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**Middle attainers and 14-19 progression in England:
half-served by New Labour and now overlooked
by the Coalition?**

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Abstract

In the context of the international problem of 'early school leaving', this paper explores the issue of sustained participation in upper secondary education in England. It focuses in particular on the position of middle attainers, who constitute a large proportion of the cohort and whose progress will be vital in realising the Government's goal of 'Raising the Participation Age' to 18 by 2015. The paper draws on evidence from national research undertaken as part of the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training in England and Wales and analysis of New Labour and Coalition policy between 2000-2012. It uses a three-year local study of 2400 14- and 16-year-olds in an established school/college consortium to illustrate the effects of policy and practice on middle attainers. We argue that this important group of young people was 'half-served' by New Labour, because of its incomplete and contradictory 14-19 reforms, and is now being 'overlooked' by Coalition policy because of its emphasis on high attainers. We conclude by suggesting a range of measures to support the 14+ participation, progression and transition of middle attainers in the English education and training system.

Key words: upper secondary education, education participation; education policy, school-to-work transitions.

Introduction

Overcoming 'early school leaving' (ESL) has become a major policy focus internationally as countries respond to the demands of globalisation by introducing measures aimed at supporting the vast majority of young people to attain improved outcomes at the end of 'upper secondary education'. Within the EU, the problem of ESL is seen to have both economic, social and educational dimensions, '*High rates of ESL are detrimental to the objective of making lifelong learning a reality and a constraint to smart and inclusive growth in Europe. They increase the risk of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. ESL represents a waste of individual life opportunities and a waste of social and economic potential*' (European Commission, 2010: 4). Early school leavers are defined as '*those who have only achieved pre-primary, primary, lower secondary or a short upper secondary education of less than 2 years*' (European Commission, 2010: 5). Policy responses differ across the four countries of the UK (Hodgson *et al.*, 2011). While all are committed to increasing post-16 participation, it is only in England that there has been legislation related to 'Raising the Age of Participation' (RPA) to 18 years by 2015¹.

This paper explores the issue of sustained participation in upper secondary education in England with a particular focus on the position and progress of middle attainers in 14-19 education and training. There are several reasons why we are interested in this group of young people. First, middle attainers constitute a large section of the cohort and their progress can be seen as a barometer on the inclusiveness and effectiveness of the English upper secondary education system and its ability to prevent early school leaving. Ensuring that their needs are met and that they are able to attain and progress are pre-conditions for RPA. Moreover, the protracted economic crisis and unprecedented levels of unemployment amongst 18-25 year olds (ACEVO, 2012) threaten to reduce opportunities for large sections of young people, including middle attainers, who could be in danger of becoming the 'new NEETs' (not in employment, education or training'). Finally, and of particular interest for this paper, they have been strongly affected by national education policy. Here we suggest that this group of young people were 'half-served' by the previous government's (referred to here as New Labour) 14-19 reforms during the period 2000-2010, but arguably their prospects have worsened under the Coalition Government since its election in 2010.

¹ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/21/contents/enacted/data.htm>

So who are the middle attainers in the English education and training system? Looked at in different ways, they constitute around 40 per cent of young people. At the end of primary education, about 4 in 10 pupils are classified as 'medium attainers' having achieved Level 4 in their Key Stage 2 SATs (Standard Attainment Tests) scores at the age of 11 (DfE, 2011a). Post-16, a similar proportion of young people are not involved in a full two-year A Level programme, an Apprenticeship or classified as NEET (DfE, 2011b).

This paper discusses the fortunes of middle attainers in 14-19 education and training (the English version of upper secondary education) through a study of national policy in the final years of the previous Labour Government and now under the Coalition. We also use data from a three-year case study to illustrate the effects of policy on this important group of young people. We conclude with a discussion of the combined effects of curricular, qualifications, organisational and labour market policies on the middle attainer and suggest practical measures to improve opportunities for progression and transition within upper secondary education and into the labour market and higher education.

Research approach

The wider policy analysis in this paper was developed through the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training in England and Wales (2003-2009) (Pring *et al.*, 2009). More recent analysis of Coalition education policy has been published in a number of articles in a special issue of the *London Review of Education* (e.g. Fuller and Unwin, 2011; Hayward and Williams, 2011; Hodgson and Spours, 2011). Research on what we will term the 'overlooked middle' is being developed through collaboration between a range of social partners in 'The 14-19 Alliance' chaired by the Centre for Post-14 Research and Innovation at the Institute of Education, University of London (Spours *et al.*, 2012).

