



## **Playing catch-up**

**A call for action on young people left behind  
in the education system**

**September 2016**

## Introduction

### 1. What is the issue?

In 2015, 14% of employers in a UK-wide survey reported a skills gap in their workforce which has been steadily increasing since 2011.<sup>1</sup> Despite numerous policy interventions there is still much to be done to address the alarming numbers of young people not engaged in education or training or undertaking casual, unskilled labour. As of March 2016, 12% of all young people aged 16-24 were not in education, employment or training (NEET)<sup>2</sup> and 169,200 people aged 18-24 were claiming Jobseeker's Allowance or Universal Credit in July 2016.<sup>3</sup> Figures also estimate that 35% of people on zero-hours contracts are 16-24 – the highest proportion of all age groups.<sup>4</sup> For many young people, this lack of engagement and progression in education during and after school can have a lifelong impact on their social mobility.

The emerging skills gap is coupled with a worrying lack of progression of disadvantaged young people in education and skills.<sup>5</sup> The type of work and careers available to young people who have not progressed to Level 2 (GCSE) by 18 is precarious, heavily weighted in service industries and unskilled work. This lack of progression will not be solved by a push to help high achieving disadvantaged young people in to top universities and higher level apprenticeships. As important as this is, all young people, at every level of ability should be supported to reach their full potential. This requires a rethinking of our educational landscape, and an outcome-focused offer that is concentrated on progression and is tailored to all levels and abilities.

In our experience, ambition for young people who do not reach GCSE levels of attainment at school often dissolves by the time they reach 16. The focus becomes about stopping people being NEET and moving them in to any kind of employment or traineeship regardless of their ambition, skills or untapped potential. Yet, skills fit for the modern age require investment at all levels. Today's young people will need to respond to changing, global economic opportunities throughout their working lives. They will require transferable skills and access to lifelong learning that will enable them to work not only today but into the mid century, and to support the economy and communities to grow and thrive. Young people who are left catching up at 16 will make up a significant proportion of our future workforce, working longer in to retirement by the end of the century. While NEET prevention is an important focus, government policy needs to shape a system with a more ambitious purpose that allows young people to progress towards individual lifelong goals, and not be shoehorned into a temporary or unsustainable next step.

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[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/525444/UKCESS\\_2015\\_Report\\_for\\_web\\_May.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/525444/UKCESS_2015_Report_for_web_May.pdf)

2 <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06705>

3 <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05871/SN05871.pdf>

4 <http://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/contractswithnoguaranteedhours/2015-09-02#what-are-the-characteristics-of-people-employed-on-zero-hours-contracts>

5 <http://www.impetus-pef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Impetus-PEF-Position-Paper-Final-draft-Web.pdf>

There is a cohort of young people who, for various reasons, experience a period of disengagement at school and find themselves 'playing catch-up' at 16. There are two groups of young people who fall under the definition: those who have different levels of cognitive ability that impair achievement in traditional settings, and those that have ability but have not realised their potential. For both groups, the current system disables catch-up and progression past a certain age. General education funding stops at 19 regardless of the headway young people have made from 16. This means young people who fell through the cracks during their school years, and start at a lower base than their higher achieving peers, are expected to progress up to three times their current level in two years. Yet funding and specialist support for this group post-16 reduces by around 50% and is incomparable to the levels of funding received by schools for disadvantaged learners pre-16. Despite the excellent ground made up during two years of renewed learning, many young people in this group fall in to a lifetime of unstable, low-paid employment with a lack of social mobility.

The Post-16 Skills Plan released by the Department for Education and the Department for Business and Skills in July 2016, addresses the current system failings and outlines a range of reforms to the skills system to support young people into sustainable employment and fill the growing skills gap. Recommendations include cementing the right funding system to ensure it supports individual choice as well as introducing appropriate accountability arrangements; themes resonating with our proposals (see page 8), providing a solid foundation for system change.

## **2. Who is playing catch-up?**

There are well-reported, clear links between the attainment of disadvantaged young people and their better off peers. Research has explored how certain groups of young people, namely from disadvantaged backgrounds, are failing to progress past a certain point. A report launched by Impetus PEF at Nacro's March roundtable showed that only 33% of disadvantaged students achieved five or more A\*-C GCSEs.<sup>6</sup> This shows that a significant number of students eligible to claim free school meals (FSM) do not progress from Level 2 to Level 3 courses during their 16-19 education. Of the 85% who continued into a sustained education or employment destination post-16, only 44% entered into a Level 3 course.<sup>7</sup>

