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Developing 14–19 education: meeting needs and improving choice

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The recent UK government Green Paper proposes reform for the supply side of 14–19 education, establishing four key goals. This article focuses on the first of these goals: meeting needs and improving choice. The article draws on research on sixth form colleges, general further education colleges and schools. It argues that employers, one of the two groups highlighted in the Green Paper, are a relatively weak force in shaping provision. The second group, young people, are more powerful due to current funding incentives. It presents evidence which suggests that colleges and schools perceive both practical and attitudinal difficulties in collaborating to meet needs by offering flexible routes and a distinctive range of choices. A long history of intervention in the supply side has not achieved widening participation nor equity amongst the choices offered. A more radical approach to influencing the demand side may be needed.

Introduction

Post-compulsory education in the UK has emerged from its previous history of relative obscurity to assume a role more centre stage for both policy makers and researchers. The national target of 50% of all 18–30-year-olds to benefit from higher education by 2010 (DfES 2002a) reverberates widely throughout the education system and has led to a much greater focus on the education and training of young people post-16. The latest result is reconsideration by the government of arrangements for the education and training of 14–19-year-olds in England and Wales.

The intensified interest has spawned a range of criticism. Dissatisfaction with the existing system derives from a number of sources, including the government, employers, and young people themselves. The analysis of weaknesses and problems varies. Raffe (2002), drawing on a 1999 OECD report on the UK, notes the academic orientation of UK education and a range of weaknesses in vocational education. This is an old song, as the CBI points out. The aims to 'create a coherent high-quality vocational route for all young people and also ensure that academic and

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vocational qualifications are held in equal value . . . not only date back 50 years –
but have so far not been accomplished' (CBI 2002a, para. 23). The government is
equally plangent (DfES 2002a), deploring the waste of potential in young people
who leave education too early, and the failures of the system to adequately meet the
needs of the whole cohort.

The government appears ambivalent in its aims. On the one hand it wishes
to achieve economic engineering, ensuring a sufficient supply of appropriately
educated and trained people for the labour market. On the other, it aspires to
social engineering, designed to break down class barriers to educational
opportunity by widening participation in post–16 education. In fact, these aims
cannot be decoupled. At least a part of the impetus to raise levels of participation
arises from the belief that higher skills levels are needed in an ever greater
proportion of the population to power a globally competitive UK Inc. (Keep
1999). However, policies which appear fuelled by social justice, but which are
also designed to lead to a workforce better prepared to contribute to the
economy, are perhaps more publicly acceptable than an overt focus on education
as primarily preparation for an economic role. These twin targets of economic
and social regeneration have fuelled a decade of reform of virtually every aspect
of further education and much of higher education (Gleeson and Hodkinson
2000, Smithers and Robinson 2000). Incorporation established self-management
in further education colleges in 1993. In tandem, funding systems have been
changed repeatedly; the curriculum framework and qualifications have been
reshaped. The results of this energetic intervention in the supply side of education
and training are not the intended widening participation, but rather a culture of
organizations forced to focus on chasing funding, a crumbling infrastructure and
an educational class pecking order left well in tact (Ryder 1996, Kennedy 1997,
Lumby 2001, DfES 2002a). For example, Keys *et al.*'s 1998 study of 1500 young
people noted the discrepancy in the percentage of those with parents from a
professional/managerial/technical background, in sixth form colleges (51%),
school sixth forms (42%) and further education colleges (28%). Each type of
institution is drawing differentially from social classes. The same is true in higher
education. Wolf (2002) points out that the number of young people entering
higher education has risen considerably in absolute terms. However, the relative
chances of those from the middle class and those from semi-skilled and unskilled
backgrounds remains much as they were decades ago. The rise in participation is
overwhelmingly middle-class.

A government Green Paper (DfES 2002a: 8) has set out a proposed route for
further reform with four key goals:

- meeting needs, improving choice
- putting teaching and learning at the heart of what we do
- developing the teachers and leaders of the future
- developing a framework for quality and success.

A range of means to achieve these ends is proposed, including placing responsibility
with Local Learning and Skills Councils (LLSCs) to take hard decisions about
reshaping local provision. Changes in funding, as yet unspecified, to encourage
collaboration between schools, colleges, and employers are also signalled, as are
reshaping teaching and learning to offer more flexibility to learners with a greater
choice of pace and location. A specific statement is made about the need for

'*structural changes in the way learning for 16–19 year olds is organised and the creation of distinct provision* (e.g. free standing sixth form colleges, school sixth forms or sixth form centres in further education colleges)' (DfES 2002a: 13, original emphasis). The LLSCs have the task of making 'radical proposals' for such structural changes (DfES 2002a: 13).

This article explores the implications of the first of the four goals of the Green Paper: meeting needs and improving choice, with particular reference to the specific recommendation for the creation of sixth form centres in various forms. It draws on a project which researched the experience of English sixth form (SF) colleges since incorporation in 1993. The research resulted in a range of evidence concerning the development of sixth form college culture, leadership and management, teaching and learning. It also considered the relationship of SF colleges with schools and general further education (GFE) colleges. SF colleges are an example of a part of the post-compulsory system which has been largely overlooked in policy formulation to date but has suddenly assumed much greater significance. As such, they provide a touchstone to explore the implications of the proposed government plans.