The empirical research informing this paper is based on a study of 2400 14- (Year 9) and 16-year olds (Year 11) from an established school/college consortium, comprising six 11-18 schools and a large, multi-site further education college in Southern England, over a period of three years (2008-2011). This particular consortium could be regarded as a New Labour 'flagship' because of the way in which it responded to national policy to provide extensive mixed general and

applied/vocational programmes of study for 14-16 year olds, as well as implementing all 10 Lines of the newly developed 14-19 Diplomas. The consortium employed a full-time co-ordinator paid for by its member institutions and introduced a number of common practices around timetabling, quality assurance and information, advice and guidance. A large number of learners travelled between sites for post-16 provision, with a smaller proportion of 14-16 year olds accessing vocational/applied courses in an institution other than their home school.

As part of the local study, several different types of data were collected and analysed over the three years – statistics from the local authority on the whole Year 9 and 11 cohorts across the locality (including the consortium) in relation to gender, ethnicity, prior attainment and eligibility for free school meals; data from a brief self-completed survey undertaken by the full 2008 Year 9 and Year 11 consortium cohorts; individual interviews and focus groups with staff concerned with 14-19 education and training; and individual interviews with an original sample of 112 Year 9 and 113 Year 11 learners, who were interviewed on three occasions over the duration of the study. 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 ethnicity and with a mixed profile of prior attainment in Key Stage 2 SATs. All learners consented to be individually interviewed annually over a period of three years.

For this paper we have also selected eight individual cases of middle attainers (as defined by their Key Stage 2 SAT scores) from the Year 11 sample for more in-depth study. They have been chosen from a total of 51 middle attainers in the sample on the basis of gender, Key Stage 4 (Years 10 and 11) courses and post-16 destinations that represent different initial progression trajectories (see Table 1). These cases are used to illustrate the dynamics of middle attainers' 14+ participation, progression and plans for 18+ transition that are thematically described in the next section.

(Table 1 about here)

Findings: the consortium case (2008-11)

Here we report the main findings from the three-year study and the ways in which the consortium interpreted national policy under New Labour.

A positive Key Stage 4 experience

Mixed study programmes at Key Stage 4, comprising General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and applied/vocational awards, were a feature of consortium provision. The introduction of the 10 'lines' of 14-19 Diplomas (new composite qualifications at three levels comprising sector-based principal learning, additional/specialist study and a generic skill-based core) over the period of the research further diversified the curriculum offer, providing students with a greater choice of subjects and different styles of learning and assessment. BTEC applied/vocational awards, which had been gradually introduced by the consortium over a period of four or five years continued to be offered in large numbers, often alongside Diplomas, and resulted in the increased 'vocationalisation' of Key Stage 4. The number of learners on GCSE-only programmes constituted a minority by 2009. This trend was accelerated by the practice of two of the schools making vocational study virtually mandatory. The consortium invested considerable effort in providing careers education and information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) and learners were generally positive towards the information they were given about choices at Key Stage 4 and post-16. However, middle attainers were more often than high attainers steered towards mixed general and applied/vocational programmes in Years 10 and 11. So in the Year 11 sample more middle attainers (66%) were on mixed programmes than high attainers (46%), the majority of whom were on GCSE-only programmes.

The development of applied/vocational provision at Key Stage 4 has attracted controversy in England with accusations of schools 'gaming' in order to improve their position in performance tables (Wolf, 2011) and in the process harming student progression opportunities. However, this would be an over-simplified explanation regarding the motives of this consortium. While the schools were keenly aware of the benefits in terms of league tables and generous national funding for the Diplomas, our interviews with consortium staff suggested that there was also a genuine belief in the virtues of mixed general and applied/vocational study. Moreover, in the interviews with students in both Years 9 and 11 we found strong support for introducing greater choice into the Key Stage 4 curriculum, even though they knew

that they were being steered towards taking applied/vocational awards. The middle attainers in the Year 9 sample when they progressed to Year 10 were the most enthusiastic about their courses. Typical comments included:

'I like the practical side, it's more fun doing something than working and listening.' (L74)

'It's different. It's not all theory and writing. I understand and learn more by doing and I enjoy it.' (L12)

But problems post-16

In terms of aspirations to continue in full-time education post-16, a total of 66 per cent of the whole Year 11 cohort clearly stated that they wished to remain in full-time education. While there was a difference between high and middle attainers (90% compared with 76%), their aspirations were more closely aligned than with low attainers (53%). We suggest that increased engagement at Key Stage 4, as a result of motivational programmes, played an important role in this process.

