The effects of weakly collaborative local learning systems on the progression of 14-19 year olds

Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Warwick, 1-4 September 2010

(Please do not cite without prior permission from the authors)

Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours
Institute of Education, University of London
a.hodgson@ioe.ac.uk
k.spours@ioe.ac.uk
Abstract

Improving 14-19 education and training to boost participation and achievement rates in upper secondary education was a major policy aim of the previous UK New Labour Government, in common with many other European countries. The main policy instruments employed in England were the reform of qualifications (in particular the introduction of the 14-19 Diplomas) and the promotion of 14-19 partnerships between schools, colleges and work-based learning providers, although institutional autonomy and diversification and a market in qualifications were still encouraged. We will suggest that this complex approach has produced what we have termed ‘weakly collaborative 14-19 local learning systems’. This concept is employed here as a lens through which to interpret the effects of the local organisational and curriculum environment on the progression of 14-19 year olds. We draw on evidence from the first two years of a five-year research project in a ‘mature’ 14-19 Consortium in Southern England to cast light on the effects of weakly collaborative local learning systems on learner decision-making and progression opportunities. We examine the system from the learner perspective by reporting the views of Year 9s (13-14 year olds) and Year 11s (15-16 year olds) on information, advice and guidance, progression intentions and destinations pre- and post-16. We suggest that this 14-19 Consortium, which displays many features of a weakly collaborative local learning system, has produced some important gains in terms of improving the curriculum experience for learners and facilitating the offer of a wider range of provision for 14-16 year olds. However, the research also raises questions about the limits of such systems and whether on their own they can facilitate effective progression for all learners across the whole 14-19 phase.

Progression and learner decision-making

Despite its centrality to raising levels of participation and achievement in upper secondary education, when learners move between qualifications levels and often between institutions, relatively little is known about the progression of these young people through 14-19 education and training in the English system. Government departments, their agencies and local authorities all set targets for and collect data on participation, retention and attainment and allocate funding to schools, colleges and work-based training providers on this basis. Institutions thus tend to focus on these key indicators rather than on learner progression within or beyond education (Spours et al. 2009) and data related to learner progression are rarely shared between providers.

In addition, progression, defined in terms of learner movement within a qualification level, between levels of study or training or into the labour market is difficult to measure. Who progresses to what is determined by a range of gatekeepers, including employers, a process often dominated by selection rather than the organisation of learner progression. While there are notional entry requirements for access to advanced level (Level 3) courses (i.e. five GCSE A*-C grades), for example, these are locally or institutionally interpreted and can vary significantly. Moreover, learner progression through 14-19 education and training is itself complex. It can be seen as a process that involves developing a curriculum offer from which learners can choose; the provision of information, advice and guidance (IAG), ways in which learners make choices, set goals and develop the skills to make the transition between stages and levels and, in some cases, explicit agreements between ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ tutors within and between institutions (Spours et al. 2009).
Although the 14-19 progression ‘agenda’ is influenced by national policy on qualifications and organisation, it manifests itself primarily at a local issue. This, as we will see, remains the case despite recent efforts to generate national data through the development of a ‘progression measure’ (DCSF 2010a). In this context, a key question is whether learner progression in the 14-19 phase is simply another way of looking at the actions of young people in a local market place or whether it revolves around institutional collaboration, either horizontally or vertically between schools, colleges and work-based learning providers.

Much has already been written about the way that young people make decisions about courses and career options in the UK context (e.g. White 2007, Payne 2003, Foskett and Hemsley-Brown 2001). International studies have focused on the effects of learner actions and wider structures in youth transitions (e.g. Rudd and Evans 1998). Common themes to both have been issues of young peoples’ ‘agency’ and to what extent they act as ‘rational actors’ (Goldthorpe 1996) or exercise what has been termed ‘pragmatic rationality’ (Hodkinson et al. 1996). Several leading analysts (e.g. Ball et al. 2000, Foskett and Hesketh 1997, Gerwirtz et al. 1995) have also stressed the influential role of the educational marketplace on young peoples’ choices and the continuing role of class-based and gendered decision-making. The wider contexts within which young people make decisions are, therefore, important whether these be concerned with social expectations or the effects of the labour market (Vaitlingen 2009).

**Recent 14-19 policy**

Under the New Labour Administration (1997-2010), as part of its strategy to raise levels of participation and attainment in upper secondary education, there was a national policy emphasis from 2002 on institutional collaboration to provide a wide range of vocational and applied as well as general courses (DfES 2002). This pressure increased in 2005 with the introduction of the 14-19 White Paper (DfES 2005), which announced the Government’s intention to launch 14 lines of 14-19 Diplomas at Foundation (Level 1), Higher (Level 2) and Advanced (Level 3) from September 2008, that required institutional collaboration for their delivery. These new Diplomas were intended both to provide an alternative progression route to GCE Advanced Levels (A Levels) and General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) and to promote the mixing of applied and general study (DCSF 2010b). The 14-19 White Paper also signalled the reform of existing qualifications and routeways, comprising changes to the design and assessment of GCSEs and A Levels, greater promotion of Apprenticeships and the introduction of a Foundation Learning Tier for lower-attaining learners.

