions about health and safety. Monitoring for quality and necessary feedback to students themselves, their parents and the senior managers and governors of schools and other organisations holding a duty of care for young people are essentials of adequate provision.

### **3. Tutorial support and advice**

37. If the development that enables greater flexibility for learners can lead to higher achievement and better retention (where provision and aptitude coincide) then the reverse can be loss of breadth and balance. Reducing breadth and balance excessively may well lead to a position where a student narrows the choices available at points of transition through having neglected learning and qualifications in an area that turns out to be necessary or desirable.

38. Ensuring maximum choice is available at transition needs strong careers guidance at all stages. In a sense, this is part of planning, but its importance needs to be underscored.

39. Evidence suggests that learning mentors can, where their work is timely and well focused, contribute strongly to engagement by young people. Some speak with very strong conviction about the importance of work related learning to the most needy and vulnerable young persons. As one said, ...(without this)... ‘ these young people have nothing to lose...’ they are on a path to dependency and membership of a non-engaged underclass.

### **4. Aptitude and relevance**

40. Our report on Key Stage 4 highlighted aspects of high quality curriculum provision. Features of the best practice were:

- a policy for the key stage which reconciled competing demands
- clarity and depth of information about courses for pupils and parents, supported by well-integrated and timely careers education and guidance
- successful efforts to build links between the subjects which pupils take, so that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts
- a deliberate approach to the provision of work-related learning for all
- strong connections between Key Stage 4 and education post-16, provided in the school or elsewhere
- highly effective organisation of extra-curricular activities, including study support, to complement and enhance mainstream courses
- good understanding of pupils’ attitudes and prior attainment, enabling activities to be matched to pupils’ needs, capabilities and ambitions.

41. The report also pointed out that few schools were satisfied that the curriculum they were offering was meeting all the needs of all their pupils. The main issues identified by schools were:

- striking the balance between breadth and depth of subject coverage

- increasing the amount of choice pupils have, while ensuring that they succeed in the core subjects
  - how to improve basic skills among those whose skills are inadequate for learning, work and daily life
  - improving differentiation in teaching where subjects, such as history, are taken by relatively small numbers of pupils of widely differing ability
  - maintaining and improving the quality of subject teaching in a period of recruitment difficulty.
42. One of its more fascinating findings concerned good levels of performance in some schools associated with option systems that allowed or encouraged pupils to take a combination of linked subjects, matched to their aptitudes and preferences, within curriculum areas such as humanities, expressive and performing arts, modern foreign languages and technology<sup>7</sup>. Popular combinations were English literature and drama and clusters of technology subjects, including ICT and electronics. Smaller numbers of pupils took three separate sciences or two modern foreign languages, or statistics alongside mathematics.
43. Pupils taking associated subjects in this way tended to show high levels of motivation and to approach their courses with purpose and enthusiasm. They valued the chance to work to their strengths and to see links between learning in similar fields. Analysis of GCSE results from the Ofsted database and from some of the survey schools suggests that performance may be higher than predicted by National Curriculum tests at Key Stage 3.
44. A broadly similar finding emerged from the earlier report on work related learning. Evidence here (albeit from a fairly modest number of student records in both published reports showed that up to a third of the pupils following an extended work-related course gained higher point scores in GCSE examinations than predicted from their attainment in National Curriculum tests at the end of Key Stage 3.<sup>8</sup> This was the case even though a proportion of their time was devoted to courses that carried no GCSE equivalent points.
45. There is no agreed basis on which to compare the attainments of pupils whose Key Stage 4 curriculum is modified by disapplication with those of similar groups of pupils or with pupils at Key Stage 4 as a whole. Pupils following an extended work-related learning programme take fewer GCSE courses – typically three or four fewer because of the time allocated to work away from their school – and some of the courses taken, as already mentioned, do not attract GCSE-equivalent points
46. Overall, the evidence from these two exercises indicated that increases in the proportion of curriculum time that pupils devote to an area where they have aptitude or is perceived by them as relevant to their ambitions and future, associated with higher than predicted achievement.
47. Of course, there is a balance to be struck in this. On one side higher achievement set against a diverse range of subjects studied; on the other, a risk that, if carried to excess, a

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<sup>7</sup> at this time science, design and technology and modern foreign languages could be disappplied in key stage four. All three could be set aside to enable young people to study work related learning, and two, (not science) to allow increased study of an area of strength (~ aptitude) or fod consolidation (~basic skills)

<sup>8</sup> This comparison is made against attainment by their age group in all schools, rather than similar schools. It makes no allowance for the reduced number of GCSE examinations entered by these pupils.

young person might narrow the field they study to a point where their future options and routes for progression are narrowed to their disadvantage.