Research highlights a concerning narrative for young people getting left behind. Some leave education below Level 3 after securing low-level employment which is personally more desirable; others never catch up from low entry levels after leaving school. For the majority of Nacro learners, by the time they have progressed from Entry Level to a Level 2 qualification with the right kind of support and guidance, their funding entitlement expires. This blocks progression for those students playing catch up at 16. However, grouping disadvantage by young people entitled to FSM only tells part of the story. To identify all young people playing catch up a wider narrative is required.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.impetus-pef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Impetus-PEF-Position-Paper-Final-draft-Web.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/destinations-of-ks4-and-ks5-pupils-2013-to-2014>

The Pupil Premium provides schools with top-up funding to use, with discretion, to support disadvantaged students. Disadvantage has long been defined by eligibility to claim FSM as a measure of a low income household and by those who have been looked after and in local authority care. This is used as the basis for schools collecting the Pupil Premium for those eligible up to the age of 16. This extra funding is only paid on the basis of those children registered to claim free school meals, and does not include those who are eligible but are not registered.

However, there are further limitations as to how useful the FSM measure is, given that it is based purely on income and does not reflect the wider circumstances of a young person.

Some young people who have experienced a trigger event, not linked to their socio-economic status, are also at risk of not reaching their potential, disengaging at school and experiencing time away from their higher funded learning before the age of 16. Research has shown that there are a number of factors over and above socioeconomic status affecting engagement and subsequent progression in education. For example, family breakdown, bereavement, ill-health, mental ill health, struggles with adolescence, bullying or contact with the criminal justice system.<sup>8</sup> These kinds of significant life events can have a devastating effect on an individual's ability to engage in education, often at the most critical point in their funded secondary education. These events can happen to any child from any socioeconomic group. This is not to say that children from low income families are not disadvantaged in the education and higher education system. However, when considering the steps needed to facilitate catch up, Nacro believe that all young people who are not on track to gain GCSEs or equivalent by 16 are disadvantaged in the education system in some way.

Being clear about the reasons why stalled progression occurs is important in order to develop practical solutions that address educational need and potential for many young people who find themselves in the position of playing catch-up. Unsurprisingly, profiling disadvantage beyond economic circumstances is complex. FSM is a widely used measurement, as it is easily calculated and collected, but broadening the scope beyond income requires an approach that takes into account more complex circumstances. While research has been carried out around young people eligible to receive FSMs, there is very little exploring other factors that stall progression. From Nacro's experience working with young people, we know that there are a huge number of complex issues that trigger stalled education progression. While this profiling information may be captured at a local level, through schools and potentially local authorities, most of it is not captured and collated at a national level when funding decisions are taken. In addition, young people with unidentified or sub-threshold problems (such as clinically undiagnosed mental ill health or unidentified special educational needs (SEN)) are not captured by profiling information. Young people falling into these cracks are often left without the additional support and specialist help needed to progress forward.

In order for us to fully understand the reasons as to why the progression gap is still significant for young people playing catch-up, factors beyond economic status need to be explored.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/219639/DFE-RR254.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/219639/DFE-RR254.pdf)

Research has considered the effect certain events can have on a young person's development and ability to engage in education. For example, an international study has shown that children from one parent families tend to leave school earlier,<sup>9</sup> making the link between a reduced probability of further education where there was one parent, particularly amongst children in large families.

Furthermore, Institute of Education research has found that 'adults who had experienced parental separation in childhood had a higher probability of problems which included mental health and well-being, alcohol use, lower educational attainment and problems with relationships.'<sup>10</sup> A paper written by the Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre explored the psychological and educational outcomes on children that had suffered close family bereavement and highlights that bereaved children were more likely to be absent from school and achieve lower exam results compared to their non-bereaved peers.<sup>11</sup>

A Department for Education longitudinal study follows young people in England from aged 13/14 to 19/20 and aims to chart their transition from compulsory education to other forms of education, training, employment and other activities, amongst other major life areas. This study explored the prevalence of risky behaviour (for example contact with the police, alcohol or drug use) amongst the group, and concluded that the higher the level of risky behaviour, the less likely young people were to be engaged with their schooling or aspire to university.<sup>12</sup>

The report also looked into truancy and absence rates, finding that truancy levels varied according to a range of factors including deprivation, bullying, ethnicity and SEN. Strong links were found between truancy and bullying, as well as exclusion and bullying. The impact of missing long periods of schooling can be significantly detrimental to a young person's progression. Moreover, Department for Education research has shown that young people who have been bullied have lower attainment at Key stage 4.<sup>13</sup>

The Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children – a study of children born to more than 14,000 mothers recruited in the Avon area during pregnancy in 1991 and 1992 – reported that 'domestic abuse and victimisation outside the home were significantly associated with lower attainment in adolescence',<sup>14</sup> as well as highlighting a number of other factors having an effect on the educational attainment of the children in the study, including family/personal injury or illness, parental separation or divorce and bullying. Witnessing crime, financial worries and arguing parents also had a negative impact on the educational attainment of the children studied.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://educationnext.org/one-parent-students-leave-school-earlier/>

