JRF Adult and Tertiary Education and Poverty

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JRF Adult and Tertiary Education and Poverty – a review

Carlo Raffo, Diane Harris, Alan Dyson, Cate Goodlad, Steve Jones and Julian Skyrme

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1. Introduction

The report is an examination of the research evidence on how and how far adult and tertiary education can lift poor young people and adults out of poverty. In undertaking this review the authors were guided by JRF’s definition of poverty as a general lack of sufficient material resources for young people and adults to meet their needs. In addition, the report recognises that access to material resources is influenced by complex power dynamics that reflect aspects of young people’s and adults’ agency – that is, what they feel they can do (alone or with others), and what is under their control. It is also about those factors that appear to constrain that agency, that are beyond their control and that reflect the structuring influences of society more generally. The report also recognises that poverty manifests itself in the context of a complex web of social characteristics – gender, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation in particular – which can act to moderate or to worsen the effects of poverty. While it is beyond the scope of this report to deal with these factors in detail, strategies for tackling poverty through education must be accompanied by and shaped in the light of strategies for tackling other forms of disadvantage.

This report focuses on how adult and tertiary education might enable poor young people (16-24 years of age) and adults (over 24) to access, progress and achieve in post compulsory education so that they can progress into good-quality employment and gain the material resources required to take them out of poverty. In particular the report focuses on those economically poor young people who are not in employment, education or training (so-called ‘NEETs’) and those adults living in poverty who may be in and/or out of work. Based on a review of the appropriate research literatures the report details some of the ways in which adult and tertiary education might develop policies and practices to enable poor young people and adults gain particular levels of employment that are commensurate with a living wage – that is, one which makes possible sustainable living. The report will not focus on other forms of formal and informal resource that might aid poverty reduction. In terms of a general anti-poverty strategy this report should therefore be viewed as complementary to other areas of social and economic policy that might improve access to resources (both formal and informal) for individuals and families. In addition the report does not explicitly deal with how post compulsory education can impact on other aspects of social mobility and social justice that are not central to poverty alleviation.

At the same time, the report will document the changing shape and nature of the labour market and its ramifications for education and training both at local and national levels. In particular it will document some of the mis-match between the education pathways that are notionally available and the ways in which these are actually viewed and used by employers in the labour market, particularly in relation to pre-selection recruitment decisions.

The report then examines some of the barriers
2. What do we know about educational qualifications and wider benefits of learning which appear to help take people out of poverty?

2.1 Educational Qualifications
2.1.1 General qualifications

The Labour Force Survey examines the relationship between employment and qualifications. The evidence demonstrates that the lower a young person’s or adult’s qualifications, the more likely they are to be unemployed but wanting paid work. The graphs also highlight how around a quarter of all people aged 25 to 29 with no GCSEs at grade C or above lacked but wanted paid work in 2010 compared to one in fifteen of those with degrees or equivalent. In addition the lower a young adult’s qualifications,

that economically poor young people and adults face in relation to engaging with adult and tertiary education. It starts by exploring psychological, cognitive and resource based factors that appear to impinge on the extent to which young people and adults access and progress through adult and tertiary educational programmes. It also examines policy and practice, and in particular related resource issues, that structure opportunities in such ways that might generate additional barriers for young people and adults. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the report examines how current configurations of the labour market, and in particular the low skills/low wage sector of the market most closely associated with poor young people and adults, can provide a strong disincentive to invest in, and sustain engagement with, post compulsory education.

Understanding these barriers then provides the foundation for examining a combination of labour market and post compulsory policy and practice interventions that widen participation and appear most successful in creating sustainable transition pathways between education and employment.

In the final part of the report, powerful strategies for adult and tertiary education are suggested that emanate from a synthesis of the research review. These strategies then act as framing device for developing recommendations for policy and practice interventions. These recommendations focus on assisting disadvantaged adults and young people access adult and tertiary education more readily in order to progress into work and out of poverty.
the more likely they are to be in low-paid work. So, for example, around half of all employees aged 25 to 29 with no GCSEs at grade C or above were paid less than £7 per hour in 2010 compared to one in ten of those with degrees or equivalent. This data, therefore, suggest that staying on in education post 16 and acquiring various credentials and qualifications can, in general terms, be beneficial for acquiring better paid employment.

The National Adult Learner Participation Survey (NIACE, 2013) suggests that adults from lower socio-economic groups are far less likely to have engaged in learning (formal and informal) since leaving full-time education compared to those from higher socio-economic groups. The report suggests:

Around one-half of those in the highest classes (52% of ABs; 47% of C1s) report taking part in learning during the previous three years, compared with 31% of skilled manual workers (C2s) and 24% of unskilled workers and people on limited incomes (DEs).… levels of participation are also significantly higher for those in employment (both full and part time) compared to those who are either registered unemployed or not currently seeking work (including retired people).… Those people currently participating in learning are much more likely to engage in further study in the next three years (81%) compared to those who have not engaged in learning since leaving full-time education (14%) (NIACE, 2013: 2-4).

2.1.2 Higher education qualifications

A report by Walker and Zhu (2013), commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), provides evidence on the impact of higher education on lifetime net earnings. The report focuses on the comparison in earnings (and employment) between those individuals who have a first degree (and 2 + A-levels) with those with 2 + A-levels and no higher education degree. It utilises the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) data in conjunction with the Labour Force Survey. The report estimates that the return to a degree relative to 2 + A-levels but no degree is 23% for men and 31% for women. The report also estimates that the returns for a good degree (first or upper second) are significantly larger than for lower degree classes (by £76k for men and £85k for women, on average). However, Brynin (2013) highlights the considerable overlap in the distributions of hourly pay amongst graduates and those with only A-levels. He reports that in 2008, 38% of all employees were in occupations with no clear demarcations between graduate and non-graduate qualifications. Brynin (2013) agrees that in most cases a degree will be of benefit, but there is an approximately 25% chance that a graduate will receive a below-average wage for all non-manual employees, and a 50% chance of receiving an average wage for all non-manual employees. However Conlon and Patrigiani’s study (2011), based on large data sets derived from tax records, suggested that average graduate returns can be misleading as there are variations around the average depending on the student’s age, institution, course and degree classification.

2.1.3 Vocational qualifications

A report by Conlon et al. (2011) for BIS points to important links between intermediate and low level qualifications and employment and earnings. The evidence shows some positive employment and earnings returns for the majority of qualifications gained in adulthood, and contains some interesting findings around the circumstances in which positive returns may occur.

2.1.3.1 Vocational qualifications - impact on earnings and employment

The Conlon et al. report (ibid) highlights how in general terms all vocational qualifications are associated with increased likelihood of being in employment. Those with an NVQ at Level 3 are 15 percentage points more likely to be in employment and for Level 2 the figure is 13 percentage points, compared to those with lower qualification levels. In addition the report documents a wage gain for many but not all vocational qualifications, and in particular an average 20% wage gain from possessing a BTEC level 3, 16% for RSA level 3, and 10% for NVQ level 3, compared to similar individuals qualified to level 2. In addition the report notes that the wage gain is lower for Level 2 with 12% for BTEC, 16% for RSA, and 1% for NVQ Level 2, compared to similar individuals with qualifications below level 2.

The report also points to strong positive returns to apprenticeships, with 22% for a Level 3 apprenticeship and 12% for an apprenticeship at Level 2. In addition the lifetime benefits associated with the acquisition of apprenticeships at Level 2 and 3 stand at between £48,000 and £74,000 for Level 2 and between £77,000 and £117,000 for Level 3 apprenticeships. Although these are signification findings the number of apprenticeships available to young people is small in comparison with other forms of learning and training. For example in 2010/11 the number of 16-19 year old enrolled on apprenticeship was 116,800 (Barnes, 2011) out of a total of 1,260,000 (Government Statistical Service, 2012) enrolled in further education and training, making up just over 9% of the total.

Although these data point to some generally positive links between vocational qualifications and earnings, many lower level vocational qualifications have limited impact on recruitment and selection decisions (see Keep, 2009, Keep and James, 2010), and generate very limited, nil or even in some cases negative effects on subsequent wage levels. This point is reiterated by Greenwood et al. (2007) who suggest that NVQ2 does not succeed in providing a means for individuals to secure higher wages, not even for individuals who leave school with few or no other qualifications. Roe et al. (2006) also report that the NVQ is not a consistent generator of employee benefits due to the fact that approximately 75% of people who gain an NVQ stayed in the same job at the same pay. As Wolf notes, “the staple offer of apprenticeship is small in comparison with other forms of learning and training. For example in 2010/11 the number of 16-19 year old enrolled on apprenticeship was 116,800 (Barnes, 2011) out of a total of 1,260,000 (Government Statistical Service, 2012) enrolled in further education and training, making up just over 9% of the total.

2.1.3.2 Route and age of acquisition

The Conlon et al. (2011) report points out that there no longer appears to be any significant difference in the returns to NVO
qualifications at Level 2 or Level 3 according to whether they are gained in the workplace or through school/college, though theory and other evidence continue to support the greater value of employer directed training. In addition the returns to NVQ qualifications at Level 2 and Level 3 when gained before the age of 25 appear positive, and of a similar magnitude to other vocational qualifications at those levels. According to the report lower overall return estimates to NVQs may reflect the fact that a large proportion are taken by those who are over 30, when the estimated earnings returns are not as good.

