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Raising the age of participation in education or training to 18 in Wales

Introduction

In England, the compulsory age of participation in education or training was raised to 17 in 2013 and then 18 in 2015. In Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, the school leaving age is 16. The idea of raising the age of participation in education or training is gaining traction in the Scottish context, as well as in Wales.

The Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) conducted research for the Welsh Government to explore the implications of pursuing this policy in Wales. The research considered how RPA might interact with ongoing reforms to school age and post-16 provision in Wales, and explored alternative policies which concentrate on reducing early school leaving, as opposed to policies that legally require young people to remain in learning for longer periods of time.

To examine the above issues, the WCPP commissioned:

- A desk-based literature review to look at **qualitative** international evidence on the benefits and challenges of RPA, as well as alternative policies.
 - To understand how RPA would interact with current and planned policy reform in Wales, a small number of interviews with key stakeholders in Welsh Government and the wider education and training sector were conducted.
- **Quantitative** analysis to model the impact of RPA in Wales, should it be implemented, compared to a baseline of current voluntary participation levels at ages 17 and 18. (See Figure 1).

The international evidence points to the need to focus efforts on encouraging continued engagement in learning and reducing early leaving.

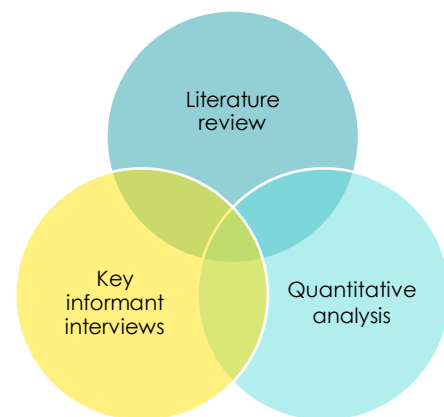


Figure 1. Research design

Policy context

The rationale for RPA centres on the argument that a prolonged period in education or training can improve young people's qualification attainment and acquisition of skills, enhancing their future labour market prospects. There are also potential beneficial impacts of increased participation and attainment in terms of health, wellbeing, social inclusion, civic participation and reduced crime. As well as potentially resulting in social and economic benefits, implementation of the RPA in England was also seen as a way to boost the UK's performance with regard to participation in education and training in comparison to other OECD countries.

Other countries that implemented RPA in recent years (including a number of USA and Australian states as well as England) have in some cases justified the policy on the basis of an inclusion agenda, with a commitment that enforcing continued participation in education (or training) for longer periods of time would help to narrow social and economic inequalities.

Qualitative findings

The literature review showed that, overall, the evidence to support RPA legislation is weak.

International analysis of historical data based on the impact of raising the school leaving age (ROSLA)¹ points to it having a small positive effect on qualification attainment, unemployment rates and future earnings. The costs of ROSLA were identified as a key issue to be addressed, as well the significant time needed to plan implementation.

The international evidence on RPA-type policies (as opposed to ROSLA) showed the impact on retention rates in post-16 learning to be questionable. On the basis of the evidence, RPA would generate limited benefits for young people who are least engaged in learning.

Substantial investment and creativity in developing learning packages to meet the needs of disengaged students could have a greater impact. The international evidence also points to the need to focus efforts on encouraging continued engagement in learning and reducing early leaving.

Interviews with nine key informants (who included senior policymakers, as well as senior representatives from organisations which play a key role in post-16 education and training across Wales) indicated a lukewarm response to implementing RPA. However, there was agreement that young people benefited from remaining in learning until 18.

Concerns were expressed by the informants about how a compulsory system would be enforced and its impact on young people from hard to help/hard to reach groups. A preference was stated for improving participation, retention and achievement rates by offering an enhanced and accessible post-16 offer across Wales.

Quantitative findings

Without a strong evidence base on which to model the impact of RPA, there is a range of plausible scenarios. For accessibility and ease of understanding, we have presented a 'central modelling scenario' (see Figure 2) based on what we believe to be plausible assumptions in terms compliance (i.e. how many people adhere to the policy), course choices, attainment and lifetime economic values.