<sup>10</sup> Impact of Family breakdown on children's wellbeing, evidence review Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education 2009 <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/11165/1/DCSF-RR113.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre 2014 [http://www.cwrc.ac.uk/news/documents/Revised\\_Childhood\\_Bereavement\\_review\\_2014a.pdf](http://www.cwrc.ac.uk/news/documents/Revised_Childhood_Bereavement_review_2014a.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/374649/RR388\\_-\\_Longitudinal\\_study\\_of\\_young\\_people\\_in\\_England\\_cohort\\_2\\_wave\\_1.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/374649/RR388_-_Longitudinal_study_of_young_people_in_England_cohort_2_wave_1.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/182409/DFE-RR001.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182409/DFE-RR001.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Family stressors and children's outcomes, Department for Education 2013 [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/219639/DFE-RR254.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/219639/DFE-RR254.pdf)

Unsurprisingly, being in contact with the criminal youth justice system can significantly affect a young person's progression and subsequent educational attainment. Criminal behaviour in children is often linked to mental health, traumatic childhood events and chaotic home lives.

Further research showed that 'young people who are under-achieving at school and not engaged in education are 'at risk' of involvement in crime'.<sup>15</sup> It also found that 'the educational paths of many of the young people in the study were characterised by change and disruption'. In Nacro's experience of working with young people in our education centres who have been in contact with the criminal justice system, as well as through the Beyond Youth Custody programme,<sup>16</sup> criminal behaviour can have a significant impact on educational achievement. Long-term implications, such as criminal records, can also play a part in affecting social mobility. Keeping the young person engaged in education and catching any aggravating factors early is critical.

While this research gives an insight into links between educational attainment and linked progression, creating a system to effectively track young people would create visible links to any stalled progression. It would also provide insight to trigger factors and potential avenues to adapt policy and funding to support young people during this period and enable them to catch up.

In the wider landscape, reforms to funding formulas offer the opportunity to expand the scope of the term disadvantage and provide better support to young people who are playing catch-up. In our view, funding needs to be flexible enough to match the journey of young people who find themselves having to play catch up.

### **3. Effectively tracking progression**

Being able to effectively track and monitor an individual's progression is extremely important. Progress 8 is a system used to track progression from the end of primary school to the end of secondary school.<sup>17</sup> It should be an important starting point to design a robust tool for tracking progression up to and post 16 and importantly, identifying stagnation. However, this progression tool needs to include factors such as those highlighted above. This would provide an individualised and tailored approach to education, that would track stalls in development and mean the right type of interventions and access to wider alternative qualifications and teaching can happen earlier and or continue post 19 (where appropriate).

Practice between schools and local authorities in recording this information differs greatly, with some being more proactive than others, for example in signposting to bereavement councillors, or solving bullying problems. However for some, a traumatic event or family situation can lead to prolonged absences, 'present absences' or complete disengagement, making it extremely difficult for the young person to catch up time lost at 16, 18 or older. Despite this pre 16 providers continue to receive full

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.crim.cam.ac.uk/people/academic\\_research/caroline\\_lanskey/EdYJExecutiveSummary2014.pdf](http://www.crim.cam.ac.uk/people/academic_research/caroline_lanskey/EdYJExecutiveSummary2014.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.beyondyouthcustody.net/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/progress-8-school-performance-measure>

funding for young people registered at school, even if they are experiencing prolonged absence, or disengaged from their learning. It is possible to consider a system that adapts to individuals pre-16 in order to use allocated funding at the right time for the small numbers of young people who are experiencing problems during early adolescence.

#### **4. Current funding**

Government data<sup>18</sup> has estimated the funding received for a state school pupil can be anywhere between £4,000 and £7,000. The funding of FE post-16 education is significantly lower. When a student comes to Nacro, or a similar provider, there is an expectation that this provider will be able to get this young person to a point of employment, further training or education in a maximum of two academic years (although it is often significantly less time than this). Providers are expected to do this at a fraction of the cost, relative to the proportion of the money spent on the years in mainstream education. In reality, many young people leave having not progressed much further than when they entered. Funding is limited and usually stops after a small level of progress. In particular, students better suited to smaller, more focused education rarely gain access to quality alternative provision in their local area. Instead, they fall in to a market of 16-18 education that fails to provide the built environment – particular teaching styles, qualification options and vocational focus – needed to address problems and aid progress. Moreover, if they do return to education (after a period out) they effectively receive less, as funding decreases as young people progress through the study programme.<sup>19</sup> Providers with constrained ability to recruit and retain staff are expected to catch young people up, placing increasing financial pressures on alternative providers in the post-16 landscape.