### 2.1.3.3 Sector and occupation

The Conlon report also highlights how returns to NVQs can vary significantly by sector. For example evidence suggests that there are more substantial returns for men in the traditional industries of manufacturing and construction and for women in office or service sectors. The report also highlights how there appears to be significant variation by occupation, with higher returns found in occupations such as men working in skilled trades and machine operative occupations and for women working in personal services. This is quantified by McIntosh (2002) who reports that men earn positive returns to craft-based qualifications e.g. Advanced Craft City and Guilds (7%) and Craft City and Guilds (6%), while women can earn positive returns to higher level RSA qualifications of up to 10%. In addition, professional teaching and nursing qualifications assist both men and women, but women benefit to a greater extent.

### 2.1.3.4 Some implications

Overall, then, the situation with regards to vocational qualifications is both simple and complex. It is simple in that qualifications by and large increase wages and chances of employment. For those who have few prior qualifications, gaining qualifications is likely to offer protection against the risks of labour market vulnerability and falling into poverty. There are good reasons, therefore, for encouraging such individuals to continue to learn. However, the situation is complex because not all qualifications are equally valuable, even for this group. There are differences by type and level of qualification (with NVQ level 2 showing relatively poor returns overall), but also by gender, by age, and by employment sector and occupation.

It follows that there is a danger that learners will pursue apparently credible qualifications that in practice have only limited value in the labour market. Moreover, this danger is exacerbated in the case of those learners with fewest prior qualifications who are therefore most at risk in the labour market. In an effort to engage those learners with further study, policy in recent years has emphasised participation per se, most obviously in the raising of the participation age from 16 to 18. However, some researchers argue that this results in learners at greatest risk being funnelled into low level programmes, possibly offered in segregated institutions, and offering limited opportunities for progression (Atkins, 2010; Fuller and Unwin, 2011). There is therefore a dilemma about how to reconcile the need to engage such learners in accessible provision and qualifications, without at the same time effectively diverting them into dead ends.

One option might be to identify and disallow those qualifications which seem to have least tradable value. However, different qualifications work for different groups in different ways and, as Greenwood et al (2007) point out, the reasons why this should be so are not fully understood. A better solution, therefore, might be a careful matching of qualifications pathways to the characteristics of needs and individuals coupled with a careful matching of the qualifications on offer to the demands of the local labour market.

Beyond this, the solution lies in ensuring that breadth of learning and consequent opportunities for progression are built into whatever is on offer to learners. The Wolf review of vocational education (Wolf, 2011), for instance, argues for a shift of focus from the design of particular qualifications to a consideration of the programmes with which learners engage. The review argues amongst other things that these should avoid being narrowly-occupational, include work on basic skills where learners have not achieved adequately in the past, and offer clear opportunities for progression. Similarly, both Wolf and Fuller and Unwin (2011) argue for maintaining close links between vocational and general education so that vocational programmes do not sacrifice the development of broader skills and knowledge which facilitate progression in the longer term.

There are also implications for the involvement of employers in developing a system of vocational qualifications. As the Wolf review (2011) argues, such involvement is essential for ensuring the relevance and tradability of qualifications. However, if relevance comes to mean narrowly-conceptualised qualifications, it may actually work against learners’ ability to trade these in the labour market as skills demands change or as they seek different employment opportunities. As Greenwood et al. (2007) point out:

> We cannot assume that the processes set up to enable employers to influence vocational qualification development and provision will automatically ensure that the vocational training system responds effectively to the needs of individuals and employers, and produces qualifications that have good economic value. (p.50)

The implication is that what is needed is a system in which employers are involved, but where this involvement is on the basis of a consideration of longer term labour market needs, and where employers are in dialogue with providers and awarding bodies who can consider the needs of learners in the longer term.

As the Wolf review (2011) makes clear most of the levers for creating a system of vocational qualifications that offers real opportunities for progression to vulnerable learners are either directly or indirectly in the hands of central government. Whilst providers can develop appropriate courses and guidance to learners, through its powers of regulation and funding, government sets out standards for learners’ programmes, ensures that providers are linked to each other in ways that open up meaningful pathways, and sets the terms and conditions for employer and provider involvement in the vocational qualification system.
2.1.4 Basic Skills Qualifications

As intimated in the previous section research evidence documents the links between a lack of basic skills and unemployment. For example, according to Bynner (2008) there is a strong tendency for young people with poor basic skills to leave education at the earliest opportunity and to have patchy labour market experiences with frequent stretches out of employment. In addition, DeCoulon, Marcenaro-Gutierrez and Vignoles (2007) investigated the employment impacts of basic skills for men and women. Results suggested that an increase in basic literacy skills was associated with a 3.5 percentage points higher probability of being in employment by age 34 for women. However there were no such increased employment probabilities associated with an increase in numeracy skills. What they found for men was in fact the opposite. An increase in men’s numeracy skills was associated with a two percentage point higher probability of being in employment by age 34 but no such increases with associated improved literacy skills.

2.2 Wider Benefits of Learning

Although an important focus for economically poor young people and adults is on gaining qualifications, there is growing evidence to suggest that engagement with learning, particularly for adults, is associated with wider psychological, social and health benefits that taken together can support improved labour market transitions and enhanced resilience. Much of this work has been classified around market transitions and enhanced resilience. Julia Preece (2014) argues that participation in learning tends to enhance social capital, by helping develop social competences, extending social networks, and promoting shared norms and tolerance of others (Schuller et al. 2004). A survey of over 600 literacy and numeracy learners in Scotland over time showed significant increases among females and older people in the proportion going out regularly; greater clarity about future intentions on community involvement, and a rise in the number who could identify someone they could turn to for help. The learners were particularly likely to have extended their ‘bridging’ networks, through contacts with tutors, other staff and fellow students (Tett and Maclachlan, 2007). Hammond and Feinstein (2006), using longitudinal data, found that learners were more likely to report gains in self-efficacy and sense of agency (perceived control over important life choices) than non-learners.

However, there is also evidence about how new ‘networks’ of experience or bridging social capital can undermine a sense of the bonding capital that may exist for individuals. For example in relation to HE, Stuart et al. (2008) warn of the danger in some current initiatives of ignoring the cultural, social and educational capital that disadvantaged groups might already possess. Thus, rather than acknowledging and trying to build on this, HE can at times impose its ‘own’ set of values, with scant regard to the groups’ existing strengths. In turn, HE’s impacts upon individuals may lead to tensions within the community or group if traditional values and culture appear to be undermined. For example in a study by McCabe et al (2013) that examined social networks, poverty and ethnicity, complex systems such as health, benefits and education were often negotiated through the support of networks. For example many different ethnic communities organised themselves collectively to deliver their own support and advice services because they did not always feel well-served or welcomed by mainstream agencies. Some turned to family and community connections for advice – though the information given was not always reliable.

Evidence on the health benefits of adult learning has demonstrated an important link between individuals’ participation in learning during adulthood and subsequent changes in their health and health behaviours (Hammond and Feinstein 2005). In particular, there is evidence that adult learning is associated with better self-reported health status (ibid). Furthermore, adult learning can transform well-being, optimism, efficacy and self-rated health during adulthood (Hammond and Feinstein, 2006). These improved health related factors have been shown to improve adults’ engagement with the labour market and hence assist with taking people out of poverty (Sabates, 2008).

2.2.2 Social capital

Evidence suggests that employers are seeking to recruit employees who demonstrate positive attitudes and dispositions towards work, particularly in relation to change and social interaction with both customers and co-workers (Keep and James, 2010). Research by Hammond and Feinstein (2005) investigated the links between participation in adult learning and self-efficacy, particularly for adults who had low levels of achievement at school. They found that achievement in adult education builds self-efficacy, which in turn reduces resistance to further participation. They suggest that learning on the job can build self-efficacy if learning is valued by the organisation. They also point out the importance of background and life circumstances in shaping the impacts of adult learning.

2.2.1.2 Confidence.

According to Vorhaus et al. (2009), there is strong evidence on the positive impact of adult literacy and numeracy on learners’ confidence. However it is less clear whether improved confidence is a prerequisite of learning progress and whether this translates neatly into improved labour market transitions. Julia Preece (2014) argues that community based education can impact upon self-esteem leading to more self-confidence and a greater ability to take control of lives. She also states that it is through lifelong and life-wide learning opportunities that there is a better chance of reducing dependency.

2.2.1.3 Health

Evidence on the health benefits of adult learning has demonstrated an important link between individuals’ participation in learning during adulthood and subsequent changes in their health and health behaviours (Hammond and Feinstein 2005). In particular, there is evidence that adult learning is associated with better self-reported health status (ibid). Furthermore, adult learning can transform well-being, optimism, efficacy and self-rated health during adulthood (Hammond and Feinstein, 2006). These improved health related factors have been shown to improve adults’ engagement with the labour market and hence assist with taking people out of poverty (Sabates, 2008).

2.2.1.1 Self-efficacy

Evidence suggests that employers are seeking to recruit employees who demonstrate positive attitudes and...
More general evidence for the wider benefits of learning was also documented by the London Economics and Ipsos MORI report (2013):

Learners were also asked for their views on the wider benefits of learning. Four in five (81%) said they had gained self-confidence or self-esteem following the training episode and 72% had made new friends or taken part in voluntary work. Three quarters (76%) said that it had helped them make better use of their spare time and 30% mentioned that the course had enabled them to assist their children with school work. There were some gender differences (especially in relation to the ability to assist children with school work) although in general these are relatively small. Only 5% of learners indicated that the course had had none of the wider economic benefits presented.

