

# Research Bulletin 18/4 | Barriers to Participation and Progression in Education – a Review of the Evidence

Mervyn Wilson, Stephen Donnelly and Jamie Stainer, Analytical Services, Department for the Economy

April 2018

---

## Summary

An 'economic' Social Inclusion Framework is currently being developed to enable people of working age to improve their skills, therefore enhancing employment opportunities, through the provision of training. A review of literature covering some of the main barriers to participation and progression in education and into the labour market shows that those facing barriers are not a homogeneous group by any means. In order to further encourage participation, a flexible and multi-faceted policy response is required. It is important that policy responses are developed in partnership with relevant public, private and community and voluntary sector stakeholders and that employers are encouraged to collaborate with the public sector to improve outcomes. This is of particular relevance to Northern Ireland as a devolved administration without access to fiscal policy levers.

---

## Introduction

The Department for the Economy (DfE) is working on the development of an 'economic' Social Inclusion Framework. The overall aim of the Framework will be to promote economic social inclusion to enable people of working age to improve their skills, therefore enhancing employment opportunities, through the provision of training. Analytical Services was asked by the responsible policy area to undertake a literature review as a first step to providing a robust evidence base for the development and implementation of the proposed Framework.

This article is based on a DfE report which summarises literature covering some of the main barriers to participation and progression in education. The article draws on existing literature relating to young people and NEETs, adult learners and second chance education programmes. The full report will be made available via the Department's website in due course and will include further topic areas not covered in this article.

## Young People and Barriers to Education

A report by Spielhofer et al (2008) found that 86% of people aged 16 do not face any barriers that stop them from doing what they want to do. However, a large proportion of young people (63%) face one or more constraints. These 'constraints' do not stop them from doing what they want to do but nevertheless are problems that they must overcome. For 14% of young people, these constraints become barriers which stop them from doing what they want to do. The most common barriers for young people were not having a course or training available in their

local area, a lack of money or a lack of knowledge of all the options available to them. In addition to this there are a number of social issues that affect young people. These include a lack of confidence, poor health and poor previous experience of educational settings. For those on government training schemes, a lack of agency is often seen as a discouraging factor.

Research on NEETs (BIS 2013) identified some frequently cited barriers to learning. Twenty percent of those interviewed for the study reported that the attitudes of family members and peers can be a significant obstacle to engaging in learning. In particular, there is a segment of the population who are unwilling to take part in education, therefore encouraging this group to participate in training that leads to employment can be particularly challenging. The study highlighted the need for good quality information, advice and guidance for young people hoping to access education and training, as well as appropriate support in addressing some of the practical barriers such as childcare or financial support. Evidence from the study suggests that a positive adult learning experience can transform negative experiences of schooling, which may result in learners engaging in learning throughout their adult lives.

Next Steps (The Executive Office 2016) found that, based on the interviews conducted with young people who were NEET, the main barriers to getting back into education, employment or training were a lack of relevant work experience, a lack of employment opportunities, lack of qualifications, low levels of confidence and self-esteem and a lack of motivation. The findings point to the fact that not every person faces the same barriers and also that there is nearly always a combination of factors that prevent young people moving out of NEET status. This underlines the fact that the policy response required to remove barriers is likely to be complex and needs to be tailored to the needs of the individual.

**Table 1: NEETs tend to have low level qualifications but by no means are they all poorly qualified.**

Qualifications	All 16-19	All 20-24	All 16-24
<b>No qualifications</b>	32%	28%	29%
<b>Level 1</b>	29%	22%	23%
<b>Level 2</b>	21%	20%	20%
<b>Apprenticeship</b>	2%	4%	4%
<b>Level 3</b>	12%	14%	13%
<b>Level 4 +</b>	1%	10%	8%
<b>Other</b>	2%	3%	3%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%

Source: Census 2011, NISRA

## Adult Learners and Barriers to Education

Attitudes to education are developed at an early stage, both by family circumstances and early education experiences. Positive learning experiences will increase the propensity to learn in later life, while negative experiences will have the opposite effect.

Flynn et al (2011) cite three distinct groups of barriers which may affect adult learners; situation barriers, institutional barriers and dispositional barriers. Situation barriers relate to the person's life situation and could include household circumstances such as childcare responsibility, poverty, violence in the home or a lack of emotional support. For instance in 2015/16, 4,360 students had responsibility for young people which represented 8% of higher education in Northern Ireland (Department for the Economy 2017). Institutional barriers may include a lack of support for learners, current government policy, a lack of teacher training and an unsuitable curriculum. Dispositional or motivational barriers include negative past experiences, negative attitudes towards education amongst the individual's peer group and/or family, low self-esteem or the general demands of family life.

