



Widening 14–19 choices:
support for young people
making **informed decisions**

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What is in this summary?

This summary looks across NFER's recent work in the area of 14–19 education and young people's choices and addresses the following questions.

How can young people be best supported to make decisions in general?



How are young people making decisions about subjects, courses, types of qualifications and learning institutions, given the broad provision available at 14?



How do providers of 14–19 education recruit and retain young people on courses at 14?



How can young people be supported once they have made their decisions?



How do decisions made at age 14 affect later decisions which young people make?



What are the implications of these findings for practice and for the provision of support?



Background to the study

This summary presents key findings from NFER's recent work relating to 14–19 education in order to understand better how young people of this age group are navigating their way through complex choices of qualifications and locations of study. Changes in the 14–19 curriculum in recent years mean that young people have to make decisions at this stage across four pathways (GCSEs and A levels, Diplomas, Apprenticeships and the Foundation Learning Tier), as well as deciding on the specific subjects they will study, and the location for that study. Consequently, we have identified a need to summarise the evidence relating to how young people (especially those who do not select the more established pathway of GCSEs and A levels) make their choices at this stage, and how schools and colleges can support them to make successful transitions post-14, post-16 and into Further and/or Higher Education or employment.

NFER has carried out substantial research in recent years relating to the way in which young people make choices, specifically at the ages of 14 and 16 (McCrone *et al.*, 2005; Blenkinsop *et al.*, 2006). Additionally, several key developments have taken place in 14–19 education in recent years which have been the subject of substantial research and evaluation by NFER. These studies can also be used to inform our understanding of how young people make (and are helped to make) decisions in the context of a wide range of available options which have been created as a result of recent policy developments.



These include:

- the introduction of programmes for students at key stage 4 (aged 14–16) where they study for at least part of the week away from school, most commonly in a Further Education college or with a training provider, including:
 - the **Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP)**, introduced in 2002, where schools, colleges and training providers work in partnership to provide vocational learning opportunities for students at key stage 4 (Golden *et al.*, 2004, 2005, 2006; O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006)
 - the **Young Apprenticeship Programme**, introduced in 2004, through which young people work towards a Level 2 qualification and undertake an extended period of work experience in an employer organisation (Golden and O'Donnell, 2006; O'Donnell and Golden, 2007; O'Donnell *et al.*, 2009)
 - the **Skills for Work** programme in Scotland, designed to provide a broader range of learning opportunities for young people. This programme enables young people of school age to take courses which allow them to develop their skills and knowledge in a broad vocational area, develop core skills, and acquire an understanding of the work place and employability skills (Spielhofer and Walker, 2008)
 - the introduction of **Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced Diplomas**, with the first five lines of learning available to students from September 2008 increasing to 14 lines of learning by 2010 (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2009)



- the introduction of the **Foundation Learning Tier** which is a coherent framework of provision below Level 2 for learners aged 14 and above
- the raising of the age at which young people are required to participate in some form of education or training (either in school or college, with a work-based learning provider or as part of a job) to the age of 18 by 2015 (Spielhofer *et al.*, 2007)
- developments in Careers Education, such as the devolving of the responsibility for information, advice and guidance services to local authorities after April 2008, enabling their potential integration with the other youth support services that local authorities manage.

As a result of these developments, young people are selecting their options within a changing landscape of available choices and pathways. So, how are they making decisions, and how are they then choosing the type of course, learning environment and subject? And how, if at all, do choices made at the age of 14 influence later decisions?

What does the research tell us?

How can young people be best supported to make decisions about their education in general?

Key points

Young people differ in their choice of the type of person from whom they seek guidance. Education and guidance professionals need, therefore, to be adaptable and knowledgeable about alternatives and refer young people to those who can inform them best. There is value in professionals involving and informing parents and carers who have a considerable influence on their children's decisions.

School staff can help to ensure that young people make informed and rational choices by having effective leadership and mechanisms for curriculum management, by providing support for students and by encouraging high expectations of young people among staff.

In a wider curriculum, young people can be further supported to make informed decisions by ensuring that college and training provider staff are actively involved. In particular they can give support by providing information about the content, mode of learning and location of the course that learners are considering.

We have found evidence that young people seek guidance and support from a variety of key figures when they are making their choices, and this is particularly the case within this new and wider landscape of available choices. These key figures are discussed below.