Three quarters of learners (75%) indicated that they now had a better idea of what to do with their lives, and 66% stated that their quality of life had improved as a result of undertaking the education and training activity. Training appeared to provide some degree of additional direction to younger learners (aged 19-24) with 83% stating that this was the case, while 73% of younger learners indicated that the learning had improved their quality of life. (London Economics and Ipsos MORI, 2013: 10)

An important reason for examining developments and changes in the labour market over time in this particular report is to ensure that an examination of what adult and tertiary education might be able do to help young people and adults leave poverty is appropriately contextualised in the realities of such changes. Without such a framing there may be a tendency to suggest that solutions lie solely with helping individuals to become up-skilled through a variety of supply side education and training measures. This section explains why this is not an appropriate response given labour market dynamics and the actions taken by employers.

The labour market in the UK continues to demonstrate an on-going polarisation between high-skilled, high-paid jobs on the one hand and low-paid, low-skilled jobs on the other. This is variously referred to as the ‘hourglass’ labour market or the ‘hollowing out’ of the labour market, as globalisation and technological change steadily reduces the number of skilled and semi-skilled jobs (Goos and Manning, 2007). This is a process that has continued unabated through the economic downturn.

As a recent JRF report (Schmuecker, 2014) highlights, employers contribute to the labour market and in particular in helping to reduce poverty by ensuring people remain in work and have the opportunity to progress in work. The report explores how employers respond to this challenge by examining:

- how decisions within individual businesses can impact on labour market opportunities
- and how a business case can be made for better jobs

3.1 Structural issues

The report starts by reviewing how firms behave in relation to the economic context within which they find themselves. In particular it documents evidence by Devins et al. (2014) that examines in some depth pay and progression of employees in the retail, catering and care sectors. Together these sectors employ up to six million employees and account for approximately a quarter of all employment in the UK.

Schmuecker’s review (ibid) therefore suggests that the way employers engage in particular markets will result in employees being either employed in more low paid, low skills cost-minimising jobs, or in value added, high skills, personalised service style work. However the reality in the UK labour market is that many employers do still engage in business opportunities that compete on low
wages and require low skilled employees with few progression opportunities. Such businesses are supported by the labour markets because of what Schmuecker suggests is a plentiful supply of labour for such jobs, particularly in those areas where there are the highest levels of poverty and disadvantage. This therefore has major implications for the extent to which adult and tertiary education can incentivise young people and adults to invest in additional education and training.

3.2 Opportunities at a local level

Schmuecker’s report recognises that although employer demand for skills is central to providing opportunities for individuals to progress in the labour market, the nature of the labour market varies considerably between places. The report documents research by Green (2012) who uses the idea of high and low skills equilibriums to identify the main skills challenges in different parts of the UK.

For Green the greatest concern for local labour markets is if they are predominately characterised by firms that engage in lower valued added markets. These are recognised as being generally located in what might be termed peripheral rural and former industrial areas. These difficulties are compounded if there is also a skills surplus suggestive of people being over-skilled for the jobs available, resulting in skills not being fully utilised (Sissons and Jones, 2014) and also providing disincentives to further individual up-skilling.

As Schmuecker suggests being trapped in labour markets where the dominant problem is either low-skills equilibrium or skills surplus is not only bad for the people who live there – who may find it harder to find good work – it is also bad for the local economy.

The report, therefore, suggests that in these areas, integrating local skills strategies with adult and tertiary educational provision and economic development, innovation and business support strategies can result in more opportunities to shape firms’ demand for skills (Sissons and Jones, 2014).

3.3 Actions by individual employers

Schmuecker’s review recognises that beyond the national and regional/city perspective, local employers need also to recognise how they might make a difference to in-work poverty. One suggested option is for employers to develop more transparent progression pathways in their businesses that align training and development to post compulsory programmes of study and credentials, future promotion to better paid, and more skilled work. Less formal practices can also support progression, including job rotation, coaching and mentoring (Devins et al., 2014). The report recognises that developed progression routes need to be supported by effective and positive management practice that provides employees with appropriate support over and beyond performance development reviews within an organisational ethos that clearly communicates progression possibilities. These findings are complemented by research by Hudson et al (2013) on in-work poverty, ethnicity and workplace cultures. They document ethnic minority workers perceived barrier to progression that included unequal access to opportunities for development, not having clear information about training opportunities, prejudice, stereotyping and under-recognition of their skills and experience. The study recommended that employers need a more strategic approach towards supporting career progression among low-paid workers from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The authors also argued that leadership from the top and clear organisational commitment was essential with managers’ objectives to include the development of low-paid staff and monitoring recruitment, progression and take-up of opportunities.

3.4 Summary

Labour Force Survey data and reports for BIS (2011 and 2013) suggest that at the aggregate level certain qualifications can potentially be helpful for young people and adults to enter the labour market, with the attainment of higher and intermediate level qualifications providing higher than average wage returns. However, the specifics of particular educational and training qualifications and the characteristics of labour markets in particular disadvantaged areas suggest a more complex story. Different kinds of labour market can dominate different areas, but young people and adults experiencing the greatest levels of concentrated poverty are often to be found in those areas with a predominance of low skills and low pay. While there may be well paid, high status jobs in such contexts, these tend to be relatively few and the nature and type of qualifications and skills needed to access these jobs are beyond the expectations that poor young people and adults might have. For the much larger percentage of jobs that are low skilled, poorly paid, insecure, repetitive and that lack autonomy, qualifications are often not required and there is little prospect of accessing training and progression in such jobs that may then help to raise people out of poverty. The incentive, therefore, to engage in learning and acquire qualifications is likely to be highly reduced given the high risk nature of such investments for potentially poor returns. In such contexts, employers and adult and tertiary education providers have a key role in supporting the development of better jobs and progression routes.
In this section, the focus is on the barriers that economically poor young people and adults experience in relation to accessing adult and tertiary education, including higher education. We begin by examining barriers that relate to accessing, engaging and succeeding in educational and training programmes provided by the post-compulsory sector. This section starts by documenting barriers that relate to the personal lives of young people and adults and issues of access, availability and information, advice and guidance that prevent them from engaging with the adult and tertiary education sectors. We then consider the distinct yet complementary structural barriers associated with the labour market that also constrain engagement with adult and tertiary education.

4.1 Personal and provision barriers to adult and poor young people's participation in Adult and Tertiary Education

4.1.1 Young people (NEETs)

For the purposes of this report the main category of poor young people on which the report will focus are those classified as NEETs and in particular that sub-category of NEETs that are most disadvantaged, likely to experience sustained levels of poverty and that are categorised in the literature as ‘sustained’ NEETs (see below).

4.1.1.1 Definition and categorisation of NEET

The term NEET refers to young people aged 16 to 24 who are not in education, employment or training, although the main focus of policy and research tends to be on the 16-19 age group. According to Nelson and O'Donnell's review (2012) the NEET population is diverse and continually changing, and includes many young people who face barriers to participation. The NEET group is not static but is rather a rapidly changing group and most young people do not spend long periods as NEET. According to the report in 2011 one in five (22.3 per cent) young people aged 16–24 were unemployed (a total of 1.04 million). A slightly lower, but still large, proportion (19.2 per cent) of young people aged 16–24 were NEET.

As we have suggested the NEET group is not homogenous. There is a diverse range of young people in the group with quite different characteristics. According to evidence collected by the DCSF (2008):

- the NEET group is getting older – around half of those NEET are of academic age 18, compared with just 40% 5 years ago;
- the gender gap is widening – 16 year old boys are now more than twice as likely to be NEET as 16 year old girls;
- a higher proportion of young people are ‘inactive’ and are not looking for work or learning;
- 39% of those with no GCSEs are NEET at 16, compared to 2% of 16 year olds who attained 5 or more A* – C GCSEs;
- persistent absentees are 7 times more likely to be NEET at age 16;
- young people with learning difficulties and disabilities are twice as likely to be NEET as those without;
- an estimated 20,000 teenage mothers are NEET.

Recent research (Spielhofer et al., 2009) into the characteristics and experiences of 16/17 year olds NEET segmented young people into 3 groups using the Youth Cohort Survey:

- ‘Open to learning’ (41%): typically these are young people who have made what have proven to be poor choices in terms of progression, have dropped out, but would be keen to take up a more suitable opportunity. Many have achieved Level 2 qualifications. They are typically more positive about their educational experiences and optimistic about future job prospects than the other NEET sub-groups.

- ‘Undecided’ (22%): these young people are unable to make up their minds about what they want to do, or are unable to access the type of provision they want to pursue in the area where they live. This group represented the smallest of the three categories. Typically they exhibit negative attitudes to school and the provision now available to them and often they appear to lack the resilience or skills to access suitable opportunities. Some 60% of this group in the Youth Cohort Study were still in the NEETs cohort after a year, compared with around 30% who had re-engaged in education or training, although many could be expected to find their way into jobs over time.
• ‘Sustained’ (38%): these young people could be regarded as having classic characteristics of young people who are NEET, including coming from deprived backgrounds, no recent history of employment, low educational attainment, and very negative experiences of school, including a record of truanting in many cases. Some 60% were still in the NEETs cohort after a year, although some may have short-term experience of jobs without training.