The research

A survey was conducted by sending a questionnaire to all 105 SF colleges, and to secondary schools and GFE colleges in the two regions with the highest number of SF colleges per region, the North West and the South East (1174 secondary schools and 60 GFE colleges). These areas are those where there is the greatest concentration of all three types of 16–19 education provision. As such they offer examples of locations where collaboration and/or competition is likely to be most complex, in that all three choices are open to young people. Response rates were 58% from SF colleges, 42% from schools and 37% from GFE colleges. Questions included fixed choice and ranking questions and text comment. Results included factual information (for example, the radius of travel for students in each institution), an indication of priorities (for example, the priority given to increasing the range of student attainment on entry) and commentary on issues such as government policy. A separate analysis of each question was carried out for each survey, using numerical analysis of frequency of response. Categories for further analysis evolved from these results, an iterative process of analysis following the principles of grounded theory. Finally, a comparative analysis of the data collected from the three types of post-16 organization was carried out. In order to provide a representative cross-section of views, 50 staff and 85 students were also interviewed in five case study SF colleges in the survey regions and the East Midlands. The staff interviewed in each college included the principal, the senior management team member with responsibility for curriculum/teaching and learning, the senior management team member with responsibility for student support, the head of a single subject department, the head of cross-college subject/teaching and learning area, and a sample of five teaching staff.

The resulting data provided information on the perspectives of different institutions about the role of SF colleges, their relationship with other types of institution, the opinions of staff and young people about the options available to the latter in choosing to continue their education or training at 16, the reasons for their choice of SF college and their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their experience (Lumby and Briggs 2002).

What follows is a discussion of the research findings in the context of the expressed goal of meeting needs and improving choice and the implications for institutional collaboration. The data from all three types of institution on the way each is interpreting needs and choice, attempting to provide opportunities, and shaping the curriculum as a result, offer an insight into these key processes from the supplier's perspective. The data from young people offer the perspective of the demand side in terms of what choices are perceived to exist and their perceived relevance to future education/training and employment needs.

Meeting needs

The use of the term 'needs' assumes an unproblematic understanding on the part of all players. In fact 'needs' can be interpreted in a number of different ways, including an internalized compulsion, a feeling of being impelled to act in some way, and also an external perception that there is something lacking which, if not rectified, will lead to detriment. As in most policy statements, the 'common sense' use of a term conceals the absence of any agreed understanding or exact definition of what is in question.

The government states:

> We need to ensure that learning provided in an area must meet national and local skill needs. It must be responsive to local employers and communities and it must provide young people and adults with the opportunities they need for progression to further and higher education and for employment and personal development (DfES 2002a: 8).

This statement makes it quite clear that the target needs are those of employers and those of young people. The most common mechanisms to analyse the needs of employers fall into two basic categories, both of which interpret need as a lack which must be remedied. The first is by using job vacancy data and employment trends to amass information about lacunae in skills, both in those already employed and in terms of filling vacancies, and extrapolating the need for skills training on the basis of current and historic shortages. The second is by asking employers about their existing and projected needs in the short, medium, and long term. Whichever method is used, the picture which emerges is unlikely to be clear. For example a CBI Survey (2002b) highlights the fact that 47% of employers expect to recruit more graduates in the next three years, 21% expect to recruit more people with qualifications at level 3 (A levels and equivalent) and 18% more people with level 2 qualifications (GCSEs). In contrast, a DfEE survey (2000) reported that 15–20% of employers indicated skills shortages, and that recruitment difficulties related to intermediate (level 2) craft skills (Steedman 2002). There is a two-year gap between these two reports, but such a period is extremely short compared to the time span of plans to reshape training. Are such plans to be based on the indicated need for more graduates, or on the report which signals craft skills as employers' greatest need?

There are a number of analyses of the reasons for such apparent confusion and contradictions. Rikowski (2001) rejects the general term 'needs' and argues that decades of failure to identify them accurately, assumed to be a result of the confusion of views which emerge from individuals and groups of employers, is in fact inevitable. He suggests employers' needs are better understood as an analysis of the relationship between labour power needs and the various functions of capital. He

suggests a framework for analysis, incorporating, amongst others, the demands of capital–in–general, sectors of capital, and the individual capital of enterprises. Each is quite different, often contradictory, and consequently there is a 'practical hopelessness of educating for industry' (Rikowski 2001: 45). The general skills demanded by capital–in–general are in tension with the very specific skills, and often low-level skills required by individual capitals. Wolf's (2002) interpretation of the relationship of industry to education has parallels and is equally negative. She suggests that micropolitical divisions, for example between large and small enterprises, mean that the stated needs of industry, as articulated respectively by the CBI and the Institute of Directors, are likely to be varying and often contradictory. Where employers have had a considerable influence in shaping what they have seen as an appropriate response to their needs, for example as lead bodies devising competences, they have been no more successful in designing training which is successful, if take up of competences is the criterion for judgement.