Between the ages of 14 to 16, learners are, therefore, now able to take a traditional GCSE-only programme or a more mixed programme, including the new Diplomas and other vocational qualifications, such as BTEC First awards. A very small number of young people will take an individually tailored alternative that might include attending a further education college or work-based learning provider for part of the week. Similarly, choices at 16+ have been restructured so that young people have the option, depending on prior attainment, to progress along what the previous New Labour Government described as five routes - Higher/Advanced Diplomas, GCSE/A Levels, Foundation Learning, Apprenticeship and employment with training (DCSF 2009a).

The second related aspect of the 14-19 reforms was the promotion of institutional collaboration, with a duty on local authorities to form 14-19 partnerships between
schools, colleges and work-based learning providers in order to ensure that learners were able to access their full 14-19 Entitlement. This prioritised learner access to a ‘high quality learning route’ including all 14 Diploma Lines of Learning (DCSF 2009b). Following on from these two flagship strategies was a later emphasis on careers education and IAG aimed to ensure that learners had adequate knowledge of all qualifications and the skills to make effective choices (DCSF 2009c&d).

In addition, the previous New Labour Government floated the idea of a ‘post-16 progression measure’. Announced in the 14-19 White Paper (DfES 2005a) and 14-19 Implementation Plan (DfES 2005b), the measure was intended to show what proportion of young people completing Year 11 in the school participated in learning the year after they left compulsory education, and what proportion went on to achieve Level 2 and Level 3 by age 19. The Government at that time planned to publish the post-16 progression measure in its newly developed school ‘scorecard’. Following a consultation in 2009 the DCSF put the measure on hold on technical grounds (DCSF 2010a).

In this policy context, and viewing progression as part of a process and a local system, we focus here on the workings of a 14-19 Consortium and how far its collaborative agenda and the relationship between its institutions facilitated or impeded learner progression. The data reported in this article were gathered in 2009 and 2010 during the early years of the implementation of the previous New Labour’s Government’s 14-19 reforms in England in a longstanding 14-19 Consortium, which had played an important role in implementing the national policy agenda. The research thus provides not only a picture of learner progression but also a commentary on the impact of the national 14-19 strategy.

Weakly collaborative local learning systems

In previous work we have viewed 14-19 institutional arrangements under New Labour, which balanced competition and collaboration within nationally determined policies for curriculum, qualifications, governance and accountability, as leading to ‘weakly collaborative 14-19 local learning systems’ (e.g. Hodgson and Spours 2006, 2008). These were seen to comprise six major dimensions – vision and purposes; curriculum, qualifications and assessment; planning, organisation and governance; professionalism, pedagogy and leadership, physical learning environments and accountability frameworks - and were conceptualised on a weak to strong continuum. The weakly collaborative variant was viewed as consisting of a number of key features such as the development of alternative qualifications pathways for certain groups of learners rather than a unified approach to curriculum and qualifications for all 14-19 year olds; an absence of the strong local governance arrangements needed to adequately plan provision in the locality; the retention of high levels of institutional competition and an over-reliance on national steers and funding to maintain partnership arrangements. The weak/strong distinction was based on a review of literature related to emerging 14-19 partnership arrangements from the early 2000’s, undertaken as part of the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education in England and Wales (Hayward et al. 2005).

However, the model remained general and descriptive, seeking mainly to identify the key dimensions of weakly and strongly collaborative 14-19 local learning systems. It did not provide an adequate explanation of how such a system might work in practice and its implication for learners. What this paper examines is the inner workings of a particular type of ‘local learning system’ from the learner perspective and with a focus on its effects on the progression of 14-19 year olds.
We thus consider three related questions:

1. What influences learner decisions about progression within a leading 14-19 Consortium?

2. What effects have the New Labour Government’s 14-19 qualifications and institutional reforms had on young people’s progression opportunities?

3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of ‘weakly collaborative local learning systems’ in relation to promoting progression for 14-19 year olds?

At the time of writing, the New Labour Government had been replaced by the UK Coalition Government and both the future of the 14-19 phase of education and training and the role of local authority leadership were in question. These issues, and their implications for the progression of 14-19 year olds, will be discussed in a later paper.

Methodology

Here we draw on data from the first year of a five-year study tracking the progression of around 2,500 14 and 16 year olds in a Consortium of six 11-18 schools and a large, multi-site further education college in Southern England. The Consortium has shared post-16 courses for many years and, in 2002, this collaboration moved to include provision for 14-16 year olds as a result of government policy and funding. More recently, the Consortium has collaborated extensively around the provision of the new 14-19 Diplomas, offering five Lines in 2008/9 and a further five in 2009/10. It has a full-time co-ordinator, paid for by the Consortium institutions, and has introduced a number of common practices around timetabling, quality assurance, careers education and information, advice and guidance (IAG). A large number of learners travel between sites for both A Levels and other post-16 provision, with a smaller number accessing mainly vocational or applied courses at Key Stage 4 (14-16 phase of education) in an institution other than their home school. However, the schools and the college remain autonomous institutions in terms of their governance arrangements and specialisms. The Consortium discussed in this paper could thus be located towards the weakly collaborative end of the spectrum, but with some features of strongly collaborative systems, notably in relation to vision, leadership and curriculum offer.