Spielhofer et al’s (2009) research found that young people described as ‘sustained NEET’ were more likely than those in the other two groups to be NEET over time. The research also found that those who were ‘sustained NEET’ were more likely than the ‘open to learning NEET’ sub-group to consider that they were under-qualified. They were also more likely to experience lack of appropriate opportunities as a barrier, were more likely than the ‘open to learning NEET’ sub-group to report that there were no ‘decent jobs’ available and say that they had not found a suitable job or course.

Although the NEET group is heterogeneous, research by and Hodgson et al. (2009) suggest that most NEETs did not conform to the media stereotype of the work-shy and feckless young person. Common characteristics included high levels of economic and social disadvantage; low levels of educational attainment and disaffection with, and disengagement from, the education system. However their findings were particularly interesting in three respects. Firstly that the aspirations of those in the NEETs group were similar to those of other young people (albeit that their expectations of achieving these aspirations were lower). Secondly that they did not see their ‘failure’ as a fault of the curriculum but instead was to do with the authority structure in schools and the nature of their relationships with adults. Thirdly NEET youngsters wanted to find a job and for the most part did not want to go on to full time education.

4.1.1.2 Barriers to participation in tertiary education

A useful review of barriers that NEETs experience is provided by the Barnardo’s report (Evans et al., 2009), a recent BIS report (2013) and research by Chowdry et al. (2013) that together provide an extensive overview of existing research literatures in this area. Together these reports suggest that NEET barriers to tertiary education participation relate to (i) poor experiences of school; (ii) personal difficulties and life circumstances and events, and (iii) accessibility and availability of tertiary education provision and information, advice and guidance support. Perhaps most importantly the reports highlight how many of these barriers are particularly accentuated for what might be described as ‘sustained’ NEETs:

(a) Poor experiences of school

The Barnardo’s review reported on poor experiences in school that related to a number of issues including poor relationships, the school and curriculum; attendance and bullying.

Poor relationships with school and teachers – the report synthesized a number of research studies by Sims, et al. (2001), Golden, et al. (2002) and Barnado’s (2007) that together suggested that young people often felt that they had been ‘failed’ by their teachers or schools. This resulted in them struggling to make a transition into learning post-16 because of negative associations. Research evidence reviewed by Bernardos’s report suggested that many young people were disaffected with school because they often felt that they were not treated with respect by teachers, nor seen as individuals in their own right. Although such young people described an initial relief on leaving school, this was often followed by an anxious and uncertain ‘limbo’ period. Hodgson et al. (2007) further suggest that the significance of the teacher/learner relationship has been downplayed by policymakers and, for the learners with these poor experiences at school, policy reforms fail to create the conditions that are favourable for sustained participation, achievement and progression.

Negative views of school / the curriculum – the Barnardo’s review (ibid) noted that some young people reported having experienced a difficult transition from primary to secondary school, or said that they found the curriculum too ‘academic’ or irrelevant to their interests or needs (EdComs, 2007; Coles et al., 2002; Steer, 2000). In addition some young people expressed feelings of ‘vulnerability’ - being looked down on in school because of coming from a poor neighbourhood - as a factor that led to disengagement from learning (Archer et al., 2005; Steer, 2000). In many respects young people sensed a ‘lack of fit’ between their ‘working-class’ identities and a predominance of what they saw as middle-class language, school ethos and staff. The report highlights the importance of young people developing a positive orientation towards school from a young age in order to appreciate the value of learning to their futures (Furlong, 2005).

Poor school attendance / incidences of bullying – The Barnardo’s report quotes evidence from a DCSF report (2008), that persistent absentees are seven times more likely to be recorded as NEET at the age of 16 than other young people. In addition some young people described a lack of fit between their working-class identities and a predominance of what they saw as middle-class language, school ethos and staff, and the form of bullying they experienced. The Barnardo’s report highlights how educational disadvantage in the form of having been bullied, having been a truant or being disaffected with school, are all key determinants in young people becoming NEET. In addition to bullying, the Learning and Skills Network (n.d.) also report special educational needs (SEN) and personal difficulties as significant factors. Although not all NEET young people report having had negative experiences of school, the Barnardo’s report draws together evidence to suggest that it is the ‘sustained NEET’ group that is more likely to report such disengagement from school.

(b) Personal difficulties and life circumstances

The Barnardo’s report documents evidence of the need for tailored support programmes to nurture young people who are likely to fall within the ‘sustained NEET’ group. The report suggests that this is due to the raft of personal challenges and ‘super barriers’ to engagement, such as homelessness or lone parenting.
Complementary evidence from Fullick (2009) and the BIS (2013) report suggest that many people do not have the money to pay for learning, or that they may be in poor health. Time can be a significant factor: people who live in poverty may suffer from time constraints because of family responsibilities or because they have to work very long hours to maintain their incomes. They may live in neighbourhoods with limited lifelong learning opportunities – local facilities are often important to people on low incomes, as they may not be able to travel far. Such people may work in industries where it is difficult to access any training that is appropriate to their needs. In addition, Fullick (2009) explains that access to the internet is also important. While the pattern of use of new technologies is changing, there is evidence that internet use is closely linked to household income: low-income groups are less likely than the better off to have access to the Internet and there are large regional differences in use. Currently, there is a strong correlation between use of the internet and people’s willingness to engage in learning.

These challenges often need to be overcome and solutions put in place before any work can begin on developing skills, acquiring qualifications or thinking about making a transition to work.

(c) Accessibility and availability of tertiary education provision and information, advice and guidance support

The BIS report (2013) and Spielhofer et al.’s study (2009) highlight that for some young people, particularly those who had applied for a programme of study/training or who were looking for learning opportunities, learning was prevented because of the accessibility, availability, appropriateness and timeliness of information and guidance. The BIS report (2013) states that the most significant aspects of this barrier were problems associated with the application process and the location of the course or college. Other issues included courses being cancelled and a lack of provision relevant to the young people’s career aims.

The BIS report (2013) also highlighted a how a lack of support and information, advice and guidance, either when looking for courses, or when on-course, acted as a barrier to learning for one in ten young people. These young people refer to three main ways in which this impacted upon them:

- **NEET young people were less likely than young people who had entered post-16 learning to report having received formal advice or support (BIS, 2013; Maguire and Rennison, 2005), or to have attended a careers interview whilst at school (Maguire and Rennison, 2005). Also only 24% of early leavers from NVQ programmes recalled having received any pre-entry information and guidance (Thornhill, 2001).**
- **Inaccurate information had resulted in provision not meeting the expectations of young people, who had subsequently dropped out. For example, early leavers from NVQ programmes had often received only very generalised careers education and guidance before embarking upon their chosen occupations (Thornhill, 2001). Early leavers from FE and work-based learning cited one of the main reasons for leaving as being that the course was not what they had expected (Simm, et al., 2007). Also, MacDonald and Marsh (2005) believe that a generic approach to careers guidance, and a failure to listen to and consider the needs of individuals can explain why some young people fail to make sustained transitions. Moderate achievers who had planned to go on to FE sometimes also became NEET because they were unaware of alternative options when they failed to achieve the grades they had hoped for (EdComs, 2007).**
- **A lack of on-course support from teachers and support staff could also result in young people dropping out (BIS report, 2013).**

In terms of higher education, the main barrier to participation for NEETs and/or disadvantaged young people more generally is their relatively poor attainments in school prior to 16. For example Chowdry et al.’s (2013) research suggests that the poorer you are the less likely you are to participate in higher education. This means that the socio-economic difference in HE participation does not arise simply because poorer young people face the same choices at 18 but choose not to go to university or are prevented from doing so. On the other hand, research by the Sutton Trust suggests that academic attainment accounts for only 75% of the ‘access gap’ in top universities (Jerrim, 2013). Chowdry et al. (2013) suggest that young people look to their futures as they see them when making decisions about what qualifications to attempt at ages 16 and 18, and indeed when deciding how much effort to put into school work. If poor young people feel that HE is ‘not for people like them’, their achievement in school simply reflects anticipated barriers to participation in higher education, rather than the other way around. Boliver’s study (2013) provides some evidence about access to the more elite HE institutions (often referred to as the Russell Group Universities) that complements Chowdry at al’s findings. However the study finds that unfair access is shown to take different forms for different social groups. For example evidence suggests that for those young people from lower social class backgrounds, unfairness appears to be largely to do with barriers to application to Russell Group universities. In contrast, for those from Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds, the unfairness seems to stem entirely from some form of differential treatment during the admissions process by Russell Group universities. These findings, therefore, highlight the inadequacy of national policy on fair access which focuses almost exclusively on eliminating barriers to university application.