Guidance professionals

As always, it is necessary that young people receive effective guidance when making their choices, and that this is linked to the decisions that they are

making about their education and training (Blenkinsop *et al.*, 2006). Guidance professionals therefore need to have information about available courses, qualifications and locations of study, and to be able to give this to pupils at the pre-14 stage, when they may be making decisions about whether to follow a non-traditional pathway. A wide curriculum offer is only valuable if learners are aware of which part of it is appropriate for them, which means that there is a need for impartial, personalised information, advice and guidance (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2009; Smith and Waxman, 2008). Our research has established a relationship between young people who make effective and successful transitions, and those who have good careers exploration skills and a sound factual knowledge of the courses and routes open to them (Morris, 2004; Morris *et al.*, 1999a and b).

Staff from schools, colleges and training providers

Our research shows that schools and their staff can make a difference to young people's choices. When curriculum management, student support and school leadership are effective, and staff have high expectations of students, schools can ensure that the choices that young people make are well-thought-out and rational, and that the young people remain happy with these choices (Blenkinsop *et al.*, 2006). Our research also highlights that it is important to develop effective relationships between all parties involved in a programme (such as schools, colleges and training providers), built on good communication and on shared aims and objectives (Golden *et al.*, 2004). Printed and online literature, such as area prospectuses (Blenkinsop *et al.*, 2006) set out a clear picture to young people of what provision is available in their area. Additionally, teachers and others who offer advice need to have up-to-date knowledge of relevant careers (Lord *et al.*, 2006).

Parents and carers

Our review work indicates that the influence of parents and carers on young people's choices at age 14 is significant (McCrone *et al.*, 2005). Consequently, parents and carers need to have easy access to up-to-date information that is easy to digest so that they can help their children in making these choices. This is particularly true within this new and wider landscape of choice. We have found that in some cases, parents and carers' knowledge in relation to newer and non-traditional courses (such as the Diploma) is lacking, and this may lead them to put pressure on their offspring to study more familiar courses such as GCSEs and A levels, which may not always be appropriate or what the young person wants (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2009; Blenkinsop *et al.*, 2006).

It is evident that young people tend to differ in who they seek advice from, and whose advice they value most. Whilst many young people appreciate the impartial advice that they receive from Connexions personal advisors, others value the support they get from teachers who know them well (Blenkinsop *et al.*, 2006). It is important that all young people are able to access diverse, effective and impartial information, advice and guidance in relation to the decisions they are making, and that the people to whom they

*The careers teacher has been helpful, she's been pointing us in the right direction ... she's got everything you need to know really
(Blenkinsop *et al.*, 2006, p.58)*



turn are supported in order that they are able to provide effective careers education and guidance.¹

How are young people making decisions about subjects, courses, types of qualifications and learning institutions, given the broad provision available at 14?

Key points

Young people's decision-making is influenced by their own unique characteristics. Whilst some have clear career goals, others have a less fixed pathway in mind: both of these mindsets need to be catered for when supporting their choices.

To some extent, the research suggests that young people who pursue applied qualifications at key stage 4 are more likely to have a preference for practical learning, and to want to learn outside the classroom, than their peers. However, they are also similar to other students in the considerations that inform their choices. For example, they have career plans to which the qualification directly contributes or will support, or they want to keep their options open.

Young people's applied choices at 14 do not appear to constrain their choices at 16 to the same applied subject area. While some continue within the same subject area, many others do not.

Our research suggests that young people make choices in different ways depending on their individual characters. Young people's preferences when choosing their options are shaped by various factors, which are different for each young person, and include individual attributes (such as personal enjoyment and perceived usefulness of the subject) and structural factors (such as the school's provision and ethos, and teaching styles) (McCrone *et al.*, 2005). For instance, in relation to choices made at age 14, evidence from our research suggests that many of the young people who chose to study for non-traditional courses (such as those offered by the IFP, Skills for Work or the Young Apprenticeships Programme), or who had opted to study the Diploma, had often chosen these because they preferred a more practical learning style, and wanted to have the opportunity to learn outside the classroom (Golden *et al.*, 2004; Golden and O'Donnell, 2006; O'Donnell and Golden, 2007) Spielhofer and Walker, 2008; O'Donnell *et al.*, 2009).