Within this study, we focus specifically on data collected in relation to both the 2008 total cohort and a sample of Year 9 and Year 11 learners as they were deciding on their future options in the Spring and Summer terms 2009 (see Figures 1 and 2 for details of these learners). These data include an analysis of individual interviews with the 112 Year 9 and 113 Year 11 learners, together with the findings from a brief self-completed survey undertaken by the full 2008 Year 9 and Year 11 cohorts. In addition, we were given further data on both cohorts by the local authority in relation to gender, ethnic group, prior attainment and eligibility for free school meals. In November 2010 this was supplemented by Key Stage 4 destinations data for the Year 9 cohort, provided by the six Consortium schools, and destinations data for the Year 11 cohort provided by Connexions (the local careers guidance service).

Figure 1. Year 9 cohort and research sample compared
Learner characteristics | Year 9 cohort n = 1203 | Year 9 sample n = 112
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number/%</td>
<td>Number/%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>648 (54%)</td>
<td>59 (53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>555 (46%)</td>
<td>53 (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White British</td>
<td>1120 (93%)</td>
<td>104 (93%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other ethnic group</td>
<td>83 (7%)</td>
<td>8 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving free school meals</td>
<td>97 (8%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High attaining</td>
<td>318 (26%)</td>
<td>42 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium attaining</td>
<td>443 (39%)</td>
<td>46 (41%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower attaining</td>
<td>426 (35%)</td>
<td>24 (21%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2. Year 11 cohort and research sample compared**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learner characteristics</th>
<th>Year 11 cohort (n=1260)</th>
<th>Year 11 sample (n=113)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>705</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White British</td>
<td>1157</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other ethnic group</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving free school meals</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High attaining</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium attaining</td>
<td>529</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower attaining</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Year 9 and Year 11 samples comprised between 15 and 20 learners from each of the six schools, with an equal number of males and females, representative in terms of ethnic background and with a mixed profile of prior attainment in Key Stage 2 Standard Attainment Tests (SATs). All learners (in the event 112 Year 9s and 113 Year 11s) consented to be individually interviewed annually over a period of five years. This sample was first interviewed during the Spring and Summer Term of 2009 when the learners had already experienced a substantial careers education and guidance process and had received information about their future options. The interview schedule used a mix of closed, scaled and open questions to explore learner views about the IAG process, their short- and longer-term intentions in terms of education and work and their views on the recession. In order to collect data from the whole cohort, a brief questionnaire was sent to all Year 9 and 11 learners in the Spring Term of 2009 asking them about their progression intentions at 14+ (Year 9s only), 16+ and 18+. In reporting these data, we use a code which indicates the Year of the learner and unique number within the sample. SPSS was employed to analyse the closed and scaled questions, while open questions were manually coded by theme. Using these data we were able to compare learner intentions and destinations, to examine why they had made certain choices and to raise questions regarding the role of IAG, student agency and the effects of national policy and individual school and Consortium policy and practice.

**Findings**
1. Learner perspectives on information, advice and guidance (IAG)

Year 9
According to the IAG co-ordinators, considerable effort had been taken to improve the IAG programme for Year 9 learners across the Consortium and, in particular, to ensure that they had adequate information about the new Diplomas so they could make an informed choice about Key Stage 4 courses. During interviews with the qualitative sample, learners were asked to indicate which IAG activities the school had offered them and to rate them in terms of their usefulness. The majority (65%) were positive about the support they had been given by their school in making choices about Year 10 and beyond. A further 18 per cent expressed more mixed views with only nine per cent feeling that they had not been well supported. Eight per cent offered no comment.

As Figure 3 illustrates, in terms of usefulness, learners rated options evenings, taster sessions and options/information booklets most positively. Only one resource, the ‘Which Way Now Booklet’, was deemed of little use. All other activities, to one degree or another, were seen as useful, although some (e.g. Connexions drop-in sessions) were experienced by relatively few learners.

Figure 3. The perceived usefulness of individual IAG activities: Year 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IAG activity</th>
<th>% very useful/useful</th>
<th>% of little use/no use at all</th>
<th>% Not experienced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Options evenings</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospectuses/Options information booklets</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience/taster sessions</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual interviews</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class sessions</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside speakers</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connexions drop-in sessions</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assemblies</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Websites</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careers conventions/careers event</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan-it</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Way Forward at 16/17+/Which Way Now?</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma leaflets</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Year 11
Year 11 learners in the qualitative sample were asked a similar question about their perceptions of the IAG programme in Years 10 and 11. The researchers had been informed that less effort had been put into the Year 11 programme compared with Year 9 because it was this latter year that was to make choices between the 10 Diploma Lines. Nevertheless, a similar range of activities was made available (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. The perceived usefulness of individual IAG activities: Year 11
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IAG activity</th>
<th>% Very useful/useful</th>
<th>% of little use/no use at all</th>
<th>% Not experienced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Options evenings</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospectuses</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual interviews</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class sessions</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside speakers</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connexions drop-in sessions</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assemblies</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Websites</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careers conventions</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan-it</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area-wide prospectus</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Way Forward at 16/17+</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the IAG experiences in the six schools varied to some extent, according to IAG co-ordinators and Connexions Personal Advisers (PAs), the following activities were seen as the major elements of the Consortium Year 11 IAG programme - individual interviews, class sessions, Plan-it, area-wide prospectus, outside speakers, options evenings, work experience, assemblies, prospectuses, careers conventions, Connexions drop-in sessions, Your Way Forward at 16/17+ booklet and websites. As Figure 4 shows, the majority of learners experienced 11 out of these 13 activities. The five most common experiences were options evenings, prospectuses, work experience, assemblies, and class sessions.