Additional access challenges are also reflected in the new fee structure for HEIs. The effects of higher fees on demand for higher education among poorer groups of students is complex and has been the subject of increasing research (Crawford et al., 2014, IPPR 2013, OFFA 2010). The raising of fees in 2012 appeared not to dampen demand among young full-time students from less well-off backgrounds (although participation rates among part-time groups and mature entrants dropped sharply). The current debate on fees has focused on the
that generations of children, especially adults who live in poverty are likely to have
Fullick’s report highlights the fact that many
4.1.2.1 Attitudes and experience
produced by Fullick (2009) in a report for the (NEETs) participation in tertiary education.
Evidence documented about young people’s relate to a number of issues that parallel the
practical issues; and (c) policy frameworks
do with: (a) attitudes and experiences; (b) to the possibility of accounting rules being
4.1.2 Adults
changed by the Treasury (IPPR 2013)
to the possibility of accounting rules being
under the current system. The IPPR point
due to these accounting rules, the IPPR estimate
a graduate tax might add an additional £7.26 billion to the deficit, even though the
government would not actually be borrowing or spending any more money than it does under the current system. The IPPR point
to the possibility of accounting rules being changed by the Treasury (IPPR 2013)

4.1.2.2 Practical barriers
According to Fullick (2009) there are also practical barriers to learning for many adults. Disadvantaged adults may not have the money to pay for learning, or they may be in poor health. As for NEETs, time can also be a challenging factor: adults who live in poverty may suffer from time constraints because of family responsibilities or because they have to work very long hours to maintain their incomes. Adults who live in poverty may live in neighbourhoods with limited lifelong learning opportunities – having locally-available facilities is often important to people on low incomes, as they may not be able to travel far. Such people may also work in industries where it is difficult to access any training that is appropriate to their needs.

The Adult Participation in Learning Survey (NIACE, 2013) suggested that participation in learning is strongly linked to socio-economic background, with those from higher groups more likely to engage with learning and return to learning. It was also reported that those in work were more likely to continue to engage in learning. The previous year’s more detailed report of findings (NIACE, 2012) suggest that 39% of adults would consider
participating in learning if it took place at a more convenient time or location. Resistance to participating in learning is strong among those from lower socio-economic groups, with 41% from these groups saying that nothing would make learning more attractive.

4.1.2.3 Policy frameworks and provision
Disadvantaged adults are likely to have more limited access than others to different types of learning provision. However one of the key policy changes that have been implemented has been in relation to funding for adults over the age of 24. In short, from 2012 most of this group was required to self-fund any course other than basic skills courses. From September 2013, adults were able to apply for a loan to cover level 3 and above course (which operated on a similar basis to student loans for HE study), paid back once they were earning over £21,000. A BIS (2012) report of perceptions of learners to the (at the time proposed) loans suggested that younger learners, those of Black and Asian ethnicity, and those who were unemployed were more open to the idea of loans as they could see a potential benefit in terms of employment returns. Older learners were the most likely to be deterred from studying as they tend to be ‘debt averse’. However there is no research available at present to assess the full impact of the implementation of FE loans.

An important issue that Fullick also raises is that employment-related learning, and learning provided through voluntary means and through the private sector, is less likely to be available to disadvantaged adults than to other groups. In addition access to training and development at work is likely to be limited in low paid and unskilled jobs. Training budgets are still heavily skewed towards those with the most education and skills, and those in more senior positions. Government policy has attempted to shift the pattern of access to employer provided adult training since 1981 but has failed to make significant gains in this area. Moreover research by Green et al (2013) suggests that the overall volume of provider training may have fallen (in terms of hours per year) by as much as half since 1997. In other words
that reality has been heading in the opposite direction to that which policy intends.

A major report into the future of lifelong learning (Schuller and Watson, 2009) suggests reorganizing the education system to reflect changes in population demographics as we become an aging society, as well as changes to working patterns. They propose that lifelong learning policy should reflect 4 stages of the educational life course (up to 25, 25-50, 50-75, 75+) and that investment should be spread proportionally across these stages. Policy should further encourage credit systems and part-time provision to make learning more flexible. There should also be a greater focus on how skills are used, rather than just increasing the volume of skills. Schuller and Watson (2009) suggest the English system has become over-centralised and needs to redress the balance and restore power to local levels, although within a coherent national strategy. Part of the reason for this more localized approach is that there is evidence to suggest that a general focus on raising skills across the board does not have a major impact on reducing poverty. At yet the same time focusing on low paid workers is also problematic because so many aren’t in poor households. Schmuecker (2014) suggest that one way forward may be to target skills and related policies on low income households through the use Universal Credit data.

4.2 Labour market disincentives to young people and adults’ participation in adult and tertiary education

As we argued above, barriers for poor adults and young people to engage with learning are, in part, around the nature and shape of the labour market and the incentives that it creates, both for young people/adults and in relation to the behavior of firms associated with such labour markets. As Keep (2009) notes, understanding the incentive structures that motivate both young people and adults to engage in learning is extremely important if policy is to identify the most urgent problems and barriers to more participation and achievement in education and training. In particular he argues that positive and negative incentives tend to cluster around certain kinds of jobs. Higher paid jobs with greater levels of status, requiring substantial and continuing educational training provide stronger and perhaps mutually reinforcing incentives to learn. On the other hand, low paid employment that is often repetitive with fewer pleasant working conditions can provide weaker incentives for further education and training and, perhaps most importantly fewer opportunities for progression (Lloyd, Mason and Mayhew, 2008; Lawton, 2009; Mcalff and Dhudwar, 2010).

At the same time, as this report documents above, incentives vary dependent of what local and regional labour markets offer in terms of the different patterns of opportunity, particularly in terms of wages and the range of jobs on offer (Keep, 2005: 535; Green and Owen, 2006). Moreover, Gutman and Ackerman (2008) demonstrate how different patterns of opportunity have consequences for patterns of choice about post-compulsory participation in education and training. In addition Keep (2012a) notes that the information and signalling produced by local worlds of employment will have profound implications for how poor adults and young people in particular places do or do not access and engage with learning. To quote Keep (2012a), all other things being equal:

- the higher the levels of unemployment, particularly youth unemployment;
- the higher also the levels of inequality in terms of job quality (working conditions, wages, progression opportunities, etc) across the different jobs available;
- the larger the pool of “bad/poor” jobs relative to the good ones (particularly within specific local labour markets);
- and the weaker and more patchy the wage returns from qualifications, particularly lower level vocational qualifications;

contemplating investing - time, energy, effort and money (directly or through wages foregone) – in learning will be faced by relatively complex, uncertain and therefore risky incentives to learn. (Keep, 2012a: 15)

The key lesson is that in economies and labour markets where the proportion of low paid jobs is substantial, the incentives to learn for many poor young people and adults may be small. This problem becomes even more challenging if young people’s labour market entry points tend to be clustered within sectors that have a high percentage of this kind of employment, and where casualisation is endemic. These problems reflect the situation in the UK, where low-skilled employment is dominated by retailing, hotels and restaurants (UKCES, 2012). As Schoon puts it:

In considering different possibilities for their future young people are aware of the barriers that may hinder their ambitions. The expression of educational expectations is intertwined with perceptions of opportunities and constraints, and young people from less privileged backgrounds are generally less ambitious than their more privileged peers (Schoon, 2010: 100).
This section of the report examines those policy and practice interventions that have been developed to counter barriers to successful educational engagement and transitions to employment. It focuses on labour market and adult and tertiary education policy frameworks and interventions that appear to be successful for NEETS and economically poor adults.

5.1 Young people - NEETs

This part of the report is guided by the extensive review completed by Nelson and O’Donnell. (2012). The evidence documented in the review is complemented by detailed research undertaken Maguire and Newton (2011) in the form of a number of evaluations of intervention programmes targeted at NEETs.

These studies make it possible to identify what are likely to be the most successful approaches to tackling the NEET problem. Based on the Nelson and O’Donnell report these include strategic-level (national and local-level policy) approaches and practice-level (preventative and reintegration) methods. These are presented within the context of economic recession, high youth unemployment, and a sustained reduction in public funding, all of which compound to make the task of supporting young people to make effective transitions post-16 highly challenging.

5.1.1 National policy strategies

Research reviewed by Nelson and O’Donnell (ibid) identifies three core elements of effective national policy strategy:

- National funding for youth training and employment. Adequate resources need to be provided by government to enable young people to engage in the labour market in a cost-effective fashion. However, nationally provided funds need to be targeted at a local level in a way that enables the needs of young people to be met in relation to particular labour markets requirements and education and training provision

- Incentivisation for employers to employ young people. This might be achieved, for example, by exempting employers’ national insurance contributions for young people under 25, or through the recent Youth Contract intervention that provides financial inducements to employers for recruiting young people

- Establishing dedicated national leadership to monitor the NEET agenda, and a lead partner at a local level to galvanise and coordinate the actions of all local partners.

5.1.2 Local policy strategies

At a strategic level, Nelson and O’Donnell’s report (ibid) recommends that local authorities (LAs) should have a whole-area plan for NEET reduction that is closely tied in to other area-based initiatives. In particular they suggest that:

*Political commitment (at council and strategic levels) is of key importance to the success of the strategy.*

Commissioning should be based upon a needs analysis and there must be good data sharing between agencies and a well-coordinated multi-agency response. At a practice level, there should be an action plan with clear targets and a timetable for implementation as well as good systems for monitoring progress and impact. (Nelson and O’Donnell; 2012: 3)

In addition they highlight a number of strategic approaches that LAs should be taking to tackle the NEET issue both as preventative strategies with young people aged under 17 or as remedial measures with young people who have already disconnected from learning. These include:

- Identify need early.
- Intervene early with families at risk of poor outcomes.
- Develop informal learning and volunteering opportunities for young people whose personal barriers to learning are not necessarily entrenched, but who lack clarity about their personal goals.
- Develop alternative and flexible learning opportunities for young people who do not benefit from a conventional classroom experience.
- Offer financial support. Most evidence shows that young people generally respond well to financial incentives to continue in learning. (Nelson and O’Donnell, 2012:4)

They further suggest that research focuses on
what LAs need to do to improve the ‘supply’ of employment opportunities for young people, particularly in engaging local employers in strategy development and the design of offers and also to raise awareness of what local employers can offer. In particular they suggest the need to identify links between initiatives for vulnerable young people and involve local employers in information, advice and guidance (IAG) in schools.