It is particularly important, within the context of increased choice for young people, that those adults who are helping them with these decisions recognise the varying support needs which different young people have. For instance, young people who have a '**decided planner**' mindset have clear career goals, and are highly focused on what they need to do to reach these goals. For these young people, it may be sufficient to ensure that they have detailed information relating to their choice. By contrast, some young people have a '**comfort seeker**' mindset, having no clear pathway in mind and making decisions based on what they know they can cope with at a given time. These young people will tend to require more intensive, one-to-one support

in order to make effective and appropriate decisions (Blenkinsop *et al.*, 2006).²

In relation to the subjects that young people choose to study, our research has found that young people opt for particular subjects and types of course and qualification for differing reasons, and in this respect, they are no different from their peers who choose the GCSE and A-level pathway.

- In some cases, young people opt for certain subjects and courses because they are **directly related to a future career path they are interested in pursuing**. For instance, young people following the Young Apprenticeship programme in the engineering or automotive skills sectors tended to consider moving onto an Apprenticeship in the same vocational area, after the end of compulsory education (O'Donnell and Golden, 2005).
- Some young people may choose particular courses because they **contribute towards a future career plan**, without involving direct study in that area. For instance, young people who choose to study chemistry at school may do so as a means towards studying (and ultimately following a career in) veterinary science, rather than with the intention of pursuing a career in chemistry (Lord *et al.*, 2006).
- However, in other cases, young people choose particular courses and subjects in order to **keep their options as open as possible**. This tended to be the case for those young people who opted for post-14 courses in areas such as business administration, information technology, or creative and media studies (O'Donnell and Golden, 2005).

I came to college for 18 months on day release to do electrical installation and I enjoyed it so much I wanted to carry on ... it made it much easier to come back because I knew the whole place (McCrone and Morris, 2004, p.45)





It is important to note here that the decisions that young people make about programmes and subjects of study are not static, but are prone to change: a decision made at pre-14 level is not necessarily a career decision for life. Evidence from our research on alternative programmes of study such as the IFP and Young Apprenticeship Programme suggests that young people who have studied on these programmes progress onto a variety of routes at post-16 level. Whilst the majority of young people participating in these programmes moved onto some form of further education or training, their progression routes varied, with some following a work-based route at post-16 level, some taking college courses and others studying A level courses (Golden *et al.*, 2005 and 2006; O'Donnell and Golden, 2006). Additionally, some of the young people who took part in these programmes found that opting for a course in a particular career area had led them to reject this career area as they had found that they did not enjoy it (Spielhofer and Walker, 2008).

How do providers recruit and retain young people on courses at 14?

Key points

Ensuring that learners embark on appropriate courses at 14, and that they are supported in sustaining this involvement, are key features of the new landscape of choice. Approaches to recruitment and retention onto appropriate courses have been developed and refined over time. In particular, collaboration between institutions in terms of the provision of formal and less formal information, advice and guidance and genuine interest on behalf of the young person in the course are key to appropriate selection and successful retention.

To maximise the likelihood of a young person sustaining their involvement with a programme of study, it is important that they are fully informed in relation to the content, structure and practicalities of participating. Opportunities to visit the location of study and/or to meet with staff and current students assist with this.

How do non-traditional post-14 programmes go about promoting themselves, and recruiting young people? How do they ensure that they get the 'right' young people to participate? And how do they ensure that they retain the young people?

With the variety of pathways that are now available at 14, those responsible for recruiting young people to programmes must consider which students they will promote the programme to, and how they will retain them once they have started on the course. Our reports on successive cohorts undertaking programmes such as the IFP and Young Apprenticeship Programme have shown how their recruitment processes have become increasingly developed over time.

In earlier cohorts, some young people had been recommended by their teachers to take part in a particular programme (see for instance, Golden *et al.*, 2004). Where this was the only reason for selection, however, these young people tended to be more likely to drop out. More effective

approaches towards recruitment were developed over time. For example, these involved:

- clear criteria being shared in a **collaborative approach** between schools and colleges
- consideration being made of students' **motivation, attendance and interest** in the subject area before they embarked on the course (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006; O'Donnell and Golden, 2007; O'Donnell *et al.*, 2009)
- rigorous entry procedures including **application forms and interviews** in order to ensure that the most suitable young people will apply and be retained (Golden and O'Donnell, 2006; Spielhofer and Walker, 2008).

It is also important that young people make decisions that are right for them, and that they are given sufficient support, in order to lessen the risk of dissatisfaction with their choice, which may lead them to drop-out. This is especially relevant at the current time, where young people have to make a choice between diverse (and often unfamiliar) options.