In 2009 a higher proportion of the total Year 11 cohort stayed on in full-time education post-16 (88%) than the national average (85%), with little difference between high attainers (95%), middle attainers (87%) and low attainers (83%). What emerged from the interviews, however, is that post-16 participation was being fuelled not only by improved attainment at Key Stage 4 and higher aspirations across most of the cohort, but also by the inability of many middle and low attainers to access the labour market or apprenticeships.

Within this general pattern of educational aspirations there was also a strong orientation across the Year 11 cohort towards post-16 general education in the form of General Certificate of Education Advanced Levels (A Levels), particularly amongst high (85%) and middle attainers (61%). In the event, half of all middle attainers progressed to A Level programmes in 2009, while for high attainers it was the overwhelming majority (86%).

Although there was a relatively close alignment of the progression behaviour of high and middle attainers, a gap opened up in relation to aspirations at 18+. Whereas 68 per cent of high attainers aimed to go to university, only 39 per cent of middle attainers indicated the same desire, although this was double the proportion of low

attainers (18%). It is also important to note that a quarter of the cohort was unsure about higher education, which is not surprising in this particular consortium because, as we will see from the case-studies of middle attainers, for many of these young people they would be the first in their family to go to university.

What the research in the consortium indicates is that having more mixed programmes at Key Stage 4 contributed to higher levels of post-16 participation, but that choices of 16-19 programmes of study were being made along traditional lines. The quotations below from Year 11 learners in the sample are typical of the thinking behind these decisions:

I don't know what I want to do in the future so I've decided to take A Level subjects. I tried to keep a range of subjects that will help with future plans. (L90)

I decided to take A Levels because I'd like to go on to university to be a vet or do medicine. (L109)

I was advised by my family to take qualifications that have been around for a while. (L105)

Over the period of the project, consortium results at Key Stage 4 improved and came very close to the national average, particularly in terms of the percentage of 16-year-olds gaining five A*-C GCSEs grades or equivalent (Level 2). However, results post-16 lagged well behind national performance. For example, on average points scores at Level 3 in 2010, the consortium scored 617 compared with 733 nationally. This comparatively poor showing at Level 3 may partly be explained by the weaker Key Stage 4 attainment profile of consortium students prior to 2010, particularly in relation to the benchmark of five A*-C GCSEs grades or equivalents including English and Maths (Level 2+), and partly by the introduction of more rigorous A Level specifications following the 2008 qualifications reforms (see Hodgson and Spours, 2003, Chapter 3 for details of these).

As we have seen, a high proportion of middle attainers aspired to take A Level and half achieved their goal. While they were not far behind high attainers in terms of Level 2 attainment (middle attainers 77%; high attainers 94%), they lagged significantly behind in terms of Level 2+ (46% compared with 88% for high attainers),

thus disadvantaging them in terms of future A Level study. As we will see from the individual cases, middle attainers tended to struggle to gain sufficiently high grades in the first year of an A Level programme (AS) to continue successfully to the second year.

The proportion of young people leaving the consortium sixth forms within or at the end of Year 12 grew steadily over the duration of the project, culminating in 31 per cent in 2011. This was a period that had seen a dramatic rise in the numbers participating in this type of provision. Most of the 17+ 'drop out' can be accounted for through those leaving Level 3 programmes. We do not have statistics on the proportion of middle attainers who left at this point, because attrition meant that we were unable to contact the whole sample in the third year of the study. However, the data we have and the case studies below indicate that middle attainers were particularly affected by this pattern. Our difficulties in accessing them in their original post-16 institutions in the third year of the study suggests that they may well have left for other destinations or dropped out of the system altogether. Institutions do not necessarily collect data on the destinations of those who leave mid-course. The problems middle attainers experienced in the first year of A Levels were to some extent reflected in the lower satisfaction ratings they gave to their course in Year 12 in comparison with high attainers. A total of 97 per cent of high attainers were satisfied with their post-16 course, whereas only 77 per cent of others rated their programmes this way.

The issue of middle attainers struggling with A Level courses in the consortium had a number of causes. In addition to relatively weak Key Stage 4 attainment profiles and the lack of GCSE English and Maths, there was also a tendency amongst some learners to want to stay on in their school sixth form because they felt comfortable in that environment. This pattern was particularly prevalent amongst males and middle attainers, whom we termed the 'comfort zoners'. Their typical comments included:

I'm used to it, I like it here and it's near my home. (L4)

*It's easier, the teachers know me and I can go to another partnership school.
(L6)*

The schools were also keen to allow them to participate in their sixth form and concerns were raised by CEIAG specialists that there was a lack of impartial advice given in some cases, as these quotations below suggest:

'All schools are trying to hold on to their students. This is a bit of an issue.'