The conception of 'need' in terms of that which is lacking – as plugging a gap – is in fact single loop learning directed to remedying the existing system (Argyris 1991); it is not double loop thinking, which would challenge the principles and values of the system itself. Thus the belief that higher level skills are needed by a large proportion of the workforce drives the endemic reform of education. This is despite the fact that the competitive strategy of many enterprises is not high performance of employees but mass production at lowest cost. As Keep (1999) points out, many British employers do not see a skilled workforce as a source of competitive advantage. The government mantra of meeting employers' needs therefore reflects embedded single loop thinking, assuming that ever higher skills levels will drive economic growth and that such a thing as employers' needs can be identified and met. A new double loop thinking is required which recognizes that decades of failure to identify 'needs' is not simply due to a failure of methodology, but inevitable given the current framework, and that even were the elusive needs to be identified, the relationship between education and economic growth is far more complex than a simple correlation between more skills/qualifications and better economic performance.

A further question follows: that of the potential tension between what employers, however confusedly, say they require, and what young people want to do. The individual choice of young people currently drives the system much more strongly than the needs of employers (Lumby 2001). This is partly the result of the difficulty of establishing the needs of employers, but more significantly due to the fact that the current funding system rewards colleges which provide what young people want. The more students an institution can enrol and retain, the greater the level of funding attracted. The funding which is directly supplied by employers is much smaller (Davies 1999). Thus the system is currently driven, not by meeting the 'needs' of employers or young people, but by meeting the 'wants' of the latter. What then do young people want? The choices open to them (in theory) include employment with or without training and schemes such as Modern Apprenticeships, as well as the option chosen by the majority, staying on in an educational institution. Our data relate to the latter, and the analysis considers the implications for policy in the situation current in schools, SF, and GFE colleges.

The data from the SF colleges provide some insight into one group of young people. The case study colleges attracted students from a wide range of abilities and

social backgrounds, and though the majority had achieved level 2 qualifications, some had not, and many of those interviewed were not from the privileged social background sometimes assumed to be the case for students of SF colleges (Robinson and Burke 1996).

The reasons they gave for choosing an SF college were very varied. However, there was some agreement on the main requirements. First, the young people were choosing a particular culture. They wanted to escape the confines of school, with its practice based on meeting the needs of the majority – children under 16. The SF college students wanted to be treated as adults, in a friendly, supportive, and individual way. They wanted freedom, but within parameters that provided a certain security. Secondly, they wanted a range of courses that would provide a good choice, both in terms of the range of subjects and the range of qualifications on offer. Thirdly, many wanted what might be termed *class-related privilege*. The words 'status' and 'reputation' were used repeatedly, along with the assertion that only those deemed 'thick' would contemplate an alternative choice to a SF college – that of the GFE college. A perceived pecking order in terms of status, from SF colleges down to schools and then to GFE colleges, was very apparent.

Many students were instrumental, wanting qualifications and whatever method of teaching would help in achieving them, however mechanical or didactic. Others wanted intellectual stimulation, not just cramming. Of course, a liberal education is about more than just producing those core skills which are seen as the key to a good job and as such highly instrumental. The students themselves distinguished between the instrumental motive for accepting and even welcoming any teaching as long as it led to success in qualifications, and the intrinsic motive of wanting a form of study which was interesting and stimulating in its own right. In the view of staff, those students motivated by instrumental and pragmatic considerations were in the majority, with some regret at the perceived demise of a commitment to a breadth and depth of intellectual engagement. One member of a case study senior management team explained the change:

> I'm not harping back to a mythical golden age of intellectual expertise and people in boaters and scarves walking around the quad talking about Plato, but I don't sense a great wave of intellectual enquiry and enthusiasm among the students. I think many of them are here out of a sense of inevitability rather than a sense of burning desire and this is just the next step.

A shift in culture from middle-class liberal education for its own sake to education as more overtly instrumental is clearly signalled. The young people themselves articulated a culture which placed education and training as a necessary step to achieving a higher qualification (usually a degree) as a precursor to a good job. Meanwhile they worked part-time to finance a lifestyle in which education was an important but not necessarily central element. For some, the incentive to continue in education was very much financial. They did not subscribe to a culture which invested in the present for reward in a distant future. On the contrary, some felt it a right to be paid for their educational activity. Middle-class, liberal attitudes of education as an end in itself, for intellectual growth, or to secure a professional career, intersected with working-class attitudes to work primarily as a means of being paid and to finance other parts of life's varied activities. The class–related divisions were also apparent in the attitudes of some staff and students to internal choices, those on A level courses attracting the greatest prestige in stark contrast to others working towards Vocational or Advanced Vocational Qualifications.

The students felt strongly that they did not want others deciding what they needed. Key Skills was a case in point. In line with previous findings (Hodgson and Spours 2002a), whether promoted by government or by staff, there was universal dislike of being forced to study for skills and qualifications which have little currency or prestige. The imposition of study which government, staff, and employers would see as a fundamental need, that of literacy, numeracy, and ICT skills, was resisted by the young people as being a distraction from the main task of achieving qualifications which would be prized, especially by universities. In insisting for a decade that progress is measured by a rise in the number and level of qualifications achieved, the government has established a culture of 'credentialization' to which many young people now firmly subscribe (Reay 2001).