5.1.2 Practice-level preventative approaches

Many of the reviewed items focus on strategies that schools can adopt to prevent young people disengaging from learning or losing direction, in order to lessen the likelihood of them becoming NEET in the future. Although not pertinent to this review specifically these preventive measures are important considerations for secondary schooling.

5.1.3 Practice-level reintegration approaches

Currently, once a young person has failed to make a successful transition at 16, there are a range of youth engagement programmes and interventions attempting to help them get ‘back on track.’ The main distinction in the literature is between ‘informal learning programmes’ and ‘alternative provision.’

According to Nelson and O’Donnell alternative provision is most typically offered to young people who fall within the ‘sustained’ NEET group. Their review suggests that such provision is most effective when it is centred on the development of a positive trust relationship between a young person and an adult ‘role model.’ In addition they document the need for a high ratio of staff to young people and a learning environment that may be quite different from formal schooling. They further stipulate that access to targeted support needs to be appropriately brokered and, in some cases, an outreach capacity made available for vulnerable young people. From a learning perspective, they also stipulate the need for good initial assessment with realistic, measurable and motivating targets properly tracked, and a focus upon basic skills and a mix of practical and theoretical learning.

In addition to these generic success factors, the Nelson and O’Donnell report also considers the outcomes of a couple of specific programme evaluations, which appeared to demonstrate some positive outcomes.

- Activity Agreements (AA) were personally negotiated contracts between a young person and their Personal Adviser/Keyworker. Young people received continuous support from their Adviser throughout the process. Activities, focused on personal development issues, skill development and work-related activities – including work tasters, workplace behaviour, CV and interview skills. These activities were particularly popular with participants but could be difficult to source. According to the report many young people on the AA were successful in terms of engaging young people because they offered a personalised and flexible programme; involved young people in the design of their learning; offered the intensive support of an AA advisor; and provided a financial incentive. However AAs were withdrawn in 2010, as they were deemed too costly with too many young people failing to gain anything substantive from the programme in relation to successful transition to the labour market.

- The Talent Year programme for young people aged 16–24 was reportedly successful in developing psychological well-being because it focused on building young people’s capabilities, such as confidence and initiative, as well as giving them experience of the world of work over a long duration, combined with mentoring and pastoral support. However, again there was little evidence that this translated into successful labour market transitions.

Although the review traces a number of generally positive outcomes from appropriately targeted interventions on different NEET subgroups, particularly in relation to access and engagement, there is little evidence about the extent to which policy developments have led to anything transformative in terms of employment for the most disadvantaged NEET young people. As we documented above the most vulnerable young people are likely to be tracked into low-level programmes which offer little hope of progression. Perhaps this is not surprising given that such qualifications are not necessary for a number of jobs at entry level, where employers are most interested in attracting candidates with the right attitudes and social skills. In addition short-term training initiatives might in some cases have an adverse impact, by raising the prospects of securing a job, which are subsequently not fulfilled (Hodgson et al., 2009).

5.2 Adults

One of the most comprehensive attempts at examining the evidence for strategies to widen adult participation in education is Taylor et al.’s (2005) systematic review. The focus of the review was on interventions and strategies that were reliably proven to raise, or not to raise, participation in learning by adults with traditionally low participation. In addition the report examined how and why such strategies might work. However the review did not examine the extent to which such learning assisted in raising adults’ employment prospects.

The recurring themes that emerged in this review included:

making available sufficient, suitable resources including quality support services

- making effective use of resources and good management of interventions
- finding suitable ways to measure learning gains
- listening to learners, responding to feedback, encouraging realistic expectations about what learning programmes offer
- identifying and taking steps to break down barriers to learning
- creating flexible and tailored delivery and support
- using networking and partnership,
including the use of intermediary organisations. (Taylor et al.; 2005:7)

These themes derived from strategies that were grouped under three main stages of intervention and that appeared to provide compelling evidence of improved widening participation of learning amongst low participation adults:

5.2.1 Outreach, targeting and engagement

Strategies that appeared to widen participation at this stage shared some of the following elements:

- Hard-to-reach adult learners are more likely to engage with education if it is tailored to be supportive and responsive to individual learner needs. Networking and partnerships between key organisations involved in providing adult learning assist in developing supportive and responsive programmes.

- Disengagement by adults from learning can be mitigated if providers have a clear understanding of the needs of the client group and what they can offer. The targeting of funding and other resources to develop projects to support the engagement of the hard-to-reach adults can help to develop successful programme interventions.

- Potential adult learners, particularly from ethnic minority communities, are more likely to be attracted to education if it is delivered via community out-reach work or individuals have been recruited onto programmes via personal word of mouth contacts.

- Effective partnerships with community-based organisations and employers by intermediary bodies such as public or voluntary bodies and be important for engaging new learners.

5.2.2 Participation and retention

Strategies in the Taylor et al. report (ibid) report that appeared to widen participation at this stage of the intervention had some of the following themes in common:

- An understanding by involved stakeholders about what motivates and constrains access to adult learning can aid the development of responsive learning programmes that encourages engagement, retention and success.

- An appropriately designed learning programme that includes delivery by an appropriate adult pedagogy can aid learner participation and retention. The experience and knowledge of teachers and other educational professions of the client group play an important part.

- Appropriate provision of resources that can be used by learners and provided in flexible ways can help with the development and delivery of learning provision for hard-to-reach adults.

- Adults are more likely to sustain engaged attendance with learning programmes if they receive appropriate levels of support during the enrolment stages and if the programme relates to the outcomes desired by the adult learner.

5.2.3 Achievement and progression

Strategies that appeared to widen participation during this stage of the intervention had some of the following features:

- Adult learners are more likely to achieve accreditation and to progress to suitable employment or other learning programmes if learning is tailored to learners’ desired outcomes. This can be delivered if trainers are skilled, are clear about the expectations of the learners and the extent to which they can be met and if they provide sensitive assessment of progress.

- A high level of learner support – especially to those from hard-to-reach groups – can aid participation.

- Positive outcomes for learners can be supported by appropriately skilled and experienced staff in the provider organisation. Effective networking and collaboration between learning providers and local agencies can also improve learning pathways and support progression.

- Well-targeted information, advice and guidance (IAG) services have a useful role to play in the planning of learning provision and progression, and in identifying smaller steps which learners can take to gain confidence and achieve substantial and measurable progress.

- Adults’ quality of work and their position in relation to the labour market can be enhanced by embedding or tailoring basic skills training to the needs of employers’ workforce development programmes. Such interventions also result in improvements in learners’ self-confidence and self-image.

However, the report concluded that there is little robust research on how learning supports adults into good-quality employment and that this is an area of study that continues to require much greater exploration. The broad principles documented in the Taylor et al. report will be examined in greater policy/practice detail in the final section of the report.
The research evidence in this report suggests that the way young people and adults engage (or fail to engage) with adult and tertiary education reflects a complex intertwining of personal biographies with social institutions such as labour markets, educational and training providers, community-based organisations, and local governance procedures. As we stated in the introduction, although beyond the remit of this report, there is also a recognition that poverty manifests itself in the context of a complex web of social characteristics – gender, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation in particular – which can act to moderate or to worsen the effects of poverty. Hence in making our recommendations with regards to strategies for tackling poverty, there is an argument to suggest these must be accompanied by and shaped in the light of strategies for tackling other forms of disadvantage.

In addition to general economic and area factors, there are numerous and specific barriers facing economically poor young people and adults in relation to post-compulsory learning. These include:

- Poor prior experiences of education – e.g. a lack of success, issues of bullying, negative views about school and the curriculum including a lack of relevance
- Personal difficulties – e.g. time constraints, low income, poor health, low confidence
- Life circumstances and events – e.g. intra-family conflict and divorce
- Accessibility and availability of provision – e.g. neighbourhoods with limited life-long learning opportunities, a lack of educational success creating barriers to HE entry, a lack of appropriate provision, a lack of suitable information, advice and guidance
- Challenging policy frameworks – e.g. funding arrangements for adults over 24
- Labour market disincentives – a lack of well-paid local jobs with commensurate credentials, skills or training requirements

Although this evidence may seem pessimistic, there is also research evidence about how, in broad terms, adult and tertiary education can engage disadvantaged young people and adults and enable them to progress. Promising strategies include:

- Developing appropriate and brokered outreach work to engage young people and adults, for instance through community-based organisations
- The development of relationships of trust between young people and adults on the one hand and teachers, other educators, and advisers on the other
- Targeted, supported, and individualised learning programmes, facilitated by a high ratio of staff to learners
- Realistic, measurable, and motivating learning targets, monitored appropriately
- Well-targeted information, advice, and guidance services in the planning of individuals’ learning pathways and in identifying smaller steps which learners can take to gain confidence and achieve measurable progress
- Well-developed transition pathways that link to high-quality academic and/or vocational training commensurate with the needs of both young people and adults and local economies

It is also clear that policy interventions could make a difference. Employers can provide higher-quality work, education providers can offer better support to individuals, and targeted interventions can reach disadvantaged young people and learners. The disengagement of disadvantaged individuals from learning, and the failure of learning to lead to good quality employment, is not a given. What, therefore, can be done? In this final section, we outline a number of powerful overarching strategies that provide a steer to the way policy and practice might develop for adult and tertiary education. We then document some recommendations for specific policy and practice interventions based around each strategy.