Joo and Huang (2013) found that adult learners have different needs to traditional students. They often work full-time and have families and so could benefit from greater access to on-line learning. In terms of technological willingness, Joo and Huang (2013) found that adult learners with minimal prior online learning experiences will need more time to adjust to the new learning processes and technology. They recommend that online learning programmes should provide comprehensive instructional support systems in order to assist novice online learners navigate the early stages of their programmes.

We are now more dependent on mobile phones and tablets to gain access for educational needs. Broadband coverage to people's homes and businesses has continued to improve (Ofcom 2017). In 2017, 85% of properties in Northern Ireland are capable of receiving at least superfast speeds (30Mbit/s to less than 300Mbit/s coverage). Although this is an increase from 77% in 2015, the proportion is lower than those England, Scotland and Wales and the UK average of 91% (Ofcom 2017). Broadband speed is not uniform in Northern Ireland. While Belfast Local Government District has on average 85% of premises with Ultrafast Broadband (300Mbits/s or greater coverage), the Local Government Districts of Causeway Coast and Glens, Fermanagh and Omagh, and Mid and East Antrim have no coverage at this speed.

In the Northern Ireland context, *Removing the Barriers to Learning: Exploring Adult Perceptions and Attitudes to Participation in Further Education* (DEL 2012) cited the main barriers to learning for adult learners in Northern Ireland, and who were interested in learning related to course timing, work, family commitments and the cost of courses. The research also identified the potential of non-vocational learning to act as a stepping stone for some adult learners to progress into vocational learning.

## Intergenerational Unemployment and Parental Worklessness

Schoon (2014) carried out an analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), which investigated the relationship between parental worklessness and the chances of a young person becoming NEET. The research found that, although there was a moderate direct effect of parental worklessness on the NEET experience of their children, the findings did point to other potential explanatory factors such as parental education, large family size and area based effects such as deprivation. Schoon postulates that it matters where young people live, and that area characteristics can affect youth development and adjustment.

Zucotti and O'Reilly (2018), in their intersectional analysis of the UK Household Longitudinal Study, found that having workless parents, or being from a particular ethnic background, are not sufficient predictors of education and labour market outcomes. Their findings suggest that the risk of becoming NEET varies across ethnic groups and genders.

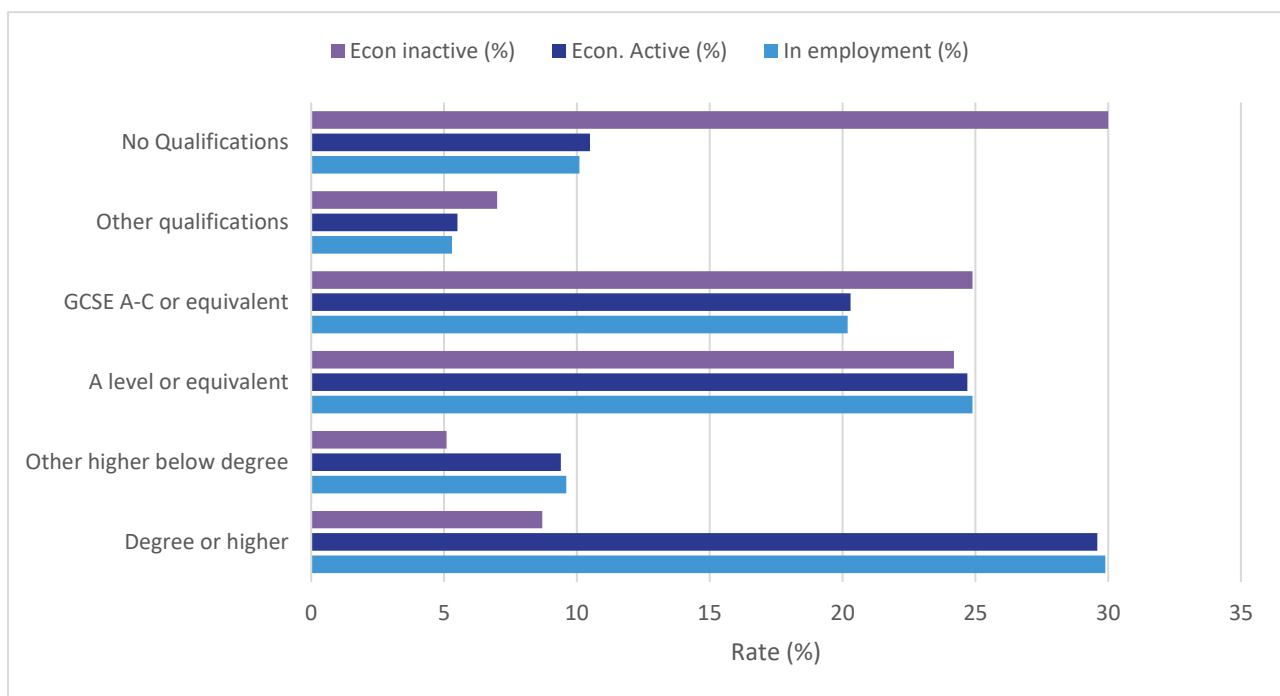
Macmillan (2013) found that, although the problem of intergenerational unemployment is overstated, evidence suggests that workless spells are associated across generations. Local labour market conditions are also a factor in that sons with workless fathers are disproportionately affected by high unemployment. The relationship between parental worklessness and the employment outcomes of their children varies according to local labour market conditions. Macmillan's work also points to the importance of informal networks when searching for jobs. Those with unemployed parents may have weaker contacts and therefore experience more difficulty in finding job opportunities. Grannovetter (1977) highlighted the importance of 'weak ties', i.e., a former work colleague or employer who will have access to information about possible job opportunities.