'Teachers will sell the academic route in their school and their sixth form'.

The consortium school sixth forms almost exclusively focused on A Levels. While the partner college offered Diplomas and a wide range of vocational programmes post-16, the majority of learners did not want to take these courses, even though they might have had more successful outcomes.

The structure of post-16 provision in the area thus made it relatively easy for students who had gained the minimum threshold to study A Levels. Across the Year 11 cohort as a whole 81 per cent of those who wanted to study A Levels were able to do so. It proved much more difficult for those who wished to access an apprenticeship or get a job, however. Of the Year 11 students who sought a place on an apprenticeship only 18 per cent succeeded and only 14 per cent of those who sought employment. The lack of opportunity in the work-based routes disproportionately affected middle and low attainers.

Progression trajectories of middle attaining students

The following cases provide longitudinal accounts of eight middle attainers from the consortium who were selected to provide greater detail of different initial progression trajectories (see Table 1). In particular, they cast light on the choices that this sample made of both course and place of study and the immediate consequences of their decisions. The case-studies thus illustrate many of the themes described in the previous section.

S111 – finding A Levels difficult and scaling down ambitions

This male student took a GCSE-only programme in Year 11 (2009) and when the researchers first interviewed him he aspired to study A Levels in a consortium sixth form; to progress to higher education, being the first in his family to do so; and to gain a Masters degree in science so he could qualify as a chemist and 'have a big house'.

He was what we described earlier as a 'comfort zoner', commenting that he wanted to study in his school sixth form because 'it is convenient for me and doesn't require me to apply for any other course in the area'. When he was interviewed in 2010 during his first year of post-16 study, he was taking three science A Levels and Use of Maths AS. He was happy both with the course he was taking and the place of study. However, he was already missing deadlines in coursework and when he was interviewed in the second year of post-16 study he admitted that he had gained very low grades at AS (E's and U's). He was still hoping to go to university, but he had decided to take a Foundation degree at a local institution because, 'I've struggled in the sixth form'. His final comment was 'I'm hoping to get to university, but I'm not doing that well in the sixth form. I'm happy that I did it, but I regret taking these subjects. I didn't realise how hard three science subjects would be. I'm quite nervous about 'uni' given my performance'.

S95 – doing better than expected and increasing aspirations

This female student was also on a GCSE-only programme and also aspired to study A Levels. However, she had chosen to go to a sixth form college outside the consortium because 'it looks like a good college that is focused on A Levels'. She was not planning to go into higher education, even though some of her family had done so, because she wanted to enter the police force. When she was interviewed in the first year of post-16 study she was on a five-subject A Level programme, having gained better GCSE results than expected. She was very happy with both the course and the college, but found it hard work. Her aspirations had become more ambitious because she now wanted to progress to higher education to be a criminal psychologist. In the second year of study she told the researchers that she had achieved good results at AS and was now doing four rather than five subjects at A Level. She was still planning to go to university, but she was worried about the future: 'I'm quite scared – the job market is bad. I've a part-time job at the moment and there are university graduates there who didn't get another job elsewhere. They are all managers in Next'.

S13 – taking the easiest option to stay on at school at 16+, but taking a step back at 18+

This male student took a mixture of GCSEs and applied/vocational qualifications in Year 11, but wanted to go on to A Levels in his school sixth form because this seemed the easiest option. This was despite his father wanting him to do an apprenticeship. He was unclear about whether he wanted to go to higher education

or what he wanted to do in the future. When he was interviewed in Year 12 he was on an A Level programme and was happy with both his course and the sixth form. However, by Year 13 he was concerned about his studies because he had got poor results at AS. He was now planning to change direction completely and to go to college to study plumbing and joinery Level 2 – ‘I want to learn a skill and I’m prepared to take a step back. If I get to college and do the course, I’ll get a job. I’d be more pessimistic if I went to university’.

S14 – made the wrong choices initially but eventually found her niche

As with S13, this female student took a combination of GCSEs and applied/vocational awards in Key Stage 4 and also wanted to go on to study A Levels in her school sixth form. She was considering going to university but it had to be near by so she could live at home. She studied A Levels in Year 12 but was not happy with the sixth form, ‘I’m thinking of leaving and going to college when I’ve done my AS Levels. Sixth form is not what I thought it would be. Teachers don’t turn up for lessons and they treat me like they did in Year 11’. At this point she wanted to do a BTEC course and be a physiotherapist. By Year 13 she had already started one college programme and dropped out, but she had found a place on a BTEC National in Sport and Leisure at a second college and felt she was finally on the right track. At this point, she was uncertain about whether she wanted to go to university and was a bit nervous about the future. She felt she had been given the wrong advice by both the school and the first college.