Our evidence (Golden *et al.*, 2006; Golden and O'Donnell, 2005 and 2006) suggests that young people need to be fully informed about the programme they are choosing, in relation to:

- the **content** of the programme (for instance, the amount of work involved, and the extent of practical work)
- the **structure** of the programme (for instance, if the young person will be required to miss other lessons in order to take part in the programme)
- **practical issues** such as travel, if the programme is provided at a site away from their home-school environment.

Additionally, young people often hold misconceptions about the courses they choose. Our research on Diplomas (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2009) found that some young people (including those who had opted to study for a Diploma themselves) had misconceptions about what these courses involved. The provision of effective information, advice and guidance in relation to these aspects, delivered before young people make decisions about courses, qualifications and locations of study, can help to ensure that young people make an effective and informed decision, and may prevent drop-out (Golden *et al.*, 2004).

Furthermore, effective partnership between all parties involved in a programme (such as schools, colleges and training providers) is needed in order that young people are fully informed about the programmes of study which are available to them. Good communication, good relationships between those involved in the programme, and shared aims and objectives, are all important (Golden *et al.*, 2004). Our research has also found that when making their decisions about courses and locations of study, young people would like:

I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but after the college experience I was more sure that I wanted to continue with education ... I want a better job so I can have a better future (McCrone and Morris, 2004, p.44)



- **advice** about available options from those **'in the know'** (that is, working in a particular profession or who have already studied on a particular course) (Lord *et al.*, 2006, Lord and Jones, 2006)
- the opportunity to **visit sites such as colleges** where the courses they are considering will be delivered (McCrone and Morris, 2004; Morris, 2004; Lord *et al.*, 2006)
- **advice from teachers in their school** who know them well, provided that their knowledge is up-to-date (Lord *et al.*, 2006).

This suggests that all of those involved in the provision of programmes need to work together in order to ensure that young people receive sufficient and useful advice when they are making their decisions.

How can young people be supported once they have made their decisions?

Key points

Drop-out from non-traditional programmes of study at key stage 4 appears to be greater among young people with certain characteristics, at particular times of year and in programmes where learners miss other lessons in order to participate.

Retention can be maximised through active support by education staff which is targeted at those at risk, and/or at particular times of the year, and that involves parents and carers.

Once young people have made the decision to follow a particular pathway, the school (and the college or training provider, in the case of programmes which involve study away from the home-school site) needs to provide them with continued support. In the context of the new, wider curriculum offer, there is a greater risk that young people may drop out, because these courses often feature an unfamiliar location, content, peers and staff, and it is important to consider how to prevent young people from becoming disengaged from the programme.

Our research has identified that young people studying for non-traditional courses tend to drop out more frequently at particular points, such as the beginning and end of terms, so schools may wish to think about designing programmes of study with this in mind, for instance, by targeting support for young people at these specific times of year. Students who drop out from courses tend to have particular characteristics (such as being eligible for free school meals, or being on the Special Educational Needs register), which may suggest that those involved in the delivery of programmes could target extra support at students with these characteristics to minimise the risk of them dropping out (Golden *et al.*, 2005).

Our research has also found that retention may be an issue for programmes which involve study outside of the regular school setting as young people

may miss lessons in core subjects in order to participate in these programmes. It may be helpful for schools to provide catch-up lessons and for teachers to provide work for individual students who have missed core lessons to complete, in order that they do not fall behind with their other work or drop out of the programme they have chosen for this reason (O'Donnell and Golden, 2006).

Additionally, staff who work in colleges and training providers may need to adapt their teaching styles in order to cater to the needs of younger students (aged 14–16) who may be studying on their programmes (Golden *et al.*, 2004; O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006; McCrone *et al.*, 2007; Spielhofer and Walker, 2008).

Finally, some young people draw substantial support from their parents and carers, and thus parents and carers need sufficient information about their children's areas of study so that they can offer this support. This can include understanding the subject area and mode of study and assessment as well as practical and logistical support with travel and organisational skills.

They are still going in the direction they originally planned, but now it is from a knowledge base whereas before it was a little bit theoretical (Golden et al., 2004, p.74)

How do decisions made at age 14 affect later decisions which young people make?

Key points

Evidence suggests that attendance at college pre-16 can help to prepare young people better for the transition at 16 and assist in improving awareness and informing their choices at the end of compulsory schooling.

For some young people, undertaking an applied course pre-16 helps to confirm a post-16 decision, for others it helps to refine their decision or to reject an initial plan.