Widening participation and choice

Government policy has established widening participation as a fundamental target, with the aim of involving young people in education post-16 from more diverse social backgrounds and with a wider range of prior attainment. The major strategies to achieve this goal relate to adjusting the supply side by creating new qualifications, new teaching methods, and new sorts of institution. Thus the suggested creation of more SF colleges or sixth form centres is one tactic to create attractive options for a wider range of young people. However, policy and provision account only for the supply side of the equation. The demand side, in terms of student wants and aspirations, is socially and culturally embedded in what might be termed *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977, Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) or *lifestyle* (Giddens 1991), largely determined by social class values. Indeed, in-depth qualitative research has called into question the assumption that young people make choices in accordance with the principles of a 'technical rationality', characterized by deferred gratification, long-term goals, linear progression and formal guidance programmes (Hodkinson *et al*. 1996, Foskett and Hemsley-Brown 2001). Rather, choice tends to be determined by a 'pragmatic rationality' that is culturally embedded and likely to be short-term, contingent and linked to unexpected events.

The analysis of data from the SF colleges was consistent with this holistic perspective of student choice and perceived want. It makes clear the degree to which young people themselves are curators of class divisions. Many of the case study students not only wished to be part of institutions which are seen as prestigious, but also wanted to be on programmes which have status and currency, with the result that a hierarchy of courses is maintained within their consciousness. They do not necessarily wish to develop the key skills emphasized by employers (CBI 2002a) or government (QCA 2001). Rather, many want the qualifications that will buy a particular kind of future; they want to remain in or move into the middle class. In offering young people a range of choices in the cultures of institutions which they may attend post-16, young people themselves, as well as others, will ascribe status value. Such denotation of status will inevitably attract or repel young people seeking to buy into or avoid the implied class associations.

The research data showed that young people who had opted for a sixth form college did indeed prize a setting for 16–19 learning which was discrete, focused on that particular age group, and which offered a greater degree of freedom than schools in a more adult environment, but was not too adult. A GFE college,

perceived as dominated by adults and offering too much freedom, was rather daunting – a bridge too far for this group. Encouraging LLSCs to set up such discrete local sixth form centres or colleges has the potential for meeting the wants of many who feel comfortable with the implied 'cushioned adulthood' (Lumby and Briggs 2002: 61). However, as a plan to widen participation, the class associations of such an environment may both attract and repel young people who feel comfortable or otherwise with the implied degree of control and security. Such an environment cannot satisfy the wants of all students – which raises the all-important issue of educational choice.

Improving choice

Many of the staff interviewed felt that a range of different environments was needed to meet the needs (as they perceived them) and the wants of all young people. For example, some acknowledged that although they felt that SF colleges best met the needs of many, some young people would require the greater degree of control and security offered, in their view, by a school sixth form. Where a diversity of local institutions made this possible, young people were making choices along two dimensions. First, they clearly connected different types of post–16 educational institution with a level of ability, SF colleges and schools perceived as generally suitable for the more able, GFE colleges for the less academically able. This is borne out by the figures in attainment on entry, which show that for 1997/98 70.8% of 16 to 18-year-olds entering SF colleges on FEFC-funded, full-time, full-year courses had 5 or more GCSE passes at A$\star$–C. The figure for GFE colleges was 25% (LSC 2001). The nature of this differential was clearly fixed in the minds of many of the young people interviewed.

Secondly, the different types of institution offered a different culture, particularly in terms of the degree of control exercised over students. In order for young people to find the match which in their view best meets their needs, a range of options is needed, and this relates to the government goal to facilitate such choice. The survey explored the differences between the three different types of institution – schools, SF colleges and GFE colleges.

The questionnaire asked the respondents of each type of institution to indicate what they saw as their distinctiveness. Respondents could make more than one reference, and some were more detailed in unpacking different elements of their distinctiveness than others. Consequently, the percentages should be seen as indicative only, but nevertheless the analysis does signal some perceived differences in emphasis.

Schools were asked 'How would you describe the main purposes of 16–19 provision in your school?'. A summary of the data is shown in table 1.

Overall, 221 school respondents (80%) identified progression as a major purpose, a particular emphasis being placed on the provision of a high quality academic education with progression to higher education (HE).

Fifty-five SF college respondents answered the question on their purpose. Their responses are summarized in table 2.

In the case of SF colleges, the emphasis is very much on providing a general full-time education of high quality for 16–19 students. Only ten respondents specifically emphasized academic qualifications, whereas an almost equal number (7) made specific reference to vocational education or training. There is a concern

Table 1.   School respondents' perceptions of their distinctive contribution to 16–19 provision (N of respondents: 277).

Identified categories of purpose	No. of respondents identifying each category of purpose	% of respondents identifying each category of purpose (rounded figures)
1. Progression to HE	114	41
2. Academic provision	98	35
3. Provision for FT students	91	33
4. Progression to employment/careers	69	25
5. Personal & social development	66	24
6. Comprehensive education ideals	63	23
7. Progression (general/non-specific)	24	9
8. Inclusive education	20	7
9. Progression to FE	14	5
10. Continuity in cross-phase provision	12	4
11. Meeting constituency needs	10	4
12. Single sex educational provision	8	3
13. Vocational education provision	8	3

Table 2.   SF college respondents' perceptions of their distinctive contribution to 16–19 provision (N of respondents: 55).