S27 – a comfort zoner who should have gone to college in the first place

This male student took a GCSE-only programme in Key Stage 4 and planned to go into his school sixth form to do A Levels because ‘I’m already familiar with the surroundings and the teachers, so it feels comfortable’. In Year 12, however, he was studying a programme that involved both BTEC and A Levels and commented, ‘I feel comfortable with it all. The subjects are not easy, but they’re achievable. BTEC is easier because there are no exams’. At this point, he was doing a part-time job in a pub chain (15-16 hours each week) and realised that this was making things difficult for him, but wanted the money. He did not achieve well at the end of the first year. When he was interviewed in 2011, he had moved to a college outside the consortium to do a BTEC National in Sport and Leisure because he had decided that ‘the sixth form was too schooly’. He had clear plans about the future, wanting to become a personal trainer in his Gap Year and then to go to a local university.

S64 – the happy and confident apprentice

This female apprentice took a GCSE-only programme in Key Stage 4 and aspired to do an apprenticeship post-16 because she wanted to work on cruise ships as a hairdresser. She commented, 'I'm interested in hairdressing. It's easier to learn when you're working'. This person achieved her goal and was very enthusiastic about the apprenticeship when she was interviewed in 2010. She remarked, 'I feel I'm progressing quicker than I would at college. I felt prepared for leaving school. I was told enough and was confident enough to move on'. She continued to be enthusiastic about her apprenticeship when interviewed a year later, had completed an National Vocational Qualification Level 2 and felt very optimistic about the future despite the recession.

S53 – enjoying vocational learning and on the right track

This male student took a mixture of GCSEs and applied/vocational awards at school and was very clear that he wanted to go on to college to study a BTEC National in Construction and the Built Environment so he could become a quantity surveyor. He had plans to progress to university as others in his family had done. When interviewed in 2010 he was taking a 14-19 Diploma in Construction and the Built Environment in the consortium partner college. He commented that he was very happy with his course because, 'It hits all the targets I want'. He was similarly enthusiastic in 2011 and his future plans remained the same.

S63 – happy with vocational learning but unsure about the future

This female apprentice, like S53, took a mixed programme at Key Stage 4. She was not clear whether she wanted to do A Levels or a BTEC, but she knew that she wanted to go to university and to become a nurse. When she was interviewed in 2010, she was on an apprenticeship in a residential care home. She was very happy with both the programme and the workplace, 'It's very interesting and I like earning money. I like everything about the care home. People are friendly and I'm getting to know the residents; taking them out and caring for them'. She commented that having done a health and social care qualification at school had helped her to decide to undertake this kind of work. By 2011, this young woman was still on her apprenticeship, but had given up the idea of higher education and was less clear about whether she wanted to become a nurse in the future.

Summary of the individual case-studies

While each of these cases has its own individual story to tell, there are a number of common themes that relate to middle attainers. With one notable exception, the most striking theme is the problematic relationship between these students and their choice to take A Levels in their school sixth form, particularly when this appeared for several to be the 'line of least resistance', leading to potentially complacent attitudes towards post-16 study. Most of the middle-attaining A Level students appeared to struggle in the first year of post-16 study, leading to a change of direction at 17+. This meant that they effectively lost a year of study, often with difficult choices to be made and reduced aspirations. Interestingly, the position of those taking GCSE-only programmes at Key Stage 4 was similar to those taking mixed programmes, so for these students there is no tangible evidence that GCSEs were a better preparation for A Levels than their applied/vocational equivalents. Moreover, these cases only relate to those young people who remained in contact and had a definite place in the education system. There was a large number whom it was impossible to track in the third year of the study, probably because they had dropped out of education altogether and had thus become early school leavers.

Those learners on more vocational pathways, on the other hand, appeared to fare better because they were more obviously doing something that related to their future goals. Some also enjoyed learning and earning at the same time. A key factor here was that they were clearer about their future employment aims. However, as we have indicated earlier, there were fewer opportunities for work-based learning and employment compared with full-time study and, across the cohort as whole, these young people were in a small minority.