Year 11 learners were requested to rate these activities in terms of their usefulness. As Figure 4 indicates, they rated options evenings, prospectuses, work experience and individual interviews as the most useful. Fortunately, this meant that the three most prevalent activities were also those with the highest learner ratings. However, over 30 per cent of the respondents claimed they had not experienced an individual interview, one of the highly rated activities. Despite this, a total of 54 per cent of Year 11 learners made positive comments about the support they had been given by their school. Typical comments of this type included:

*I feel kind of prepared now, teachers go out of their way to support me.*

(L11/42)

A further 16 per cent expressed more mixed views. Over one in five did not comment and only one in 10 made negative statements about their IAG experiences, some of which broadly revolved around not feeling they had had an adequately personalised service or fully independent advice.

*They’ve given us quite a lot of support, but we could have had a wider range. Most of it posted you towards the school sixth form. They should have told you about all possibilities. They should have allowed us to look at everything and to make our own decisions. When we went to the Head of Sixth for an*
interview, she asked me why I’d put the sixth form college first and why I didn’t want to stay on. There was pressure to stay here. (L11/35)

2. Year 9 Key Stage 4 intentions and destinations

The 2008 Year 9 Consortium cohort was faced with a far greater number of Key Stage 4 courses from which to choose than its predecessors because of the introduction of the 10 Diploma Lines from September 2009. In all Consortium schools learners were asked to select from a range of GCSEs, Diplomas and other vocational qualifications, normally BTEC First awards.

As Figure 5 shows, the majority of Year 9 learners, both in the cohort (53%) and in the sample (59%), intended to take mixed GCSE and applied programmes in Key Stage 4, with the largest grouping being those opting for a Diploma alongside their GCSEs (43% and 39% respectively). Forty per cent or more of the cohort and the sample indicated they wanted to study GCSEs only. However, it emerged from interviews that in two schools learners had been told that they had to take a Diploma or other vocational qualification as part of their Key Stage 4 programme. This undoubtedly increased the overall proportion of learners both opting for and taking the Diplomas across the Consortium.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>14+ option</th>
<th>Year 9 cohort intentions (learner survey) (n=1203)</th>
<th>Year 9 cohort destinations (school data) (n=1290)</th>
<th>Year 9 sample (interviews) (n=112)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All GCSEs</td>
<td>44% (529) H (33%) M (39%) L (28%)</td>
<td>27% (347) H (56%) (33%) L (11%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCSEs and Diploma</td>
<td>43% (520) H (21%) M (38%) L (41%)</td>
<td>22% (283)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCSEs and other vocational qualifications</td>
<td>8% (91) H (23%) M (33%) L (44%)</td>
<td>25% (324)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCSEs, other vocational qualifications and Diploma</td>
<td>2% (20) H (37%) M (37%) L (26%)</td>
<td>26% (329)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4% (43) H (20%) M (22%) L (58%)</td>
<td>0.5 (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100% (1203)</td>
<td>100% (112)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

H=high attainment, M = medium attainment and L= low attainment at KS2

On balance, higher attaining learners were more likely to choose GCSE-only programmes, while mixed programmes were more likely to be the choice of middle and lower attainers. The new Diplomas also attracted a proportion of higher attainers, but across the Consortium as a whole it was middle and lower attainers who made up the bulk of those opting for these new awards.

When learners in the sample were asked, ‘Why have you made these choice(s)?’ the most commonly cited reasons were – enjoyment of the subject (32%) and the needs of a future career (31%). There was also a significant proportion of learners who
were keen to keep their options open (16%) and who saw GCSEs as valuable for their future (13%).

Those opting for mixed programmes all gave enjoyment of the subject and future career as the basis for their choice.

*All my family has done Engineering and I enjoy it.* (L9/1)

*I want to work in the music industry in recording, so the Creative and Media Diploma is a good match.* (L9/101)

The vast majority of those intending to take GCSE-only programmes, however, gave two other prime reasons – ‘GCSEs are valuable for my future’ and ‘keeping options open’, with many making quite sceptical comments about the Diplomas.

*I’m not sure about the Diplomas – they’re new. I’d rather stick with the safer options.* (L/914)

*With the Diplomas I was worried they would disappear as they are a new qualification. GCSEs have been around longer.* (L9/106)

Diplomas were not only seen as new, untried and therefore risky, but also as restricting choice, as these learner comments illustrate.

*I feel the Diplomas are too much in one area. With GCSEs you get a wider range.* (L9/66)

*The Diploma takes up three options – others give you more choice.* (L9/65)

The schools that expected their learners to take a Diploma as part of their Key Stage 4 programme provoked some comments and two types of response. Some interviewees made it clear that they were made to do Diplomas but were quite happy to do so. A minority, however, were resentful and wanted the opportunity to take a GCSE-only programme for the reasons outlined above.