Identified categories of purpose	No. of respondents identifying each category of purpose	% of respondents identifying each category of purpose (rounded figures)
1. General provision for FT 16–19 students	27	49
2. Personal, social and spiritual development	20	36
3. Meeting constituency needs	20	36
4. Academic provision	10	18
5. Progression (general/non-specific)	6	11
6. Inclusive education	6	11
7. Vocational education provision	4	7
8. Progression to employment/careers	2	4
9. Progression to HE.	1	2

to meet the broader personal needs of individual students, with reference to student welfare, support, progression, and moral and spiritual development.

Only 22 respondents from general further education (GFE) colleges provided information on the purposes of their college's 16–19 provision. This is a very small number and the responses therefore must be treated with caution. However, a different emphasis from schools seems to be indicated, as shown in table 3.

GFE colleges stressed a wide range of provision. A majority (16 of the 22) see their purpose in terms of providing vocational and technical education along with associated training and key skills. Eleven colleges also emphasized the comprehensive nature of their provision, an expressed purpose being to cater for students with a wide range of interests and abilities, both vocational and academic. Although in a minority

Table 3.   GFE college respondents' perceptions of their distinctive contribution to 16–19 provision (N of respondents: 22).

Identified categories of purpose	No. of respondents identifying each category of purpose	% of respondents identifying each category of purpose (rounded figures)
1. Vocational education provision	16	73
2. Comprehensive education provision	11	50
3. Academic provision	9	41
4. Providing for those who have not succeeded in school	5	23
5. Values (general/non-specific)	4	18
6. Progression (general/non-specific)	3	14

(9 of 22), a number of GFE colleges also specifically identified the pursuit of traditional academic qualifications (i.e. A level and GCSE) as a goal.

Schools therefore emerge as having the clearest commitment to an academic curriculum with progression to higher education, a far greater percentage, 98 out of 277 (35%) referring to academic education compared to only 10 out of 55 (18%) for SF colleges and a mere 2 out of 22 (9%) for GFE colleges. This seems to support the Government policy of encouraging the establishment of centres for 16–18 education other than school sixth forms, in order to promote a viable alternative to the academic route. A difference in general ethos of SF colleges, GFE colleges and schools was also signalled by the survey, with 82% of GFE colleges believing that they offered a different ethos from SF colleges. Similarly, 79% of SF college respondents believed their ethos to be different from that of GFE colleges, and 83% different from that of schools.

Such self-reported data, particularly in the case of the low number of responses from GFE colleges, must be treated cautiously. As one case study college member of staff put it, 'Evaluation of sixth form provision by sixth form providers is rarely motivated by objectivity'. However, the response from young people in the SF colleges did confirm that the range of curricular provision and the general culture of schools, SF colleges, and GFE colleges were strongly differentiated and distinctive in their perception.

In some parts of the country, where there is access to both GFE colleges and SF colleges, there is a genuine choice for young people. Where schools are the only practical option, because of the absence of local SF colleges or because of travel difficulties to GFE colleges, the academic orientation and perceived culture of control in schools (as indicated by the data) may be proving a disincentive for some young people to continue their education. However, the problem with general-izations drawn from surveys is that they may conceal variation. Some schools may be offering a service which is comprehensive in meeting the needs of many young people. One school respondent argued strongly that their very small sixth form did a good job for all their students:

> We do not want to lose our small sixth form. It is heartbreaking. I complement our local FE college – I do not compete with it. The majority of my students go on to FE with the skills necessary to help them achieve. 90% of my students finish their courses. We have been told that all sixth forms must have 150 students . . . Isn't it sad that successful sixth forms like mine will have to go?

Any formula for stipulating the viability of sixth forms, whether of 150 students minimum or any other criterion, will inevitably curtail some choices while opening up others. The staff and students in the case study colleges generally saw the range of curriculum offered by a larger centre, and the ethos which offered greater freedom and a more adult feel than schools, as of benefit to young people. However, for some students, large size may be daunting. The size of GFE colleges was a negative feature for the SF college students, but it may be an attraction for others. Choice means maintaining differences, and equity means ensuring that the same choices are available for all. The implications of this are that LLSCs and LEAs must take difficult decisions, both in educational and economic terms, and that schools and colleges must work together to maintain distinctiveness, thereby providing alternative choices and appropriate routes for the whole cohort. Such requirements are problematic. Firstly, the power of LLSCs to effect change is limited by local political allegiances and alliances. For example, even where there is strong evidence that a school sixth form may be too small to be viable on curricular, social, and economic grounds, parents may well work to block moves to close the sixth form and provide an alternative. Secondly, as argued earlier, providing differentiated options does not result in young people experiencing choices in the same way. Practical issues such as the cost of travel can impose limitations. Moreover, class issues, related to the considerations of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1977), deeply embedded social attitudes and educational aspirations, reflecting both background and attainment, may also colour young people's ability to perceive different options as choices genuinely open to them. Finally, the institutions themselves may resist moves to encourage distinctiveness and open choice. They may wish to be whatever will draw the most young people and therefore the most funding, and work to recruit as many students as possible, even where the suitability of provision is doubtful. Their willingness and ability to collaborate is the key to addressing this difficulty.

Working together to improve choice

Despite these impediments, the government has put the onus on LLSCs to reorganize, if necessary, to arrive at an optimum local arrangement of provision. Setting aside the micropolitical difficulties of such a process, and assuming this could be achieved, there would still be a need for schools, GFE colleges, and SF colleges to collaborate, so as to provide flexible study routes and the necessary guidance to ensure the right pathway for each student, as mooted in the Green Paper. The research questioned all three types of institution on their attitudes to collaboration – what they perceived as the incentives and barriers.