Discussion – reflections on policy and practice

The disjuncture between the pre- and post-16 experience

Viewed from the perspective of 14-19 progression, the middle attainers in this study were subjected to a highly differentiated experience pre- and post-16. Pre-16, most had a choice of taking general or mixed general and applied/vocational programmes of study and the pedagogy and assessment modes that resulted appeared to be

producing high rates of student satisfaction. The combined effects of engaged students, an extensive programme of CEIAG and the reward of GCSE equivalent points scores for applied/vocational qualifications appeared to fuel young people's aspirations for further study post-16. However, this positive experience was by and large not replicated post-16.

Distinct track-based qualifications dominated the 16-19 curriculum and the consortium was no exception, so mixed general and applied/vocational study remained a minor trend. This meant that the balance of theoretical and practical pedagogies enjoyed pre-16 featured much less post-16. Moreover, the new 14-19 Diplomas, which had played an important role in promoting mixed study for 14-16 year olds in this consortium, failed to take off post-16 because they were untried and had to compete with A Levels. Furthermore, the 11-18 schools were slow to develop Level 3 applied/vocational qualifications, not least because they were far less equipped than further education colleges to do so.

What is also apparent is that for middle attainers, both GCSE and applied/vocational qualifications at Key Stage 4 did not adequately prepare them for advanced level study, particularly A Levels. However, it was A Levels that the majority wanted, partly because of their tried and tested reputation and also because they were offered in the familiar environment of the consortium school sixth forms. Moreover, the schools had a strong incentive to advise their pupils to stay on within the sixth form and thus appeared happy to accept these middle attainers onto A Level courses because they increased their numbers. It could be argued that these institutions thus encouraged a complacent attitude towards A Level study because of the acceptance and even promotion of the school sixth form as a familiar environment. It was the 'comfort zoners' in our study who were to find the school sixth form and A Levels least comfortable. National policy also contributed to the problem. The gap between Level 2 (e.g. GCSEs) and A Level study in England widened following the 'tightening up' of A Level standards in 2008, which meant that for middle attainers the likelihood was low grades or even failure at the end of the first year of an A Level course.

The case studies also illustrate how for the small minority who could access the work-based route it turned out to be highly successful in the short-term at least. The problem was that the schools had little incentive to recommend apprenticeships and, as our wider data show, demand outstripped supply. A significant proportion (15%+) of both the Year 9 and Year 11 cohorts indicated that they would like to enter the

work-based route. Most were unable to do so, thereby channelling young people into full-time education and onto courses that were not their first option.

New Labour and the ‘half-served’ middle attainer

The 14-19 policy of the previous Labour Government could, in several ways, be seen to have favoured the middle attainer. *Curriculum 2000* and the initial reform of A Levels broadened access to post-16 general education by splitting these qualifications into the AS and A2; the use of modularity and the opportunity to resit examinations; and reclassifying some broad vocational awards as applied A Levels (Hodgson and Spours, 2003). This allowed nearly half of 16 year olds to enter A Level programmes by 2010 (DfE, 2011b).

The *Curriculum 2000* reforms were swiftly followed by the introduction of greater flexibility in Key Stage 4 to allow applied/vocational qualifications to play a greater role in the curriculum (DfES, 2002). Between 2003 and 2010 qualifications such as BTEC First Diplomas played a significant role in helping young people in the middle quartiles to achieve the Level 2 threshold of five GCSE A*-C grades, thus potentially opening up access to Level 3 study post-16, as our case study has illustrated. In addition, New Labour developed the 14-19 Diplomas designed to encourage the mixing of general and vocational study (DfES, 2005), although these were not taken by large numbers of young people nationally (Hodgson and Spours, 2007). The Labour Government also financially supported 16-19 year olds from low-income families through the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and attempted to broaden access to higher education through campaigns such as *Aimhigher* and the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) points tariff, which gave equivalence to a wide range of pre-university qualifications. The combination of these policies contributed significantly to a sustained rise in initial full-time post-16 education participation that increased from 74 per cent in 2004 to 85 per cent in 2009 (DfE, 2011b).