A report for the Social Mobility Commission by Friedman, Laurison and Macmillan (2017) found that there is very little evidence of generations of families never working, but those who experience a workless household are more likely to experience their own workless spells in adulthood. The paper also supports Macmillan's (2013) argument that the combined experience of growing up in a workless household and being exposed to a bad local labour market creates greater intergenerational worklessness. Historically, the unemployment rate in NI had been higher than the UK average and this may have had some bearing on the levels of intergenerational worklessness in the local context.

However, the unemployment gap between NI and the UK has been narrowing for some years, with Labour Force Survey figures for August-October 2017 estimating the NI ILO unemployment rate at 3.9%, which is below the UK ILO unemployment rate of 4.3%. Economic inactivity, however, remains persistently above the UK average with recent LFS figures estimating that the NI economic inactivity rate was 29% compared with the UK average of 21.5%. The LFS also shows that NI has a higher proportion of workless households than the rest of the UK. In April-July 2017, the proportion of workless households in NI was 21%, compared with the UK average of 15%.

Figure 1 below shows the breakdown of qualifications in the NI working age population by economic activity, taken from the Labour Force Survey (NISRA). Whilst a significant proportion (30%) of the economically inactive have no qualifications, approximately 38% of the economically inactive hold A-Level or higher qualifications. This reflects the fact that the definition of 'economically inactive' includes those who are in full-time education, looking after family or long-term sick. As those who are economically inactive are a potential future supply of labour, it is important that those who wish to return to the labour market have access to the skills and qualifications that will enable them to do so.