Of the 146 school respondents who commented on collaboration, 123 gave positive responses highlighting incentives, and 23 gave negative or neutral responses, either claiming that there were no incentives or failing to highlight them. The incentives for collaboration are summarized in table 4.

The great majority of responses fall into the broad category of perceived internal/intrinsic incentives for collaboration, particularly with respect to the advantages for students (e.g. a wider choice of courses, enrichment opportunities). However, collaboration is also seen as having major organizational benefits to the schools themselves in terms of cost effectiveness, staff development, and the long-term survival of school sixth forms.

Table 4.   School respondents' perceptions of incentives for collaboration (N of respondents: 146)

Identified incentive	No. of respondents identifying each incentive	% of respondents identifying each incentive (rounded figures)
1. Broadening the educational experience of students	83	57
2. Funding and resource provision	27	18
3. Externally driven incentives	22	15
4. Professional development and support	15	10
5. Institutional survival	12	8

Specific references to external/extrinsic incentives for collaboration are far fewer and relate to the LSC, the LEA, and the new inspection arrangements. They are linked in part to the funding mechanisms where funding follows the learner, each attracting a fixed sum for a programme of learning and for achievement of a qualification, and incentives for collaboration, such as ring-fenced funds to promote collaborative schemes. References also relate to other pressures and opportunities resulting from these external organizations, such as the inception of local federations of schools and colleges. There is a degree of uncertainty and tentativeness expressed by some respondents, indicated either in terms of expressed aspirations for collaboration, rather than the reality, or in terms of reserving judgement on the new funding arrangements until their true impact is known.

In terms of barriers that prevent or deter collaboration, there were comments from 224 school respondents, nearly double the number of responses on incentives for collaboration. The categories of barrier are shown in table 5.

The practical difficulties facing schools figure very prominently as barriers, particularly timetable incompatibility and transport arrangements. In some isolated rural areas such constraints may be seen as prohibitive. Many respondents also draw attention to the opportunity costs of collaboration, in terms of the additional pressures on administration, the blurred boundaries of responsibility between

Table 5.   School respondents' perceptions of barriers to collaboration (N of respondents: 224)

Identified barrier	No. of respondents identifying each barrier	% of respondents identifying each barrier (rounded figures)
1. Constraints related to transport and distance between institutions	89	40
2. Timetable constraints	73	36
3. Competition	42	19
4. Safeguarding institutional autonomy	41	18
5. Accountability issues	28	13
6. Funding and financial issues	27	12
7. Negative/indifferent attitudes of other institutions	19	8
8. Political constraints (mainly LEAs)	4	2

institutions, accountability to students and parents, and maintaining control over standards, especially if potential partners in collaborative projects have a poor local reputation. Successful, relatively self-sufficient institutions seem to question whether the potential gains of collaboration are worth the extra risks or the additional effort.

Of the 12 GFE college respondents on collaboration, the emphasis appears to be a little different. There were six direct references to externally driven incentives arising from a need to respond to, or comply with, government initiatives, including the 'external threat from the government agency' and 'the LSC Area Inspections'. However, other respondents see the prospects of external influence for collaboration more in terms of an opportunity than a threat, including reference to the prospect of additional support (especially financial) from the LSC and Local Learning Partnerships. There were only four direct references to internally and/or locally driven incentives arising from an appreciation that collaboration is a worthwhile goal in itself, irrespective of external government influence. These references highlighted such potential advantages as the 'removal of inefficient duplication', 'building Key Stage 4 collaboration' and the potential to achieve some degree of rationalization and overall coherence of 16–19 provision. One respondent summarized the potential gains: 'Fairness to students – avoidance of destructive competition with the student as loser; exchange of good practice; cross-fertilisation with other professionals; increasing the likelihood of the survival of some small institutions'. However, there were more references to barriers than to incentives to collaboration. Of the 18 comments, the largest number (11) cited competition as a barrier. The sense of a lack of trust of other organizations emerged strongly. There were only three references to practical constraints. By way of contrast, for schools the practical difficulties of collaborating appear considerable. For GFE colleges, it is existing competition and the lack of a climate of trust which appear the biggest hurdles.

Of the 39 respondents from SF colleges, the majority (22) identified external incentives resulting from a need to respond to, or comply with, government initiatives. They would attempt to access funding to support collaboration. Thirty-three respondents noted internally and/or locally driven incentives, arising from an appreciation that collaboration is a worthwhile goal in itself, irrespective of external influence. Two further respondents gave negative responses indicating that essentially there were no incentives for collaboration.

In terms of barriers that prevent or deter collaboration, the position of SF colleges was similar to that of GFE colleges. Based on the 43 respondents who answered the question, the categories of response are indicated in table 6.