In terms of 14-19 progression, however, the picture was more problematic for middle attainers. On the one hand, the diversification of the curriculum with the promotion of vocational and applied courses, the development of more accessible forms of assessment through modularisation and the use of equivalences in performance tables led to higher levels of measured attainment and greater aspirations to continue

study post-16. On the other hand, as we have seen, this approach did not always foster skills for effective 14-19 progression. Despite this, funding steers meant that 11-18 schools were anxious to attract students to their own sixth form provision (largely A Levels) and New Labour, despite rhetorical support for institutional collaboration, actively encouraged competition between post-16 providers and the opening of new school sixth forms. The result was that students in Key Stage 4 who previously might not have been able to access A Levels, were now encouraged by their parents and by the school to do so. A Levels, not Diplomas, were the qualifications of choice. In the event, as we saw illustrated in the local study, many struggled and their difficulties are evidenced nationally by high non-completion rates in AS levels. The Learning and Skills Council (2009) found that for students in London with fewer than 40 GCSE points, for example, AS failure rates could be as high as 30 per cent. Post-16 BTEC National courses would prove more accessible, but for many students, including the middle attainers, these were not always the first port of call. Their perceived lower status was closely tied to the fact they were not universally recognised by higher education institutions (Hoelscher *et al.*, 2008). Another major problem was the performance of the work-based route. Despite a great deal of policy emphasis, New Labour's voluntarist approach to employers (Keep, 2005) proved incapable of providing high numbers of apprenticeship places (Dolphin and Lanning, 2011). For middle attaining students, New Labour's policies for 14-19 curriculum and qualifications reform constituted a 'game of two halves' – 14-16 and 16-19.

New Labour's organisational reforms were also contradictory, encouraging both institutional collaboration and competition. Collaboration was much more evident pre-16, with schools having strong incentives to offer a more mixed curriculum for 14-16 year olds. Post-16 this logic did not hold. Schools and sixth form colleges could continue to offer more traditional provision and had financial incentives to compete with one another and with further education colleges. The policy of 'sixth form presumption' that encouraged schools to open new sixth forms contributed to this atmosphere of competition. Carefully constructed and impartial CEIAG for middle attainers was highly compromised in this context and many learners found themselves on courses where they were unlikely to be fully successful.

New Labour's performativity also 'half-served' middle attainers. The focus on league tables, institutional performance and a new high-risk qualification (14-19 Diplomas) functioned as substitutes for comprehensive curriculum, organisational and labour

market thinking across the whole 14-19 phase. New Labour thus led middle attainers up the hill of 14-19 participation, progression and transition only to lead them down again. From a wider political perspective, this partial and contradictory approach to reform also opened the doors to a Conservative backlash, with its criticisms of mechanical learning and 'dumbing down' (e.g. Bassett *et al.*, 2009).

Coalition policy and the 'overlooked middle'

From the evidence of the first two years of the Coalition Government, education policy emphasis appears to have moved from support for broad sections of the 14-19 cohort under New Labour to high attaining elites. It has its sights firmly set on the top 30 per cent of the cohort in its drive to ensure that more young people attain GCSEs in five traditional subjects and that talented children from deprived backgrounds can become potential candidates for access to research intensive universities (DfE, 2010). Boosting the performance of sufficient numbers of these young people is seen as emblematic of the Government's commitment to social mobility (HMG, 2011a). It has also promised to expand the availability of Apprenticeships for young people (BIS, 2012). Like the previous administration, the Coalition Government is very focused on NEETs (HMG, 2011b). However, the position of middle attainers appears far less certain in this new policy world.

Five policies combine to mark this shift. First, the English Baccalaureate performance measure, with its benchmark of the attainment of five traditional subjects (DfE, 2010), is encouraging schools to focus more sharply on more able learners at Key Stage 4. Accompanying this, the Review of the National Curriculum, with a traditionalist emphasis on core knowledge, spelling and grammar and the abolition of modular specifications, is intended to make GCSE study more rigorous (Ofqual, 2012). At the same time, as a result of the Wolf Review on 14-19 Vocational Education (2011), there has been a reduction in the number of vocational qualifications available at Key Stage 4, an increase in external assessment and a much lower level of recognition for vocational learning in performance tables. Each vocational qualification will now only count as one GCSE (DfE, 2011c). This type of approach is being replicated post-16, with plans for A Levels to become less modularized, with fewer opportunities for resitting modules, more stretching specifications and more external assessment (Ofqual, 2012). In addition, the raising of GCSE floor targets from 35 to 40 per cent and the moving of GCSE grade

boundaries, particularly in English, appear to have had a disproportionate effect on pupils on the GCSE C/D borderline and on particular schools (Vasagar, 2012).

Coalition Government policies in curriculum and qualifications are being reinforced by its approach to institutions, governance and funding. The philosophy of the market, growing institutional competition and the lack of support for 14-19 partnerships between schools and colleges could well lead to greater inefficiency, inequity and polarization at the local level. Pre-16, the combined effects of curriculum, qualifications and organisational policies could result in a reduced curriculum offer at Key Stage 4 that narrows choices for middle attainers. Post-16, there could be a serious weakening of the type of area-based provision that offers all students, but particularly the middle attainers, a range of 16-19 progression routes. The policy preference for 11-18 schools with their own sixth forms, a process accelerated by the growth of academies, could lead to a larger surplus of A Level places which will not necessarily be appropriate for middle attainers.