Schools were not the only influence on learner choices however. Learners in the sample were asked to rate a range of factors that had influenced their choice of Key Stage 4 course. Family members were by far the most important opinion formers (67% of students rated them as important) while friends and the Connexions Service were seen as important by fewer than 20 per cent.

As Figure 5 indicates, the relationship between attainment and choices at Key Stage 4 is complex. Both GCSE-only and mixed programmes appeal across the ability range, although the latter attracted a higher proportion of middle and lower attainers. Learners of all abilities intending to take mixed programmes appeared to be a feature of this Consortium and ran counter to some of the fears reported nationally that Diplomas and vocational qualifications would only be attractive to lower attaining learners.

Within this overall pattern, however, there appeared to be marked individual school differences, reflected in the sample data. The proportions of Year 9 learners opting for GCSE-only programmes ranged from six per cent in one school to 73 per cent in another, with an average of 44 per cent across the Consortium. There was a similar variability in relation to combined GCSE/Diploma programmes, ranging from 15 per
cent to 87 per cent of the cohort, with the average being 43 per cent. This suggests that despite a common and very active IAG programme across a long-standing and nationally renowned Consortium, individual school factors still continue to play a major part in learner decision-making.

Data were collected from schools about the final destinations at Key Stage 4 of the total 2009 Year 9 cohort (Figure 5, Column 2). These indicate a major difference between learner intentions and their final programmes of study in Key Stage 4 as recorded by the schools. Of the 1290 Year 10 learners, a total of 27 per cent were recorded as being on GCSE-only programmes. This compares with 44 per cent who indicated their intention to take only GCSEs in Key Stage 4. Nearly three quarters of this cohort were thus on mixed GCSE/Vocational/Diploma programmes of study. Of these, 48 per cent were taking programmes which contained a Diploma. The numbers reported as taking a vocational qualification alongside a GCSE and Diploma were much higher than those recorded in the intentions survey (25% compared with 2%).

The strong individual approaches apparent at the intentions stage in Year 9 were reproduced at the point of take-up in Year 10:

- Only one school had the majority of its learners on GCSE-only programmes, with very small numbers taking Diplomas.
- Two schools had a greater balance between students on GCSE and mixed programmes that included both Diplomas and other vocational courses.
- Two schools had a heavy engagement with vocational education across the board.
- One school stood out for its commitment to Diplomas.

Some of the differences between the responses to the Year 9 questionnaire ‘My Plans for the Future’ and the data provided by schools on the actual destinations of learners in Year 10 might be accounted for by learner lack of awareness of the nature of Key Stage 4 qualifications and what is counted as a vocational award. However, the more likely conclusion is that these patterns indicate a school policy impact on learner destinations and what they are allowed to take between the ages of 14-16.

3. Year 11 post-16 intentions and destinations

Course/workplace intentions
Both the Year 11 cohort and sample were asked about their post-16 intentions in terms of study or work (see Figure 6). In addition, the 113 learners in the sample were asked about their preferred place of study or work.
The majority of Year 11 learners indicated that they intended to take A Levels, with the next most popular options being either a broad vocational course, such as BTEC, or an Apprenticeship. Very few intended to take a Diploma, to combine qualifications or to enter the labour market. Just under 20 per cent of the cohort were still unsure about their 16+ plans (or left this question blank). With regards to the very small numbers of learners intending to take a Diploma, it has to be remembered that at the time of these interviews, these awards were in their first year of implementation and only five Lines were available (although a further five would be added the following year). It is interesting, however, to note how few learners aspired to enter the labour market at 16 (except via an Apprenticeship). In terms of gender differences, females (60%) were marginally more likely than males (57%) to opt for A Levels and for other broad vocational qualifications (17% and 9% respectively), and males were more likely to want an Apprenticeship (16% compared with 6%). There is a strong correlation in both the total cohort and the sample between attainment and choice of destination at 16+, with high attainers opting for the academic route and lower attainers opting in greater numbers, though not overwhelmingly, for vocational options.

Place of study post-16
When asked where they would like to study post-16, the Year 11 sample learners mentioned a range of providers. The majority (65%) stated that they wanted to remain within the Consortium. Of this total, 45 per cent mentioned progressing to the sixth form of their school, with 20 per cent moving to the local FE college. The sixth form college, which was often cited as a major competitor to the Consortium, was the first choice for under a fifth of the sample, the majority of whom were females (15 out of 18). As earlier data suggest, only a handful planned to enter the workplace post-16. Significantly more young men opted for the Consortium. Young women were more likely to say that they wanted to go elsewhere. Higher attainers tended to opt for Consortium sixth forms or the sixth form college. Medium attainers spread themselves out across different providers, while lower attainers were more likely to focus on college courses or the workplace.
The most prominent reason for choosing a post-16 provider was ‘familiarity’. Virtually all the learners who cited this factor as their main reason were opting for the Consortium. The following quotations, which are a small proportion of a large number of very similar comments, point to the strong inter-relationship between knowing the school, knowing teachers, not having to travel far and staying with friends.