The categories of response are interrelated. Funding, for example, is an explanatory factor behind both the competition between institutions and the practical/logistical constraints, which could be eased with an additional injection of funds. The funding issue also illustrates well the current tensions and contradictions in government policy. On the one hand, SF college principals see funding policy as a mechanism for collaboration, but they also clearly see it as an impetus behind competition. Although the 'negative attitudes' to collaboration are broken down into 'fear', 'suspicion', 'lack of trust', 'hostility', and 'inertia' (to reflect the language used by respondents), the dividing line between these may be thin, reflecting a semantic nuance, rather than a substantive difference in the intensity of attitudes or feelings. Some of them sense that they are managing a transition, in response to

Table 6. SF college respondents' perceptions of barriers to collaboration (N of respondents: 43)

Identified barrier	No. of respondents identifying each barrier	% of respondents identifying each barrier (rounded figures)
1. Negative/indifferent attitudes of other institutions	20	47
2. Practical/logistical problems	18	42
3. Competition	14	33
4. Funding and financial issues	10	23
5. Safeguarding institutional autonomy	5	12

changes in government policy, from a culture based on the virtues of competition and the operation of market forces, to one based on the virtues of collaboration and the rationalization of provision to meet local needs in a more co-ordinated and coherent fashion. However, they point out that such a change will be necessarily long-term, taking time to build trust and to establish lasting links, and will require adequate resources. How far this is a real transition, and how far respondents are reflecting what they know they are expected to do, is debatable.

Clearly the difficulties in collaboration differ in emphasis, with schools largely seeing practical issues as the key, and both types of college pinpointing underlying attitudinal orientation as critical. The government insistence on greater collaboration and flexibility of provision for individual students (DfES 2002a) takes no account of the practical difficulties indicated by schools in this survey. Nor does the policy address the antipathy and intense competition between some organizations signalled by survey comments.

The injection of sufficient funds so that those who collaborate gain financially may erode distrust. However, rewarding those who encourage students (in their own best interests) to move to another institution, whether full-time or part-time, remains problematic. While funding remains tightly linked to student numbers and progress, those who ensure students move to the most appropriate location are likely to lose out financially.

With funding arrangements as they are, organizations are more likely to attempt to maximize their appeal to as broad a spectrum of students as possible in an effort to increase recruitment levels, thereby endangering another policy target of the Green Paper: to ensure that every provider is 'clear about its own educational and training mission and focuses on its particular strengths' (DfES 2002a: 9). Since 1993, as schools and colleges have pursued funding attached to students, there has been an effort on the part of institutions to broaden their provision in order to attract or retain more students. Colleges are offering the higher education previously confined to polytechnics and universities, and schools are engaging with the vocational education which was previously the remit of further education. In some cases not only the curriculum but the ethos of schools has been changed, with an attempt to replicate the culture of colleges, adopting a 'quasi FE style' (DfES 2002b: 9). As a consequence of the curricula and cultural changes, the Secretary of State for Education recently noted 'the drift and lack of mission in further education and training', as highlighted in the Green Paper (DfES 2002a).

Funding is important but it is not the only incentive to compete. The survey responses evidenced a desire to be successful, to be a popular choice for students, and to thrive for professional as well as financial reasons. This being the case, schools and colleges are likely to be tempted to replicate whatever is perceived as successful in another organization in order to continue to attract the growing numbers of students. The policy emphasis on widening participation is double-edged. On the one hand, it implies development of the curriculum to appeal to the widest group. However, this very process is likely to blur distinctions and to erode the reality of choices in terms of the range of curriculum and culture. At the same time, while the supply side of schools and colleges is attempting to appeal to the broadest constituency, the demand side of students and their families is likely to be a force to maintain the hierarchical distinctions which offer them choices in terms of status (Brand 1998).

The Pandora's box of entrepreneurialism, opened by a decade or more of a funding system and a funding shortage which has fuelled competition, will not be easily closed (Lumby 1998). Schools and colleges will need much help to achieve success through developing distinctive approaches, rather than replicating the successful approaches of others, and will have to work with a demand process which is less concerned with the best for the majority than with selecting and maintaining the best option for each individual, on the lines of those individual demand factors discussed earlier in the paper.

Searching for answers

The 'third way' strategy, of 'the development of a "wide-ranging supply side policy which seeks to reconcile economic growth mechanisms with structural reform of the welfare state"' (Hyland 2002: 247), has not achieved the goal of ensuring that young people have a range of choices which meet their educational and training needs, because it has not dented the social structures which impel life trajectories. The gulf between the rhetoric and the reality, the vision of a more equal society fuelled by equity in education and the reality of a hierarchy of status in choices post–16 persist. A truly radical change will require far more than a reform of the supply side; it will also require a long-term change of class-based attitudes and perceptions of the respective merits of the vocational and academic routes in post-16 education. Despite this, government policy persists in its aim to reshape attitudes towards recognition that both vocational and academic routes have their respective and equal roles to play in ensuring the future prosperity of the nation and in meeting the needs of the full cohort of post-16 students.

Attempts to achieve this through decades of adjustment of the supply side have failed to take account of the micropolitical and cultural issues which continue to overwhelm attempts to achieve choice and equity in post-compulsory education. The latest Green Paper continues the rational trend in optimistically assuming that potentially radical local restructuring can be achieved by the LLSCs on the basis of researching and responding to need. Strategists in business have learned long ago that rational plans may not achieve very much. Quinn (1993: 83) describes the bewilderment, frustration, and anger which results when leaders see their plans fail through relying on 'the awesome rationality of their formally derived strategies and the inherent power of their positions to cause their organizations to respond'. Such an experience is familiar to government.