It is important to consider how the decisions that young people make at the age of 14 have an impact on the later decisions that they make: for instance, at the end of compulsory education (currently age 16). Our research indicates that attending a college course pre-16 can help young people to make more informed choices at post-16 level. As an example, the majority of young people participating in the first cohort of the Young Apprenticeship Programme felt that their participation had influenced their choice of post-16 destination: in particular by increasing their awareness of opportunities that were available to them after year 11, and helping them to decide which route to take post-16 (O'Donnell and Golden, 2005). Similar findings were apparent in our research with young people who followed courses in the IFP (Golden *et al.*, 2004, 2005; O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006) and Skills for Work (Spielhofer and Walker, 2008). Additionally, our research revealed that college staff consider participation in college courses pre-16 aids young people's transition to college at post-16 level, as it enables them to be better prepared for post-16 courses, and to have greater awareness of possible future career paths (McCrone *et al.*, 2007; Spielhofer and Walker, 2008).



So, how do young people's decisions at age 16 and older relate to the earlier decisions they made to participate in particular programmes?

- In some cases, young people who had studied on programmes at age 14–16 **continued their commitment to the same subject area** at post-16 level. For example, many of the young people who took part in both the IFP and the Young Apprenticeship Programme either continued to study in the sector they had selected pre-16, or planned to do this in the future (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006; O'Donnell and Golden; Golden and O'Donnell, 2006).
- For others, studying in a particular vocational area at pre-16 level had informed their decision-making at post-16 level by leading them to **reject a career choice which had previously been considered** (Spielhofer and Walker, 2008).
- For some young people, studying a particular type of course at pre-16 level led to a later decision to **study for a similar type of course, or to study in a similar location**. For instance, young people who studied NVQs through the IFP often continued on the NVQ route post-16, and similarly, young people who studied IFP courses in college or with a training provider often continued in the same or similar location after completing year 11 (Golden *et al.*, 2005, 2006).

Overall, our evidence suggests that pre-16 courses do influence post-16 decision-making, which further emphasises the need for clear and accurate guidance relating to possible progression routes for young people.

Summary

The key findings from this review are summarised below.

- Schools and college staff need to **support young people** in their transition to new types and locations of learning. Support is not just important during the decision-making process, but throughout their time on the programme.
- School and college staff, and parents and carers, need to be **open to and knowledgeable about the options** that are available in this widening landscape. It is important that all of those from whom young people seek advice are informed about the available options or know to whom they could refer young people.
- Young people make decisions in different ways, depending on their individual characteristics. Consequently, there is a need for **diverse and wide-ranging guidance** so that all young people receive appropriate advice in this changing landscape of choice.
- Successful recruitment and retention involves **collaboration** between institutions and a **genuine interest** in the course by the young people.
- To make well-informed choices young people need **full facts including information on potential progression routes**.

Implications

The main implications of the findings from our research for policy and practice, and for young people, are as follows:

- Young people need **support** to navigate their way through these new curriculum opportunities. This support needs to come from **informed adults** – not only guidance professionals but also those with particular insights into the content and nature of the qualification that they will be studying, such as college or training provider staff. Such informed support can be enhanced by connecting with teaching staff or parents and carers who know the individual young person well and who can assist them in interrogating and interpreting the information to ensure that they do make a decision that is right for them.
- The information and guidance provided needs to include not only the **content and learning style** of the course that they are considering but also, in the context of inter-institutional delivery, the **practical and logistical implications** such as the travel, costs and impact on their wider education.
- While the choice made by a young person at 14 is influential in relation to their later education and career related decisions, a decision to pursue an applied qualification at 14 **does not appear to constrain the options** for young people at the end of compulsory schooling as young people who have undertaken applied qualifications have pursued a wide range of routes post-16. Young people need to be **aware of any implications** of their decision but also to understand where their decision may or may not present future constraints.

It's a really big step ... these choices might influence my entire life
(Blenkinsop et al., 2006, p.63)



Notes

1. This could be achieved through the introduction of a new qualification to accredit careers coordinators in schools, which the NFER is currently researching (see www.nfer.ac.uk/research-areas/pims-data/outlines/careers-co-ordinators-in-schools.cfm).

2. This research used, as an analytical tool, models of educational mindsets developed by consultants from SHM, see DfES Research Report (RW67) Mindset Profiles: Segmenting Decision-Makers at Ages 14 and 16, findings from exploratory research by SHM. (SHM, 2005)

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