It's easier, the teachers know me and I can go to another partnership school. (L11/6)

I’m used to it, I like it here and it’s near my home. (L11/4)

They (teachers) know me, I feel more comfortable. (L11/84)

I know the school, I know the teachers and there are smaller classes so I will get more help. (L11/83)

These views can be contrasted with those expressed by learners choosing another institution, in this case the sixth form college. Those opting for this institution appeared to be interested in a new start, reputation, a more adult environment and possibly getting better grades.

The sixth form college will be a fresh start and will focus me more on what I want to do not just expectations of teachers. (L11/43)

The sixth form college feels like a change, more college-like to prepare for HE. (L11/34)

It is a good college, it gets good results and I’m getting out of the comfort zone. (L11/11)

These data suggest that the Consortium may be attracting more than its fair share of learners who are studying within their ‘comfort zone’, with all the possible knock-on effects this is likely to have on future attainment.

**Overall post-16 destinations**

The 2008 Year 11 cohort overwhelmingly progressed to further study at 16+. A total of 88 per cent went to either a school sixth form or a college (sixth form or FE). The proportion entering the work-based route (employment or Apprenticeship) totalled just over seven per cent (3.7% and 3.5% respectively). A residual proportion (2%) was classified as unemployed and one per cent of learners entered an Entry to Employment (E2E) programme.

Of those who progressed to full-time education, 70 per cent entered Level 3 courses of which 57 per cent were studying A Levels. Twenty per cent were on Level 2 courses (13% vocational and 7% GCSEs) and eight per cent were on Level 1 programmes.

Prior attainment (measured by KS2 SATs scores) influenced post-16 destinations – a total of 95 per cent of high attainers, 87 per cent of middle attainers and 83 per cent of lower attainers progressed to full-time education at 16+. A significant proportion of high (61%) and middle attainers (49%) progressed to a school sixth form. Only 30
per cent of lower attainers stayed on at school beyond 16, with 53 per cent progressing to an FE college. High attainers (3%) were much less likely to enter employment or Apprenticeship than middle (8%) or lower attainers (11%). Conversely middle (3%) and lower attainers (4%) were more likely to be unemployed than high attainers (1%).

There was a degree of variability between the six Consortium schools in terms of student destinations at 16+. The proportion of those continuing in a school sixth form ranged from 38 to 53 per cent and those progressing to further education from 35 to 49 per cent. Participation in Apprenticeship ranged from two to five per cent, and for young people entering employment, the range was one to seven per cent.

Destinations compared with intentions
Of those who indicated that they wanted to study A Levels post-16, a total of 81 per cent did so. Eight per cent ended up on a vocational Level 3 programme, 10 per cent started a Level 2 programme and two per cent, a Level 1 programme. Of those who wanted to undertake broad vocational programmes, the vast majority progressed to a further education college, although not all went into Level 3 courses.

However, of those who stated that they wanted to enter an Apprenticeship, only 18 per cent succeeded, with a total of 60 per cent progressing to a further education college or school sixth form, 16 per cent entering employment, one per cent an E2E programme and with three per cent unemployed. A similar picture pertained to employment. A total of 60 learners stated that they wanted to get a job at 16+, but only 14 per cent succeeded. Fifty-six per cent progressed to an FE college or school sixth form and 17 per cent were unemployed, seven per cent went into an E2E programme and two per cent into an Apprenticeship. Just under 80 per cent found themselves on programmes at Level 2 or below.

Contained within these destination data are four distinct but related patterns:

- the vast majority of young people remained in full-time education and of these the majority was able to progress to Level 3 study, overwhelmingly A Levels;
- the role of the labour market/work-based route was extremely weak with only a small minority of those who intended to enter employment or an Apprenticeship succeeding in doing so;
- more high and medium attainers entered schools sixth forms and more lower attainers progressed to further education colleges;
- the relationship between intention and destination thus only held up strongly with A Levels (80%). For those aiming for vocational courses at Level 3, under a third succeeded. The position was even more disappointing for those wanting employment or an Apprenticeship.
Summary

Viewed across the 14-19 phase as a whole, the Consortium appeared to be promoting progression more clearly in the 14-16 phase than post-16, although firmer conclusions will only be able to be made on this issue following research tracking the two cohorts throughout their 16-19 experience.

Curriculum development at Key Stage 4 and a new level of IAG

The development of the curriculum was clearest at Key Stage 4 during which institutional collaboration around the new Diplomas produced an improved level of IAG with high degrees of learner satisfaction. The introduction of the 10 Lines of Diplomas had also further diversified the curriculum offer within the Consortium, providing students with a greater choice of subjects and different styles of learning and assessment. The Diplomas did not represent an entirely new curriculum phenomenon, however, but extended a process that had already been substantially started by the BTEC awards, which had been gradually introduced by the Consortium over a period of four or five years. These latter awards continued to be offered in large numbers often alongside Diplomas. The overall effect of these developments was the ‘vocationalisation’ of Key Stage 4 in which the number of learners on GCSE-only programmes was in a minority.

Mixed school motives

The motives of the schools in vocationalising the Key Stage 4 curriculum and introducing the new Diplomas were complex. They appeared keen to provide a more diverse and motivating curriculum for their learners, which they, in line with Government policy, associated with the provision of applied/vocational courses and experiences. However, they were also deeply aware of both the performance points available through the vocational awards (e.g. the Diploma at Level 2 is counted as seven GCSEs at A*-C grade) and the funding associated with this new initiative. Both of these issues were of particular importance to this Consortium because they wanted to raise their performance at Key Stage 4 and to compensate for what they considered to be underfunding by the local authority.