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In response to this seemingly insuperable set of problems, a number of answers to the problem of how to achieve genuine choice for young people and equal value for those choices have already been suggested. Gleeson and Hodkinson (2000) propose a unified approach to 14–19 training and a re-examination of the funding system. The evidence reviewed in this article supports this suggestion. If young people are to have a coherent range of options from which to choose, institutions need to work together to create such a system on a local basis. However, the evidence reviewed also shows that the barriers to achieving this are considerable. Not only are there attitudinal and practical difficulties in the supply side, there is also the resistance from the demand side to eroding inequalities. As Reay (2001: 341) points out 'for many middle-class parents, the imperative to reproduce their privileged position is profound'. Education for them is primarily a means of maintaining or increasing social capital, not for producing an equal society. For working-class families education offers complex choices 'as escape, as a project for maximising and fulfilling the self, or a complicated mix of the two' (Reay 2001: 336). Consequently, there may be some ambivalence about eroding inequalities, if the aim is to escape one class and find a route into another. Nevertheless, Gleeson and Hodkinson may be right in suggesting that in the face of such intractable difficulties, funding may be one of the most powerful levers for change.

Hodgson and Spours (2002b) argue that qualifications exert a powerful force in shaping the system, and it is the reform of qualifications which holds the key to improvement. However, our analysis indicates that whatever the revision to existing qualifications, or the creation of new ones, young people, their families, and advisors are likely to continue to ascribe differential status to such qualifications. The orientation of each young person to the resulting hierarchy of qualification choices will be coloured by their class background and influenced by the determination either to remain in, or to move from, class roots. Attempting to bypass such divisions by forcing young people into incorporating both high-status academic and low-status vocational elements, for example in the government-proposed matriculation for all at 18, is likely to cause a storm of protest, both from those who wish for a high-status route from A levels through to university, without the need to undertake vocational qualifications, and from those who would prefer a primarily vocational route.

Certain fundamentals to achieve change are self-evident. Firstly, in considering strategy and tactics, the complex picture of demand as well as supply, including vested class and financial interests, must be taken into account. If policies and planned provision (the supply side) are to be successful, they 'must be built on better understanding of the real social processes and contexts in all their confusing complexity' (Hodkinson *et al*. 1996:138). This implies the recognition that creating more choices through a greater range or differentiation between types of institution may serve only to embed or intensify the current status hierarchy amongst schools and colleges. Young people and their families will continue to read the status signals and, quite rationally, connect certain routes with more prestige and financial reward than others (Wolf 2002).

Government needs to acknowledge that it cannot achieve change through signals which are in essence manufactured and false. As Schein (1985) argues, culture is discerned from what people do, not what they say, particularly in the case of leaders. Policy statements can promote rhetoric on the value of vocational routes, but young people and their families have not been – and will not be – fooled. If different choices are to be seen as offering equal status then much more powerful signals of genuinely

ascribed value are needed. Arguably the most powerful cultural signal from government to help engineer such change, as suggested above, is investment and financial recognition. Policy implementation in 14–19 education may require affirmative action by way of a much greater level of investment in vocational education and training to redress current status inequities, for example in the pay of teachers and lecturers. The investment needs to encompass both the supply and demand side, providing greater funds to colleges but also to students. Equally, the funding dispersal system as a whole needs review. At the moment the principle of funding following the student means that institutions are driven to a range of measures which are not necessarily in the best interests of the young people. Instead, funding could relate to institutional plans to offer learning opportunities.

Secondly, the process of policy implementation needs to be given far more weight. The current emphasis in government on policy formulation needs a radical shift to policy implementation. Staff and students in this study were united in believing that it was not so much the principles of policy which were mistaken, but the process of achieving them which was given far too little attention. Implementation planning needs to take detailed account of the strategic requirement to work on a political as well as rational platform at a local level, especially working in close partnership with the schools and colleges which have direct operational responsibility for the effective implementation of new policy initiatives.

Given the long tradition of an education system differentiated by class, there is no set of recommendations which will achieve the ideal of equality for all. Government continues to assume that equality can be achieved and that rational planning for change will move towards it. In this they have no choice. Once perspectives other than the purely rational are adopted, for example the micropolitcal or cultural, then the complexities of the situation come into much sharper focus, but equally, such viewpoints generate no clear agenda for action. The choice appears to be between either a rational and simplistic course of action, or a complex and much deeper understanding that in itself is powerless to engineer the desired change. What is needed is a policy which does what is possible to lessen differentials in status ascribed to different types of education institutions and routes, recognizing that results are likely to be limited, while also recognizing the importance of the cultural and micropolitical perspectives. Such recognition is necessary to a realization that reform will not succeed while cultural signals which undermine it persist. For example, if government policy promotes equality while retaining the A level 'gold standard' as the pre-18 pinnacle for getting into a 'good' university, operating in an increasingly differentiated higher education system at post-18, then both society in general and young people in particular will continue to read the cultural and status runes correctly. Consequently, the reforms specifically directed at 'meeting needs and improving choice' are unlikely to amount to any more than the rhetoric of good intention, rather than the substantial and effective transformation of post-16 educational provision that is so desperately needed for the twenty-first century.

Acknowledgements

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