## 5. Collaboration

### a. Collaboration with employers

48. Emphasis on work related learning often entails extended periods of work experience. In good practice these periods are systematically connected to courses, units of courses and to the achievement of qualifications.
49. In well configured work experiences, young people may gain strongly in social skills and the interpersonal competences needed to be effective in a work role, they gain insights into applications of their learning to 'doing' at work and acquire an understanding of how industry and business organisations structure, communicate and proceed in going about their enterprise.
50. It is vital that all parties recognise that a key contributor to this, the employer(s) does so on a voluntary basis. In the better practice work placements of various formats are linked to learning as firmly as they are to the development and consolidation of skills, including employability skills.
51. Employers are nearly always generous with their time and give willingly through oversight, mentoring and supervision. They are willing to develop work experience further provided there is time, briefing and necessary information, and many see benefits to company personnel through engagement, in areas such as awareness of the interests and capabilities of young people and knowledge about the school curriculum, occasionally opportunities for company staff to grow their own skills in supervising others.

*By making joint visits with employers, HMI gained evidence of views between one employer and another, with school co-ordinators and work-related learning manager. These suggested there needed to be a framework to guide work-related learning and provide a rationale, aims and objectives for it. Employers saw extended work-related learning as distinct from the long-established one- or two-week work experience placements taken by most pupils during Key Stage 4.*

*To be successful, extended work related learning needs:*

- *always to have a clear focus on structured learning, a progression of experiences and be devised to introduce pupils to vocational skills;*
- *to contribute to established forms of accreditation and encourage attributes toward lifelong learning*
- *thorough preparation by pupils before a placement begins, including careers education and guidance, some understanding of the company*
- *Pupils to record and substantiate what they learn and be clear about the key and vocational skills they have experienced, consolidated or developed.*

*Employers point out that;*

- *assessment of the pupils' learning and progress requires specialists*
- *there is willingness to plan a succession of experiences for the pupil*
- *this can be of benefit to company junior supervisory staff as well*
- *there are potential difficulties in particular areas of many industries and broadly in some when the employer recruits almost wholly at Level 3 or above. In these environments it is difficult for employers to provide experiences that match pupils' current stage of learning and development, or to ensure that health and safety requirements are met.*

## **b. With colleges of further education and training providers**

52. HMI are currently surveying the Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP). This DfES initiative funds the formation of partnerships between schools, colleges and training providers. It allows young people to experience vocational and/or work related learning within a broadened curriculum in Key Stage 4. The programme is about mainstream provision and hence any effects it has on reducing the likelihood that young people will disengage from learning will be indirect rather than its core purposes, which are to support the introduction of new GCSEs in vocational subjects, enable access to a range of national vocational qualifications and technical certificates, and support opportunities to learn in colleges or training providers as well as at school.
53. The early evidence is by and large positive. Young people value the vocational range that a strong FE college can provide, or the work relatedness of a course with a training provider; their attendance is often good and for some an improvement over their previous record. The GCSEs are taken up by pupils of all abilities although there appears to be some variation by subject. The social learning resulting from working in a college where adult mores are the norm is usually associated with sound development and responsible attitudes. The sense of belonging to a wider 'learning community' than one's individual school has important messages in itself.
54. There are issues that are still to be addressed. These include:
  - early information, that is timely and insightful for young people and their parents, enabling choices to be made in good time, usually in Year 9;
  - agreements across partnerships over essentials such as time allocations, days of the week when particular courses will be mounted, and the time needed for each;
  - synchronisation of parts of the timetable so that competing commitments do not arise to undermine a young person's progress in either school or college courses
  - protocols over sharing information about young people, their prior attainment and its significance for planning, teaching and assessment;
  - study support and, fairly often, matters about pedagogy appropriate to 14-16 year old learners;
  - study skills and how young persons can effectively benefit from the work related elements that are structurally part of most of the IFP arrangements;
  - the extent to which internet resources can be used, as they are now, or developed and improved for the future;
  - Support for transition, as young people in the Year 11 now (some 45 000) will need to prepare for and soon make, decisions about their intentions for progression after 16.

## **6. Careers education**

55. It is clear that increasing curriculum flexibility might contribute to learning gains as young people for a greater proportion of the curriculum study courses they have elected and, if provision is good, that match their aptitudes, capabilities and ambitions.
56. Equally, there are risks that stem from excessive allocations of time to a single pursuit that leads to a narrow range, unbalanced and over time, attainment in a narrow field of qualifications that cut off rather than enable choice and progression post-16.