**Figure 1: Qualifications by Economic Activity, 16-64**



Source: Labour Force Survey, October-December 2017

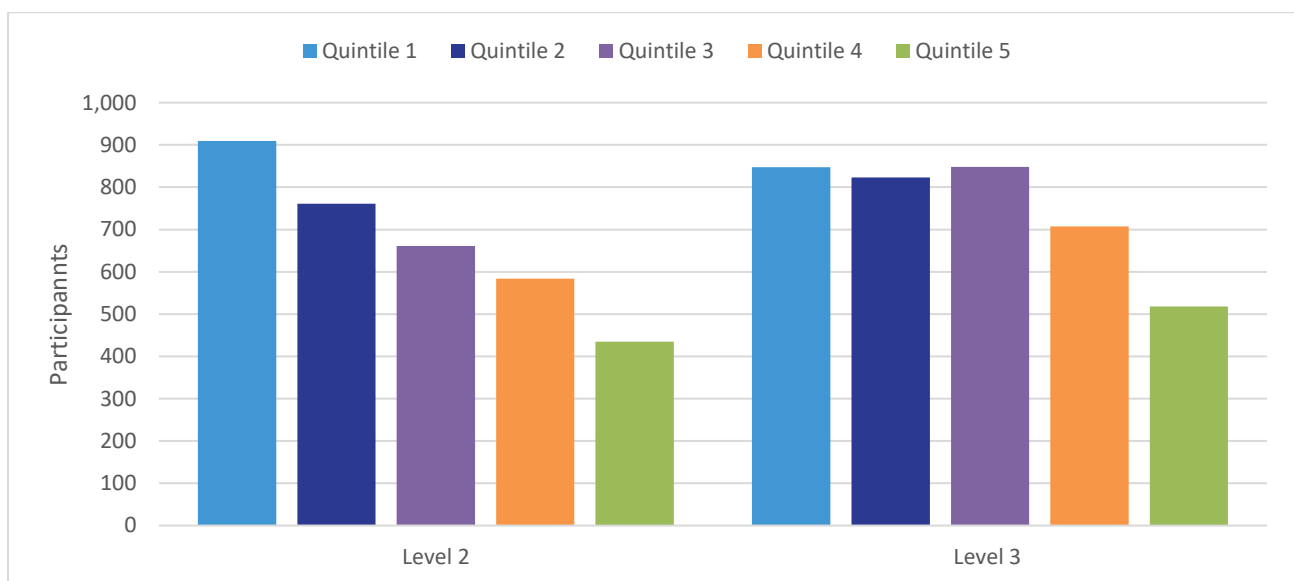
### Economic Barriers

A central assumption of the literature is that lower socio-economic status is associated with poorer educational outcomes. Holzer et al (2007) postulated that childhood poverty reduces productivity and economic output. The commonly identified economic barriers to participation in education are social welfare, childcare and transport (SOLAS, 2017). In terms of social welfare, recipients may be required to attend a training course as part of the terms and conditions of their payments. This can cause individuals to feel somewhat coerced into participation and may negatively affect their attitude to learning. On the other hand, there is also evidence that the social welfare system may act as a deterrent to course participation in circumstances where the individual is afraid that were they to start a course they would no longer qualify for benefits.

Research by Cavaglia, McNally and Ventura (2017) using the Longitudinal Education Outcomes database (LEO), found that those from disadvantaged backgrounds (using Free School meal entitlement as a proxy), especially men, are less likely to start an apprenticeship. The percentage of disadvantaged men who start an advanced (Level 3) apprenticeship is the same as those with university degrees.

Figure 2 shows occupancy on the Apprenticeships NI programme as of April 2017 broken down by NI Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM) quintile relating to the home postcodes of participants. Occupancy refers to the number of participants on the programme at a particular point in time. Those from the most deprived quintiles (Quintiles 1 and 2) make up 49% of those on Level 2 apprenticeships and 44% of those on Level 3 provision. The socio-economic gradient is more pronounced for those on Level 2 provision, whereas participants on Level 3 provision are more evenly distributed across deprivation quintiles. It should be noted that the NIMDM is an area based measure and free school meal entitlement is more likely to provide an accurate reflection of household circumstances.

**Figure 2: Apprenticeships NI Occupancy on Level 2 and Level 3 Apprenticeships, April 2017**



Source: Data extracted from the Department for the Economy's Client Management System on 28th July 2017.

## Structural Barriers

Saar et al (2014) carried out further work in relation to structural barriers to education, which focused on the degree to which institutions encourage participation of adult learners, how open they are to those without traditional entry qualifications, financial support available to learners, institutional flexibility with regard to study and curricula and the existence of short programmes which can act as a gateway for adult learners. Earlier work by Inbar and Sever (1989) addressed possible systemic barriers to second chance education such as possible selective procedures which may prevent certain groups gaining access to education.

McQueen (2014) postulates that many vocational courses introduce a compulsory academic element to what are essentially practical subjects. The introduction of these more academic elements is intended to raise the status of the subject in question, but may negatively impact the learners' intrinsic motivation to learn.

## **Second Chance Education Programmes**

Second chance education programmes are specifically targeted at individuals who never attended school, or who left school before completing the level of education on which they were enrolled. Participants may also include those who wish to enter an education programme or occupation for which they are not yet qualified. Savelsberg, Pignata and Weckert (2017), in their evaluation of second chance education programmes in Australia, note three common themes which are present in the literature. Second chance education programmes should be customised to the learner, services should be collaboratively linked with multidisciplinary, or 'wrap around', services and should be contextualised to be relevant to the individual, local community and the needs of industry. The need for a multidisciplinary approach is underlined by Considine et al (2005), who argue that a balance is needed between economic goals such as improved labour market outcomes and social goals such as developing closer connections between the programme participants and the wider community. Barnett and Spoehr (2008) emphasise the importance of a case management approach to address multiple and complex needs.

## **Conclusions**

Those facing barriers to participation and progression through education and into the labour market are not a homogeneous group by any means. In order to further encourage participation, a flexible and multi-faceted policy response is required. Economic barriers are the easiest to remedy from a policy perspective. In many cases improved information and guidance on available support will help individuals to overcome these barriers.