We find that, based on the central modelling scenario (which assumes 30% compliance with the policy), should RPA be implemented in Wales, an additional 3% of a student cohort would be participating in year 12 (~900 students) and an additional 6% in year 13 (~1,800 students).

The estimated economic value (i.e. impact on productivity) of the additional attainments that these new participants would gain is approximately £36m per cohort, representing a 1.4% increase on the total lifetime value of the qualifications we would expect in the absence of RPA.

Failing to provide options that attract young people affected by RPA to remain in education or training would result in negligible economic benefits.

¹ The RPA policy, as has been implemented in England, is distinct from the 1947 and 1972 Raising of the School Leaving Age (ROSLA) policies, which mandated compulsory additional years of education in secondary school. RPA is broader: the additional education or training could comprise full-time study in a school or college, or with a training provider, but could also be full-time work or volunteering (20 hours per week or more) combined with part-time education or training (approximately one day per week), or an apprenticeship or traineeship.

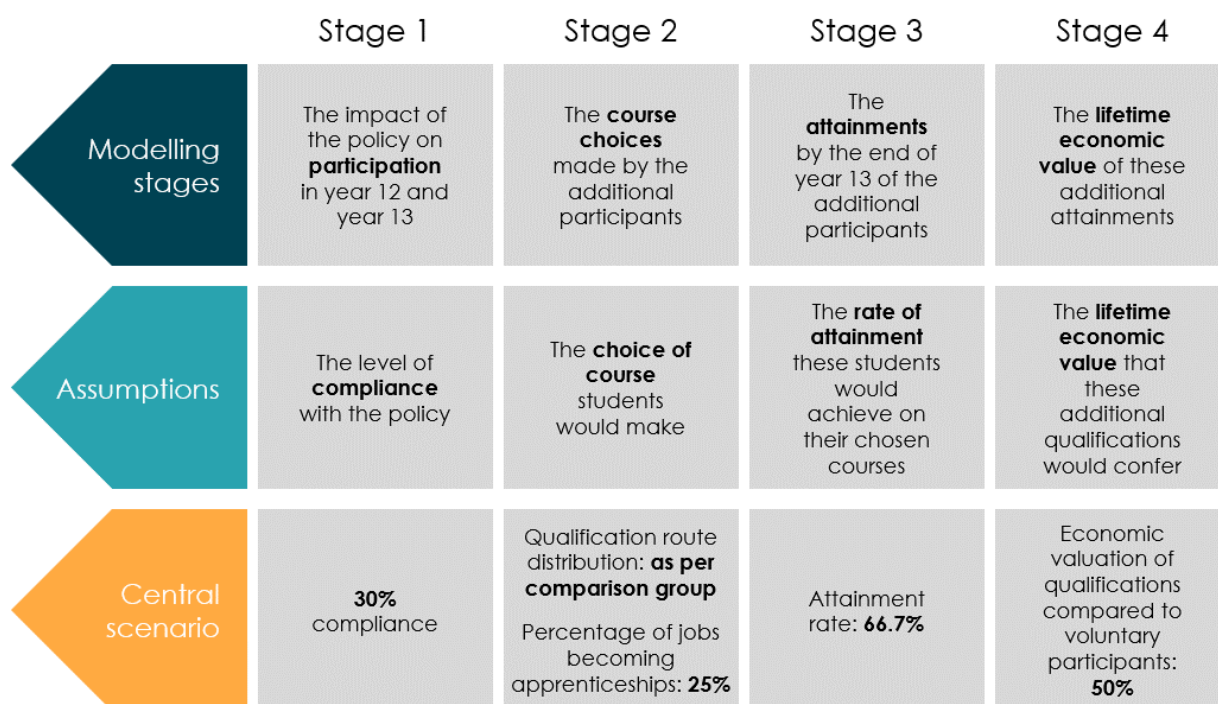


Figure 2. Modelling stages, underlying assumptions and assumptions used in central scenario

The vast majority of the economic benefits of the policy relate to the additional attainments for students who would previously not have participated in year 12 or year 13.