57. Where careers guidance is good, young people with their tutors and parents, and careers education specialists can construct a portfolio well suited to their ambitions:

*Lucy is on work experience placement with a long-established company of travel agents. She aims to be a member of cabin crew for an airline in the future. Her curriculum choices, alongside English, mathematics, science, PSE/RE/PE are: geography (because of its broad relevance to her interests and because she is 'quite good at it', French, because international travel will necessitate competence in this, and a double award GCSE in leisure and tourism, for its immediate relevance to the industry. Her work experience is informing coursework in the GCSE.*

58. This is in sharp contrast to provision for some of the young people, whose situations were described in Key Stage 4: toward a more flexible curriculum. Here we focused on the disadvantaged circumstances for young people taking excessive amounts of work experience without progression and unconnected with qualifications. We also voiced our worries over the more extremely disadvantaged who had no school place, were chronic non-attenders or had been through mobility or other causes, outside the education system. For these, the transition to adulthood and a career where they will thrive is very precarious.
59. Good careers education, objective, independent and timely is therefore essential. It is needed throughout secondary phase, and critically during Year 9, across key stage 4 and for the transition to post-16. We might ask ourselves if the internet, e-learning and related resources are yet as complete, robust and up to date as they need to be.

## **7. Study skills**

60. Clearly these are important for all young people. They are at a premium in situations where the learner is expected to take responsibility for some of their own work and progress and in awarding schemes where skills are to be demonstrated. Where learning is, in part at a workplace, the learner needs to be an active learner, taking responsibility for their work, and develop the capability to use time and opportunity productively.
61. It is highly desirable that young people pursuing work related programmes are well placed to frame and ask questions, make notes of replies, observe activities and processes and, through discussion in the workplace, understand how organisations operate, communicate and maintain their effectiveness. In our evidence it is clear that where young people have these capabilities and use them their understanding improves, the pace of learning quickens and the evidence of achievement in portfolios and other records of learning and progress are more likely to be sound.

## Discussion

The evidence and related arguments I have presented are largely about the agenda for raising achievement, boosting social competences and sustaining engagement. There is a definite urgency about this particularly in relation to vulnerable or disaffected young people or those who are rejecting education. Around 60 000 leave compulsory schooling with no GCSE qualification, around 8500 are permanently excluded, mainly in secondary phase, particularly during or close to Key Stage 4, and some 10 000 disappear from school rolls. These figures relate to a single age group. Even allowing for some overlap in the categories of data, the scale of this is worrying. If we are not worried about it, then we should be.

Young people who are out of school, or whose trajectory is consistently toward that situation, often know they have missed or are continuing to miss opportunities. They understand how quickly the doorways to career pathways either close or become more difficult to unlock. They see in work related learning a fresh and first-hand opportunity to engage and progress.

Work related learning and vocational qualifications associated with them can make a strong contribution to raising achievement and sustaining, or re-energising progress in learning. They do this by connecting the development of knowledge, understanding and skills being acquired from school, college and training provider courses to a young person's aspirations and possibly their ambitions for the immediate future.

Where formulated well, work-related learning enables young people to see in daily practice the application of skills and competences, and to recognise within an application the inescapable need for adjustments from what is learned in school - in short, the beginnings of experience about an area of work.

It is from the last of these elements that the influence of work experience itself comes. Young people (confirmed through interview and surveys repeatedly) place a high value on work experience. They perceive it almost as part of the passage to young adulthood, akin to learning to drive or progress toward the right to vote.

Although rarely articulated by young people, including the neediest and disadvantaged, work is seen as more than a means to make a living. The social identity of work groups, the sense of 'being a AAA' and acquiring the values, routines and social standing by the accomplishments of a group are strongly connected dimensions. In this sense, vocational learning is about developing the capacity to serve others and assuming a role in society.

The National Skills Task Force more around three years ago forecast some occupations in decline, others flourishing with a difference between them being the level of skill needed to be proficient. The skills White Paper in July stresses some of the directions and focused on the need to strengthen learning opportunities and incentives for adults, while also arguing for an increased role for modern apprenticeships and leadership by sector skills councils. Furthermore, transformation goes on continuously in many areas, occupations once classed perhaps as 'skilled trades' transform into 'higher technician', some become 'associate professional' and might require graduate level skills for competence.

Striving to ensure that young people possess the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in a changing economy is far from easy and work related learning might well contribute.

John Mattick HMI  
September 2003