6.1 Qualifications and work experiences that count

In general terms, improved qualifications provide a better return with regards to wages, and this can lift people out of poverty. There is a powerful argument, therefore for expanding education and training programmes leading to qualifications. As we have seen, however, it is not the case that any qualification will do. The type and level of qualification, and the structure of the local labour market all
impact on the returns that can be expected. There is no point simply expanding low level, narrowly conceptualised programmes which do not produce tradable qualifications or enable progression to further education or high quality employment. Likewise, whilst the involvement of employers in designing qualifications is important, there is little point if this also leads to a narrowing of what is on offer. Any expansion, therefore, needs to be of the right kinds of qualifications, and needs to be accompanied by the development of good-quality careers advice, guidance and support on the best pathway for them.

6.1.1 Recommendations

The clearest and most detailed policy and practice recommendations associated with qualifications and work are provided by the Wolf report (Wolf, 2011). The report makes some 27 recommendations which bear detailed reading. At the core of them is a view that, for young people in particular, both post-compulsory education and training and the latter stages of compulsory education need to be broadly-based, opening up opportunities for further progression rather than closing them down. Specific recommendations include:

- Ending the tracking of 16 year olds into programmes which effectively do not lead to improved labour market opportunities. Any young person's programme of study, whether 'academic' or 'vocational', should provide for labour market and educational progress on a wide front, whether immediately or later in life. Specifically, full-time students should not follow purely occupational pathways. Programmes should include at least one substantial qualification offering clear potential for progression either in education or into skilled employment. Similar considerations of breadth and progression should apply to part-time students.
- Developing models for full-time students of high-quality and longer-term work experience, where young people undertake genuine workplace activities.
- Ensuring that programmes for the lowest attainers focus on English, Maths and work experience by directing funding towards these forms of provision and to employment outcomes rather than towards the accumulation of qualifications.
- Requiring all students under 19 to work towards GCSE English and Maths if they do not already have these qualifications.
- Shifting the basis of post-16 funding from a per-qualification to a per-student basis to help focus institutions' thinking on the nature and quality of student programmes.
- Funding employers to provide apprenticeships which involve off-the-job training and education where the potential for transfer of learning is clear.

6.2 A coherent response to interconnected challenges

Work to change the capacities and attitudes of disadvantaged adults and young people is, of course, important. Interventions and policies which enhance attainments at school, raise aspirations, widen horizons and incentivise participation are likely to make some difference to some individuals. It is not surprising, therefore, that much policy over the past two decades and more has been firmly targeted at disadvantaged individuals and groups. However, the evidence we have presented suggests that this alone is not enough. The capacities and attitudes of individuals do not appear spontaneously. They are shaped by the experiences of those individuals as they engage with the education system, the labour market and the workplace. These in turn are shaped by national and local policy, and by the practices of local educators and employers. The past is also present in the present. These in turn are shaped by the experiences of the communities in which they live.

Making a difference to economically poor people's engagement with learning, therefore, demands what is sometimes called an 'ecological' approach to policy and practice. It means understanding the complex interactions between the individual and the context in which the individual lives. It also means being prepared to intervene to change that context rather than simply attempting to change the individual. In order to engage in this more holistic approach requires, however, that the policy arena be more coherent and less fragmented with clear lines of public policy responsibility, accountability and delivery.

6.2.1 Recommendations

A key issue raised in the evidence is who owns and is therefore responsible for public policy and its delivery, particular in relation to NEETs and disadvantaged adults. At present, wherever the nominal responsibilities lie and there are many government ministries, local authority bodies, funding organisations who might have an interest, for example BIS, DfE, Education Funding Agency, Skills Funding Agency, Local Authorities - the answer is that there is often no clear owner of the problem, particularly for adults and part-time learners. One recommendation for these latter groups that has promoted by the million + university is the appointment of a senior figure or 'tsar' in government to hold complete responsibility for the needs of adult and part-time learners in policy-making and championing the benefits of higher and tertiary study for adult learners (http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Parliamentary_briefing_-_Part_time_higher_education)

6.3 Macro skills policy and the re-balancing of labour markets

Macro-economic policy is clearly important as a key determinant of the contexts within which disadvantaged individuals and groups live, learn and work. Creating a thriving economy which boosts the overall number of jobs, increases the overall quality of employment, and raises wages will create greater opportunities for people facing disadvantage, which in turn is likely to generate greater incentives for them to engage in learning. Again, though, this alone is not enough. The ‘hollowing out’ of the labour market nationally, the dominance of particular kinds of low skills/low wage labour markets locally, the personal, community
and area histories which lock attitudes and practices in place, and the impacts of gender, racial, disability and other forms of discrimination and stereotyping mean that overall improvements impact very differently on different people and places. A rising economic tide, therefore, is unlikely to float all boats. At the very least macro-economic policy needs to focus on rebalancing the labour market in ways which promote a full range of types of employment and create a virtuous cycle through good-quality employment generating incentives for learning and training, which in turn generates better employment. It may also mean that employers in particular labour markets examine ways of improving the levels of skills development in the workplace.

6.3.1 Recommendations

Such a strategy suggests that focusing solely on developing a skills policy linked to appropriate and generic credentials and work experience is not enough to enable disadvantaged young people and adults to move out of poverty. As Keep suggests, a skills policy may need to be more closely integrated and aligned with other social and economic policies in order to maximise impact. Such a policy requires not just improving the supply of skills and learning opportunities but also improving underlying levels of demand and as importantly improving the usage of skill within the productive process. One recommendation is a shift of adult and tertiary provision of skills from providers such as FE to developing the capacity of workplaces to be sites of learning. Such an approach would allow a skills policy to align more coherently with aspects of ‘business improvement, workplace innovation, productivity enhancement and quality of working life policies’ (Keep, 2014: 15).

6.4 Local transition pathways

As indicated above a macro level strategy needs to be accompanied by local strategies in the most disadvantaged places which incentivise employers to create high value-added products and services that require a highly educated and skilled workforce. This then demands a local compulsory and (particularly) post-compulsory education system that offers multiple pathways to link the (sometimes very low) starting points of learners with the demands of the local labour market. Whilst there is a balance to be struck between equipping learners with transferable capacities and enabling them to access very local employment opportunities, the absence of pathways which link to the latter is likely to compound learners’ disadvantages.

6.4.1 Recommendations

For young people apprenticeship schemes in the EU have proved to be important local measures to smooth the transition into work. During the current economic crisis, the so-called ‘apprenticeship countries’ (Austria and Germany) managed to keep their youth unemployment down (OECD, 2010) and other EU countries (including Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Romania and Finland) have recently implemented or strengthened their apprenticeship programmes. In Italy, a new higher-level apprenticeship scheme was introduced in 2003. The scheme links apprenticeships to the educational system, enabling young people (aged 18–29 years) to gain higher level qualifications (upper secondary and tertiary education) through combining training and paid employment.

In England modern apprenticeships incorporates both on- and off-the-job learning in a particular trade or skill. They are paid positions and are offered at a range of levels. Through combining education and employment, apprenticeships are designed to smooth the difficult transition from school to work. The UK government has focused on the growth of apprenticeships as part of a localised strategy to tackle high levels of youth unemployment. However recent debates have centred on the quality of apprenticeships in their current form, and whether they are equipping enough young people with the skills they need to enter and succeed in their local labour markets. Drawing on international comparisons with the German apprenticeship system, The Work Foundation (Jones, 2013), has highlighted several areas in which the system in the UK must be improved that include the clarity of local pathways into apprenticeship for young people; the enhancement of appropriate educational content in such programmes and an improved local employer involvement. Recommendations from the Work Foundation report (Jones, 2013: 4) suggest the following:

- Improving pathways into apprenticeship for young people
- Ensuring that the careers advice and guidance in schools is improved (particularly for those who wish to pursue vocational pathways)
- Reintroducing work experience for older learners in compulsory education along with taster days for both vocational and academic options for all students
- Encouraging current and former apprentices to take part in school alumni mentoring programmes
- Improving access to information about apprenticeship opportunities
- Making traineeships available for young people not yet ready to undertake a full apprenticeship
- Expanding promotional activities to increase employer engagement
- Maximising the impact of larger employers (e.g. through supply chains and business networks)
- Strengthening links between schools and employers
- Increasing support for and representation of small businesses
- Consolidating information for employers making it easier to access
- Ensuring that government leads by example – both directly and via procurement
- Enhancing the educational and training content of apprenticeships must be enhanced
- Expanding both advanced and higher level apprenticeships and ensuring that young people are able to take up apprenticeships at higher levels
- Setting government targets for growing the number of apprenticeships
for each level

- Rebalancing academic content and on the job training in line with higher international standards.