It is important that policy responses are developed in partnership with relevant public, private and community and voluntary sector stakeholders and that employers are encouraged to collaborate with the public sector to improve outcomes. This is of particular relevance to Northern Ireland as a devolved administration without access to fiscal policy levers.

**Mervyn Wilson, Stephen Donnelly and Jamie Stainer**

For further information or queries please contact [mervyn.wilson@economy-ni.gov.uk](mailto:mervyn.wilson@economy-ni.gov.uk) or [jamie.stainer@economy-ni.gov.uk](mailto:jamie.stainer@economy-ni.gov.uk)

## References

- Barnett, K. and Spoehr, J. (2008), *Complex not simple: The vocational educational education and training pathway from welfare to work*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), Adelaide.
- BIS (2016), *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, Department for Business Innovation and Skills, London Research Paper Number 87.
- Cavaglia, C., McNally, S. and Ventura, G. (2017), *Apprenticeships for Young People in England: Is there a Payoff?* Research Discussion Paper 010, Centre for Vocational Education Research.
- Census (2011), Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, Belfast.
- Considine, G., Watson, I. and Hall, R. (2005), *Who's Missing Out? Access and equity in vocational education and training*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), Adelaide.
- DEL (2012), *Removing the barriers to learning: exploring adult perceptions and attitudes to participation in Further Education*, Department for Employment and Learning, Belfast.
- Department for the Economy (2017), *Enrolments at UK Higher Education Institutions: Northern Ireland analysis 2015/16*, Department for the Economy, Belfast.
- Executive Office (2016), *Next Steps*, The Executive Office, Belfast.
- Flynn, S., Brown, J., Johnston, A. and Rodger, S. (2011), Barriers to education for the marginalized adult learner, *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 57 (1), pp43-58.
- Friedman, S., Laurison, D. and Macmillan, L. (2017), *Social Mobility, the Class Pay Gap and Intergenerational Worklessness: New Insights from The Labour Force Survey*, Social Mobility Commission, London.
- Granovetter, M.S., 1977. The strength of weak ties, in *Social Networks: A Developing Paradigm*, Edited by Leinhardt, S., Academic Press, New York, pp347-367.
- Holzer, H., Schanzenbach, D., Dubcan, G. and Ludwig, J. (2007), *The economic costs of childhood poverty in the United States: subsequent effects of children growing up poor*, Working paper, Centre for American Progress.
- Hu, S. and Kuh, G.D. (2002), Being (dis)engaged in educationally purposeful activities: the influences of student and institutional characteristics, *Research in Higher Education*, 43 (5), pp555-575.
- Inbar, D. and Sever, R. (1989), The importance of making promises: an analysis of second chance policies, *Comparative Education Review*, 33 (2) pp232-242.
- Joo Yoo, S. and Huang, W.D. (2013), Engaging online adult learners in Higher Education: motivational factors impacted gender, age and prior experiences, *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 61, pp151-164.
- Labour Force Survey (2017), Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, Belfast, October to December.



McQueen, P. (2014), Tensions and Inequalities Revisited: Roles, Rights, Responsibilities and Recognition, in, *Roles, Rights and Responsibilities in UK Education: tension and Inequalities*, Edited by McQueen, H., Palgrave, Macmillan, USA, pp133-155.

Macmillan, L. (2013), *Intergenerational worklessness in the UK and the role of local labour markets*, University of London.

Ofcom (2017), *Connected Nations 2017*, Ofcom, London.

Saar, E. and Täht, and Roosalu, T. (2014), institutional barriers for adults' participation in higher education, *Higher Education*, 68, pp691-710.

Savelsburg, H., Pignata, S. and Weckert, P. (2017), Second chance education: barriers, supports and engagement strategies, *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 57 (1), pp36-57.

Schoon, I. (2014), Parental worklessness and the experience of NEET among their offspring: evidence from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, 5 (2), pp129-150.

SOLAS (2017), *Specific aspects of Further Education and Training (FET) provision and barriers to participation in FET programmes*, Amárach Research, Further Education and Training Authority, Republic of Ireland.

Spielhofer, T., Golden, S., Evans, K., Marshall, H., Mundy, E., Pomati, M. and Styles, B. (2008), *Barriers to participation in education and training*, National Foundation for Educational Research, Department of Education, London.

Zucotti, C.V. and O'Reilly, J. (2018), Ethnicity, gender and household effects on becoming NEET: An Intersectional Analysis Work, *Employment and Society*, 16 January.