Diplomas functioning as a curriculum framework to enhance pedagogy

Many more students in this Consortium ended up studying a Diploma in Key Stage 4 than had originally intended to do so, in part because of certain schools making them virtually mandatory. However, recent interviews with these learners, but not discussed in this article, suggested that initial scepticism by some students about the Diplomas appeared to have been overcome by their positive pedagogical experience of these new awards. In this sense, as we will argue, the Diplomas were being used more as a curriculum framework to enhance pedagogy than as a progression route at Key Stage 4.

Blurring the attainment divide and raising aspirations to study post-16?

Because of the policy of a minority of schools to offer Diplomas and vocational awards to all their Key Stage 4 students as part of their overall programmes of study, Student use of the Diplomas and vocational awards across the Consortium was not strongly aligned with medium and lower attainers (although they do predominate). The evidence could be interpreted to suggest that the cumulative effect of a more vocationalised curriculum at Key Stage 4 may result in higher levels of educational participation post-16 because of the intention to provide a wider range of courses to meet the needs of all learners. These developments in the Consortium could be seen as the combined results of strong ‘push factors’ within the education system to promote progression to Level 3 courses of different types, together with very weak labour market and work-based route ‘pull factors’, exacerbated by the recession.
However, what is not assured is how particular progression pathways will work and to what extent learner aspirations for particular courses, routeways and levels will be met.

**Diplomas appear to function better as a curriculum framework than as a 14-19 progression route**

According to the data on the Year 9 cohort reported in this study, the high level of engagement with Diplomas in Key Stage 4 will not be replicated post-16 because most of the Diploma students will want to take A Levels, more vocationally focused BTEC awards or to enter the work-based route. The more mixed curriculum at Key Stage 4 will, in effect, give way to a more strongly tracked system post-16. A key question will be whether the Diploma experience will produce qualifications returns that allow students onto these routes or courses and will help them to develop the skills to cope with employment or Level 3 study of different types. At the time of the research, we did not know how many students had passed their Diplomas and how they had fared with Functional Skills, a concern nationally (e.g. Wells 2010). Furthermore, the qualifications that have been encouraged at Key Stage 4 may not have the progression currency that government performance measures suggest. As we have commented elsewhere (Spours et al. 2009), admissions criteria and practices in relation to post-16 progression remain highly localised. Even within this advanced Consortium, there has been no formal progression agreement between the seven partners. Admissions thresholds to post-16 courses vary according to the subject, type of course, institution and the attitudes of admissions tutors because they are driven by performance tables and funding mechanisms which penalise unsuccessful completion of courses.

It would appear, therefore, that the Diplomas are proving to be a positive Key Stage 4 curriculum phenomenon rather than a clear and assured qualifications progression pathway between pre- and post-16 education and training. There is some indication from these student data that the Diplomas and other vocational awards have significant ‘use value’ in terms of their motivating effects and, to a lesser extent, their skill development capacities. However, there is little evidence to date from this study or elsewhere (e.g. Hodgson et al. 2010) that they have strong ‘exchange value’ in terms of progression beyond Key Stage 4. Moreover, because they are being used in part as a curriculum framework and as applied general education, learners taking the Diplomas at Key Stage 4, as we have seen, may aspire to progress to the general A Level route post-16.

**Work-based learning post-16 looks a very unpredictable and difficult route**

A sizeable proportion of Year 9 students aspired to enter the work-based route or the labour market post-16. The experience of their Year 11 counterparts in this study who have already progressed in this way suggests that this may not happen. Only a small proportion (less than 20%) of those students who indicated that they wished to enter work-based routes have succeeded so far in either getting a full-time job or an Apprenticeship. In chances terms, it appears far easier (80%) to access A Levels if the learner has the minimum required prior attainment.

**Learner agency and choice or steering and prescription?**

Within trends described above, both the Year 9 and Year 11 learners appeared to feel a strong sense of agency and the former felt they had a high degree of choice about their Key Stage 4 programme. It is certainly the case that these young people, as a result of Government policies and the actions of the Consortium, have had a much more diverse offer at Key Stage 4 than would have been available in the past or exists in other parts of the country. At the same time this study, in common with earlier research by Higham and Yeomans (2008), suggests that the schools in the
Consortium have a strong shaping effect on the nature of learners’ Key Stage 4 programmes. These are determined by certain subjects beyond the national core being compulsory as a result of school specialist status, by the way the option blocks are constructed and by the policy of a mandatory vocational course for all learners in some institutions. What appears on paper to be a very wide range of options available to learners, is in reality much less so for each individual learner. Despite learners’ sense of agency, the level of individual school determination of their programmes could affect learners’ post-16 progression opportunities.

Weakly collaborative local learning systems and 14-19 progression

The experiences of a leading 14-19 Consortium, its enthusiastic promotion of the new Diplomas, the increased importance given to IAG and a focus on learner progression through the 14-19 phase can be viewed as an archetypal illustration of the successes and limitations of New Labour’s 14-19 policy since 2002. Key features of the previous Government’s policy priorities were being played out in a single area.