6.5 Governance structures and systems

Creating appropriate local transition pathways requires governance structures and systems, particularly in the most disadvantaged areas, that are capable of linking employers and education providers, planning appropriate pathways and targeting resources to sustain those pathways. Whilst there are many kinds of governance structures which might achieve this, and whilst the freedom of action of providers and employers is self-evidently important, some coordinating function which goes beyond their individual self-interest seems necessary.

6.5.1 Recommendations

Fresh thinking is required around local co-ordination and planning, labour market intelligence (LMI), information, advice and guidance (IAG), course choice; patterns of provision; and institutional and systemic capacity building, in order to manage the local education and training offer. Those involved might include: private training providers (PTPs) – for profit and charitable, Studio Schools, Academies, Community schools, FE colleges, VI form colleges, employers that provide training – apprenticeship and adult, organisations delivering adult and community education and training, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and Local authorities.

Although mechanisms to facilitate this kind of activity are lacking, there are emerging policy ideas that are worthy of further examination and development into policy recommendations. It is, for instance, tempting to assume that coordination is best achieved by central government requiring the creation of coordinating mechanisms at local level. An alternative approach is to develop the incentives and capacities of existing local organisations to play a coordinating role. For instance, FE colleges are well placed to play a local coordinating role, but are arguably hampered by the other expectations placed upon them and for which they are held to account. In this context, for example, the Sharp Commission’s final report (Sharp, 2011) on FE and community suggests that thought needs to be given to how college governing bodies might be supported in balancing their engagement with communities against their statutory responsibilities for quality and financial performance. Stronger guidance might be given to governing bodies on engagement with and accountability to communities and this might be developed into a ‘compact’ setting out the college’s community offer and the outcomes against which progress might be measured. Similarly, a recent review of the evidence on poverty and growth for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has highlighted to role of ‘anchor institutions’ in disadvantaged areas (Lee et al., 2014). These are major organisations – usually large, public sector medical and educational institutions – which are in those areas for the long haul and already have a major impact on the local economy as large-scale employers. The argument is that they can play a significant part in supporting those areas by coordinating a strategic approach to employment practices, workforce development and education.’

6.6 Flexible and customised support systems

The notion of pathways implies a journey along those pathways. Economically poor and otherwise disadvantaged learners will in many cases lack the prior attainments, attitudes and confidence necessary to embark on demanding, accredited programmes, and may lack the financial resources to engage in such programmes. Flexible, customised and financial support systems are necessary that can engage learners in the first place, build their confidence, and support them in making appropriate and ambitious decisions about their trajectories. Personal relationships, experiences of success, and multiple ‘second chances’ all seem important. Crucially, provision has to start from where learners ‘are’ – not only in terms of what they know and can do, but also in terms of how they think and feel about themselves, and in terms of the practicalities of how they access learning opportunities. For individuals whose experience of learning has been negative, or who see more advanced learning as ‘not for people like me’, or who face financial and other access difficulties, there is no substitute for flexible, personalised support. This in turn implies that at least some aspects of education provision has to be based in the areas where disadvantaged individuals live, and that it has to be resourced and organised so that it is not entirely focused on demanding, accredited course.

6.6.1 Recommendations

Economically poor young people and adults may not be able to access training or employment opportunities because the associated travel costs are too high, or the venues are simply too far away to reach on a daily basis. For this reason, measures need to be continually aimed at reducing this geographical mismatch and facilitate greater mobility by providing mobility grants or support towards accommodation where appropriate.

In addition for poor adults looking to improve their transitions into better paid jobs, the relaxation of particular funding streams related to equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQs) may be particularly helpful. Since 2008, neither higher education institutions or further education colleges have received additional funding to teach students who are studying for a qualification that is equivalent to, or lower than, a qualification which they have already achieved. The ELQ policy is to be relaxed from 2015/16 for individuals wishing to take up part time engineering, technology and computer science courses. A further recommendation might be that this relaxation of ELQ policy should be extended across other areas of study to support adult learners seeking to transfer into better paid professional occupations.

On the supply side, a more generous part-time premium for adult learners could also incentivise institutions to develop their part-time provision. Much like the pupil-
premium in schools, HEIs are funded by a HEFCE Student Opportunity Fund pro-rata for the proportion of widening participation funds they recruit each year. The continuation of the Student Opportunity Fund is a critical aspect to the maintenance of part-time provision in many institutions. However, there are two issues. Firstly, the fund has gradually been eroded, meaning less is provided to support part-time learners at a time when the recruitment of adult learners has been dwindling. Secondly, this fund does little to change institutional behaviours. One recommendation might be that the Student Opportunity Fund is protected and that HEFCE work with BIS and other groups to review what funding levers might incentivise institutions to provide more part-time provision.

6.7 Widening Participation in Higher Education

Since the closure of the national Aimhigher programme, there are few incentives for universities to collaborate to support the progression of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. This means that universities often duplicate resources and/or undertake outreach work that is more likely to favour their own institution rather than the sector as a whole. The National Strategy for Access and Student Success (BIS, 2014) found that partnership between HEIs were key to maximising resources, could ensure more impartial information and, potentially, widen the geographical spread of HE outreach activities. In addition the progression of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds into selective HEIs is currently measured through Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) indicators that examine the proportion of those from state schools, low participation neighbourhoods and lower socio-economic groups. Whilst these are important indicators, there are few measurable indicators that incentivise more selective universities to undertake outreach that might not have any benefit on recruitment to their own institution. In relation to these issues the planned introduction of a national Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) service which allows universities and colleges to measure the progress of individual participants in activities designed to raise aspirations and attainment is to be welcomed. Many highly selective universities now use additional socio-economic contextual data about applicants when making admissions decisions, some to allow guaranteed or lower admissions offers for less advantaged learners. Finally the complex issue of HE fees will need to monitored carefully, particularly in relation to access issues for those most disadvantaged and also in relation to sustainable long-term funding of the sector more generally.

6.7.1 Recommendations

Based on emerging activity in the HE sector around widening participation initiatives highlighted above the report makes the following recommendations:

- The planned funding by HEFCE of new collaborative outreach announced in the National Strategy should be sustained for the long term so that new partnerships can develop.
- The new HEAT is used to measure the relative outreach contributions of all universities, including selective ones, to the progression of learners into higher education, wherever that might be.
- UCAS continue to invest in and promote contextual data provision, and encourage its integration as an embedded and seamless aspect of the admissions process. We also recommend that information about the use of contextual data be disseminated more widely to teachers, advisors and young people.
- A longer-term, sustainable solution to student funding is adopted, including proper consideration of a graduate taxation system. This should include a further investigation into current Treasury rules for the way government loans and taxes are accounted for.

6.8 The Wider Benefits of learning

Although pathways to good quality employment are central to the role of education in overcoming poverty, the evidence suggests that it is important not to forget the wider benefits of learning, in terms of health, self-esteem, quality of life and, we might add, democratic participation. On an individual level, graduates are associated with higher levels of trust and tolerance than non-graduates (Borgonovi and Miyamoto, 2010) and longer life expectancy (OECD, 2012). Likewise, in their report for BIS, London Economics (2013) found that further education and training had a positive association with measures of general wellbeing and happiness.

Despite the inherent difficulty in monetising a number of these non-economic benefits, the analysis suggests that these non-economic benefits are significant and in excess of the economic (and more quantifiable) benefits. The analysis supports the rationale for government investment in further education and skills as a driver of long-term economic growth and social capital. (London Economics, 2013: 68)

Evidence in our report demonstrates that there is, indeed, a wide range of non-economic benefits associated with undertaking additional learning – changes in self-confidence or self-esteem; an increased likelihood of becoming more involved in the local community; a greater ability to make better use of spare time; a greater focus or understanding of what learners want to do with their lives; more enthusiasm about (and potential uptake of) further education and learning; enhanced intergenerational transmission of skills through an improvement in the ability to assist children with school work; and being better able to manage health issues or disabilities.

6.8.1 Recommendations

One implication of this is that post-compulsory education need not be entirely instrumental in its view of the purposes that educational participation might serve. Clearly, there is a concern on the part of policy makers to focus limited educational resources on forms of provision that will
make most difference to the economic wellbeing of individuals and the health of local and national economies. However, the non-vocational and non-economic benefits of learning point to the need for diverse provision, in terms of aims, modes and type of providers. In particular, the recommendations made earlier about moving beyond a purely occupational focus, thinking in terms of overall learner programmes and emphasising breadth and depth of provision rather than the accumulation of low-level qualifications seem important.

A second implication is that post-compulsory education is not simply an educational matter. Specifically, it has implications for a range of government departments, not just DfE and DIS, and for a range of local authority functions. There is a case, therefore, for reviewing what cross-departmental and cross-function coordinating mechanisms exist and which organisations and divisions are members of them.

6.9 Conclusion

The strategies we have outlined are, of course, not entirely new. Over the past decade and more, policy has focused on finding ways of using education to lift people out of poverty and the risk of poverty. Many of the strategies we recommend, therefore, build on what has been attempted previously. In many ways, the key question is not what should be done as whether there is the will to maintain, develop and extend these strategies on the part of policy makers and practitioners. Nothing we recommend is likely to produce an instant transformation in the situations of economically poor and otherwise disadvantaged learners. However, there is every reason to believe that a comprehensive approach of the kind we have outlined, sustained over time, would make a significant difference to how those people learn, and ultimately, how they live.


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