The squeeze on the middle relates not only to the education system (curriculum, qualifications and organization), but also to the operation of the youth labour market. At a time of economic stagnation and with more than a million young people unemployed and growing numbers of NEETs (Sissons and Jones, 2012), there is both a paucity of jobs and an inadequate supply of apprenticeship places.

Reflections on the experience of 14-19 year olds involved in the local study suggest that despite the rhetoric of performance and high standards for all, the Coalition Government's focus on the top 30 per cent at Key Stage 4 and the top 10 per cent post-16 (those destined for Russell Group universities) has produced an education narrative that does not apply to the middle attainer. It thus fails to address the real needs of this part of the cohort because of an inability or unwillingness to focus on the more important practical problems of progression between pre- and post-16 study highlighted by our local research. The Government's response is to create a 'restrictive coherence' between pre- and post-16 study by narrowing the academic track, which will exclude more young people from 14-19 general education (Hodgson and Spours, 2012). The numbers in the middle ground are thus likely to grow, with little prospect of the new academically excluded being able to enter Apprenticeships in large numbers during a recession. On the other hand, the Coalition Government has no clear plans for applied/vocational post-16 qualifications because they do not consider them to be sufficiently rigorous or recognised by employers (Wolf, 2011);

nor are they prepared to back the degree of institutional collaboration required to build progression pathways 14-19. The middle attainer has thus moved from having been 'half-served' to being 'overlooked' by policy.

How can we meet the needs of middle attainers?

The local study highlights the interaction of an 'ecology' of factors under New Labour affecting learner 14-19 progression - the mismatch between pre- and post-16 qualifications; inadequate skill development in this context; the impact of school organisational factors, institutional competition and policy levers (e.g. funding, performance tables and inspection) and the depressed condition of the youth labour market. We have also argued that Coalition policy presents new dangers for middle attainers as its focus on curriculum traditionalism and institutional competition deflects attention from the necessary practical actions to support the effective participation, progression and transition to the labour market of middle attainers.

We conclude with four urgent practical measures to ensure that these young people are not overlooked and are better served:

1. Encouraging an explicit focus on building progression skills into the curriculum at Key Stage 4 both within subjects and across the curriculum as a whole (e.g. through a Level 2 research project focused on progression) and more emphasis on English and Maths throughout the 14-19 phase.
2. Rebuilding collaboration between all 14-19 providers, employers, higher education and wider stakeholders in order to focus on impartial CEIAG; progression skills and routes 14-19 and 18+ transitions to the labour market and higher education. First steps are already being taken in this regard in some localities with proposals to form '14+ Progression and Transition Boards' (Centre for Post-14 Research and Innovation, 2012). One of their initial tasks will be to introduce systems for collecting and sharing data on 14-19 learner progression routes and destinations and supporting impartial CEIAG.
3. Making mixed routes more available post-16 that are accorded high status because they are recognised by and lead to higher education and the labour

market. This also requires the Coalition Government to cease denigrating full-time applied/vocational qualifications.

4. Dramatically expanding apprenticeships so that learner demand can be better met and that these programmes can achieve a higher profile in localities.

None of this will prove easy because much of policy is either moving in a very different direction or the conditions for successful realisation are not being put in place. Nevertheless, it is important to ensure that government and wider stakeholders become more aware of the needs of those who currently constitute the 'overlooked middle' and that an informed debate ensues. We are, however, under no illusion of the scale of reform needed in the future, if early school leaving is to be avoided in England and 14-19 education is to become a 'universal system of upper secondary education' (Hodgson and Spours, 2012).

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Table 1. Eight middle attaining young people according to their initial progression trajectory

Student Code	Gender	Year 11 course in 2009	Post-16 course in 2010
S111	M	GCSE only	A Level
S95	F	GCSE only	A Level
S13	M	Mixed GCSE/applied/vocational	A Level
S14	F	Mixed GCSE/applied/vocational	A Level
S27	M	GCSE only	Mixed BTEC/ A Level
S64	F	GCSE only	Apprenticeship
S53	M	Mixed GCSE/applied/vocational	Level 3 Diploma
S63	F	Mixed GCSE/applied/vocational	Apprenticeship