Greater equality is required for funding of Further Education for all young people post-16. In addition, flexible use and extension to funding for young people who fall significantly behind during school age years would mean that they receive the full benefit of their education funding, equal to their peers.

#### **5. Making the case for funding catch-up**

For a small number of young people, additional support post-16 would help them to catch up with their peers and reach their full potential. This would not be suitable for every student, but for those who have experienced a significant stagnation in their education progression while in mainstream schooling, an extended period of funding could be life-changing. Currently, Pupil Premium is paid up to the age of 16, stopping at a point when, for some young people, additional help is critical. Providing a 'Pupil Premium Extra', encompassing those young people who have experienced stagnation, would allow flexibility for accelerator hubs, assisting in getting this group to where they need to be.

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<sup>18</sup> Hansard – House of Lords debate on state school funding, 4 Dec 2013 and House of Commons Library Briefing Paper 06702, 1 Aug 2016. <file:///H:/Downloads/SN06702.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Current funding levels start at £4,000 per FTE learner at 16, decreasing to £3,300 at 18.

Although official data and statistics collected centrally are limited regarding disadvantage over and above FSM status, current data can give some indication of the numbers of young people experiencing this type of stagnation. For example, exclusion figures show that just over 5,000 pupils were permanently excluded in 2014/15, with behavioural problems cited as the main reason.<sup>20</sup> Of this relatively small set, a proportion would need to play catch-up, where wider factors have affected behaviour and extra time is needed to get the young person to where they need to be.

Nevertheless, from the current data gathered, it is difficult to gain an accurate picture of the levels of young people experiencing this type of disadvantage. School census data collects birth date, ethnicity, language, nationality, pupil premium funding and FSM eligibility. While some institutions and local authorities collect data, there is no official link or acknowledgement between how certain events and circumstances can affect progression. Introducing a uniform and multi-layered progression tracking tool, including factors such as family circumstances, bereavement, mental ill-health etc., will mean those young people that need additional help to catch up can be specifically identified.

The economic arguments for providing funding for the small cohort are multiple; it would not only go some way to solving skills gap issues, but would also provide a foundation for social mobility which will have a lifelong impact, lowering NEETs, unemployment, in work poverty and on/off welfare dependency.

Research has explored the estimated costs of spending on youth economic inactivity as £3.7 billion<sup>21</sup> – a number which could be significantly reduced if those young people playing catch-up were identified and supported in the system.

## **CASE STUDIES**

G struggled to progress at the same rate as his peers at school, presenting characteristics of borderline Asperger's syndrome without any official diagnosis. He also suffered with an eating disorder and had confidence issues in larger groups of people. Referred to Nacro through the Connexions service, G began to gain confidence in a smaller environment and progressed to qualify in a wood work course and started to work on his English and maths skills, which he had struggled with in school. Given more time and resources at Nacro, G could have developed his confidence and skills before entering employment and/or further training.

J left school at 16, having experienced a number of family circumstances impacting on his progression and confidence in school, in particular his engagement with English and maths. Moving in and out of a large FE college, J eventually reached Nacro where he began to study for a mechanics

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<sup>20</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/539704/SFR\\_26\\_2016\\_text.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/539704/SFR_26_2016_text.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.eif.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/SPENDING-ON-LATE-INTERVENTION.pdf>



qualification. By the time he got to Nacro, there was a limited amount of time to catch up, which has impacted his progression into employment and further training.

## **6. What are we proposing?**

These proposals form one part of the picture to address challenges and barriers for disadvantaged young people to progress in education. They seek to support young people to help young people to adapt and catch up after a dip in progress or a period of absence. Further research by Nacro and others will consider other key challenges system-wide change including earlier interventions and career destinations, and 'what works' for evidence-based support. Our findings on 'playing catch-up' lead us to the following recommendations.

**Proposal 1:** Establish a robust system to track significant life events, to be administered by schools and local authorities in conjunction with the Education Funding Agency and used as a tool to support accelerator funding post-16 for those that need it.

Some of this information is currently collected by schools but there is no uniform approach and very often this is not shared with providers. This can be used to provide insight into what causes some young people to experience stalled progression and identify periods of disengagement with education.

Gather and track post-16 catch-up information at a Local Authority and national level to develop an evidence base of what works to help young people succeed and monitor outcomes and destinations.

### **Proposal 2:**

Increase post -16 funding rate for all young people who have not reached GCSE equivalent grade C and above in maths and English, rising in accordance with level and additional teaching hours required. This should include set funding for 16-18 year olds at the same rate by removing the lower rate for 18 year olds.

In addition we recommend the introduction of a Pupil Premium to 19 or equivalent to fund accelerated learning for young people who have experienced a pause in their pre-16 education and are left catching up a number of levels, linked to the tracking measures proposed above.