How then did this Consortium, and its features of what we have termed ‘weakly collaborative local learning systems’ (Hodgson and Spours 2006, 2008), affect learner progression throughout the 14-19 phase? Our research suggests that key policy steers - extra funding; the promotion of government-driven qualifications, such as the Diplomas, and the enactment of key government policies on IAG - were ‘mediated’ or ‘translated’ (Coffield et al. 2008) at the local level by the Consortium in a way that enriched the curriculum at Key Stage 4 and potentially opened up a wider range of provision post-16.

Collaborative activity across the Consortium boosted the range and amount of IAG experienced by 14-16 year olds. Diplomas built on the existing offer of BTEC awards to ensure that mixing general and applied study was almost becoming the norm. The pedagogy used to enrich programmes of study appeared to be producing high rates of student satisfaction. Despite institutional differences of emphasis on the Diplomas and vocational qualifications, the cumulative effect of these measures across the Consortium as a whole appeared to fuel young people’s aspirations for further study post-16 regardless of prior attainment.

However, other deep-seated features of weakly collaborative local learning systems - the track-based nature of existing qualifications beyond Key Stage 4; continued institutional competition and the lack of direct involvement of employers and the work-based route - were beginning to impact post-16, thus posing threats to effective progression throughout the 14-19 phase as a whole. From the experience of the learner, progression across the 14-19 phase in this locality could be seen as a tale of two halves – 14-16 and 16-19.

- Evidence thus far suggests that the success of Diplomas as a curriculum and pedagogical tool pre-16 would not be matched by their up-take post-16. What appeared to be the case was that an applied curriculum that boosted students’ GCSE scores might be encouraging many to engage with A Levels post-16 rather than with Diplomas. Thus Diplomas could play an important role pre-16, but still end up as a minor progression route post-16. Moreover, we are not sure yet whether the skills developed in Diploma programmes at Key Stage 4 translate well into the kind of skills required by the current (and slightly tougher) A Levels. In addition, there is no certainty that admissions tutors will recognise and accept the credit value attached to the Diplomas for
progression to the next level of course or, more importantly, to another type of study. The practice in two schools of insisting that all students follow a Diploma as part of their Key Stage 4 programme may not only be limiting learner choices but also not necessarily serving them well in terms of progression. This area will require more research in the upcoming years of the Project.

- Institutional collaboration pre-16 appeared to give way to a more competitive approach post-16. Unsurprisingly, the 11-18 Consortium schools were keen to retain their highest performing candidates. The way this was interpreted by some students was that progression to the school sixth form was a more ‘comfortable’ option than moving somewhere else. This may be one explanation as to why the Consortium’s increase in Key Stage 4 performance has not yet been matched post-16. Collaboration did exist post-16, but institutional motives were more mixed. The sharing of A Level provision, for example, was aimed primarily at retaining as many high-performing learners as possible within the Consortium, lest they fall into the hands of the local sixth form college. Post-16 collaboration internally was thus being pursued as a competitive strategy externally and there were indications that this practice jeopardised the impartiality of IAG for some Year 11 students.

- The institutional anatomy of the Consortium (six 11-18 schools and an FE college), with its lack of active wider partners, meant that post-16 Level 3 provision (and A Levels in particular), were of prime concern, despite the policy emphasis around Diplomas. This was reinforced by learners’ intentions. Despite their flirtation with mixed study in Key Stage 4, learners appeared to aspire to more traditional routes post-16. As a result, post-16 applied and vocational programmes remained under-developed in the school sixth forms and A levels continued to dominate. The work-based route and Apprenticeships appeared more distant still. The Consortium so far appeared to have had little effect on the provision of a strong work-based route and learner participation in Apprenticeships and employment was low.

The Consortium used key national policy steers to pursue a vision of mixed study that it had nurtured for nearly a decade. These external measures — funding, new qualifications and other policy initiatives — were cohered by proactive local leadership and IAG to produce positive curriculum outcomes, particularly at Key Stage 4. However, it was more deep-seated ‘system features’ — a divided qualifications system; continued institutional competition and a voluntarist labour market and work-based route - that were to impact to produce a more divided, stratified and fragmented post-16 landscape. Research to date suggests that students are likely to participate in post-16 study in record numbers, but the nature of progression for some appeared to be in doubt. They might not attain as highly as they should in A Levels with knock-on effects for progression to higher education at 18+; they might not progress on to appropriate vocational courses and they might not get anywhere near the job or work placement they desired.

Finally, of real current concern is the fact that the positive steers from national government used by the Consortium to promote curriculum development and an environment for higher levels of participation in 14-19 education and training may cease under the new UK Coalition Government. Funding for 14-19 development has already been reduced. Weakly collaborative systems are likely to become weaker rather than stronger as they become more marketised. Any shared sense of purpose in the 14-19 phase could be threatened by this new external context. A key question for the Project in the future is how it might be possible to build the curricular,
organisational and local labour market features of more strongly collaborative local learning systems in order to bind in all stakeholders and to promote meaningful progression for 100 per cent of the 14-19 year olds in a locality,
References


DfES (2005a) 14-19 education and skills. London: DfES.


*This document was added to Education-line on 8 September 2010*