These estimated economic values are particularly sensitive to the degree to which young people comply with the policy, with increased engagement/participation leading to much greater attainment and economic value. Varying the degree of compliance sees the economic value increase from £36m for 30% compliance, up to £70m if compliance is at 50%. On the other hand, lower compliance of 15% would suggest a value of only £17m.

It is worth noting that the estimated economic value is that of the additional attainments over and above what would be expected in the absence of the policy, but importantly does not take into account the costs of providing the additional education.

This is also just an estimate of the economic value of the productivity increases associated with the policy – it does not take into account any additional benefits of increased participation and attainment in terms of health, wellbeing, social inclusion, civic participation and reduced crime.

Conclusions

Overall, the qualitative evidence from other countries to support legislation which raises the participation age in learning is weak. International experience shows a small positive effect on qualification attainment, unemployment rates and future earnings. However, the impact on improving retention rates in post-16 learning is questionable. On the basis of the evidence, RPA would generate limited benefits for young people who are least engaged in learning.

The quantitative analysis supports these findings, demonstrating that any economic benefit provided by RPA is highly dependent on the level of compliance with the policy. In all models presented, the analysis suggests that failing to provide the young people who will be affected by the policy with options that attract them to remain in education or training would result in negligible additional attainments and commensurately small economic benefits. It may also impact on their future motivation to participate in learning.

The New Curriculum for Wales and proposed post-compulsory education and training (PCET) reforms offer a platform for change. OECD countries' experience shows a need to focus on:

- Early prevention measures for those not in education, employment or training (NEET);
- Supporting and engaging pre-16 learners who are experiencing difficulties;
- Monitoring those at risk;
- Offering good quality pathways to all groups of learners; and
- Offering additional support for learning at the end of secondary school.

Crucially, this offer should be extended within the post-16 arena.

Looking beyond full-time post-16 learners, the needs of post-16 young workers must be better understood and addressed, as they remain a neglected post-16 learner group.

The challenge to secure and sustain funding to support NEET interventions remains another key part of post-16 education, employment and training reform in Wales.

The results of the quantitative analysis are not restricted to the introduction of RPA, but rather show the effects of increased participation. This

means that the results are relevant for both RPA and for other policies that aim to encourage participation and engagement in post-16 learning, and/or reduce early school leaving.

Recommendations

Taking into account existing and proposed legislation in the post-16 education and training space (e.g. the implementation of the New Curriculum for Wales and the proposed PCET reforms), recommendations include:

- Focusing on reducing post-16 attrition rates and introducing a strategy to reduce early (school) leaving;
- Providing a coherent and consistent post-16 offer which is aligned with the objectives of the New Curriculum for Wales;
- Supporting early labour market entrants and strengthening their access to continued support and learning options; and
- Providing sustained funding for prevention and reintegration initiatives targeted at young people who are NEET.

Find out more

See the full reports: Maguire, S. (2021). *Raising the Age of Participation to 18*. Cardiff: WCPP, and Dickson, M. (2022). *Modelling the Impact of Raising the Age of Participation to 18*. Cardiff: WCPP.

About the Wales Centre for Public Policy

Here at the Centre, we collaborate with leading policy experts to provide ministers, the civil service and Welsh public services with high quality evidence and independent advice that helps them to improve policy decisions and outcomes.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and Welsh Government, the Centre is

based at Cardiff University and a member of the UK's What Works Network.

For further information contact:

Manon Roberts

+44 (0)29 2087 5345

manon.roberts@wcpp.org.uk

Wales Centre for Public Policy

Cardiff University, Sbarc/Spark, Maindy Road, Cardiff CF24 4HQ



www.wcpp.org.uk



029 2087 5345



info@wcpp.org.uk



@WCfPP

