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Simmons, Robin

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### Original Citation

Simmons, Robin (2012) Raising the participation age to 18: 100 years on. *Post 16 Educator* (68). ISSN 0459-2026

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# Raising the participation age to 18 – 100 years on...

## Introduction

From next year all young people will be required to take part in some form of education or training until the age of 17. In 2015, this will rise to 18. This is a notable landmark and has been debated on the pages of *Post-16 Educator* before. However, in many ways, the forthcoming raising of the participation age (RPA) is far from a radical development. As most now realize, RPA does not raise the school-leaving age. The 13 % of 16-18 year-olds who work full-time will not be prevented from doing so as long as they also engage in some form of recognized education or training for at least 280 hours per year. For most 17 and 18-year-olds RPA will make little difference. Today the vast majority of young people continue to take part in education after they reach to minimum school-leaving age, and most are still participating at the age of 18. Those most affected by RPA will be the minority of young people classified as not in education, employment and training (NEET), although there will still be a number of ‘reasonable excuses’ for non-participation such as long-term illness, caring responsibilities or behavioural problems.

Whatever its impact, raising the participation age to 18 is far from a new or novel concept. In fact, its history stretches back almost 100 years. This article looks back at the early twentieth century and two potentially ground-breaking attempts to ensure universal education until the age of 18. Firstly, it deals with the 1918 Fisher Education Act and its proposed system of Day Continuation Schools for all young people up to the age of 18 not in full-time education. It goes on to look at how the 1944 Education Act tried – but again failed – to revive RPA to 18 with its plan for County Colleges. It is argued that both these proposals would have had far more significant consequences for young people, the economy and society more broadly had they come to fruition than is the case with RPA today. The article finishes by reflecting on some of the differences between raising the participation age in the twenty-first century and the previous attempts to do so.

### **The first attempt to raise participation to the age of 18**

War is often followed by attempts to reconstruct or remodel society, and the rhetoric of creating ‘a land fit for heroes’ was commonplace at the end of World War One. But whilst the years after the end of the war saw a range of social reforms, poverty, inequality, and alienation continued to flourish in inter-war England. The 1918 Fisher Education Act did, however, provide a degree of progress. Perhaps most notably, the Act raised the school-leaving age to 14, created school medical services, and established provision for children with special educational needs. It also required local education authorities (LEAs) to establish free, obligatory Day Continuation Schools for all 14-to-18-year-olds not in full-time education. The Fisher Act made attendance for a minimum of 320 hours per year up to the age of 17 compulsory - rising to 18 by 1925. Had this proposal been carried through it would have had far-reaching social and economic consequences. Young people formed an integral part of the workforce in the early twentieth century; most left school and entered full-time employment at the earliest opportunity, and a minority received any formal education thereafter. Against this backdrop, the idea that all young workers would, in effect, go to college for a day a week was truly radical, and there is no doubt that the Day Continuation Schools would have required a huge mobilisation of resources and had a great impact upon employers. However, very few of these institutions were ever set up and only one LEA, Rugby, fully implemented the plan for Day Continuation Schools. Twenty years after the Fisher Act still only one in five elementary school leavers went on to full-time education; one in 25 fourteen-year-olds was on a part-time course of some kind; and one in 123 young people attended a Day Continuation School (Barnett, 1986).

The economic downturn of the 1920s and the ensuing public spending cuts played an important part in the failure to establish the Day Continuation Schools. More generally, RPA to 18 was not popular with many young people or their families at the time: perhaps understandably, there was widespread concern at the prospect of losing a day’s wages each week. The majority of employers also opposed raising the participation age. For many, the idea of losing a day’s work per week from young workers was viewed as particularly problematic. Most preferred any off-the-job training to take place via evening

classes. In addition, many employers were suspicious of formal learning in general and particularly negative about the ‘dangers’ of education which might extend the horizons of employees beyond their immediate place of work. Most industrialists believed the young were better served by workplace training and, under pressure from employers, amendments to the Fisher Act made participation in education and training up until the age of 18 voluntary. This, more than anything, meant that the Day Continuation Schools went largely un-established.

### **The first attempt to raise participation to the age of 18**

The military and industrial demands of World War Two stimulated the need for vocational education and training, as well as a far greater degree of state intervention across the economy than was the case hitherto. Some employers also began to show an active interest in technical education during this period. The Building Apprentices and Training Council, for example, suggested compulsory technical education for apprentices up to the age of 18, and the retailer John Lewis proposed a one-year college day-release scheme for all employees. It was against this backdrop, and the broader spirit of compromise which grew during World War Two, that the 1944 Education Act took place.

The 1944 Act resulted in far-reaching changes to all forms of education in England and Wales. Raising the minimum school-leaving age to 15 and the creation of a new system of primary and secondary schools were among its most significant achievements. However, the Act also had important consequences for post-compulsory education. A statutory duty was placed upon LEAs to secure ‘adequate’ facilities for further education, and the post-war period saw significant growth in technical and vocational education: by 1947 there were 680 ‘major establishments’ of further education in England, double the number that existed in 1938 (Lucas, 2004: 14). Full-time enrolments increased by around 130 per cent and the number of part-time students grew by 300 per cent during the same period (Ministry of Education, 1946). What is less well known is that the 1944 Act also required the establishment of another form of post-school education – the County Colleges.

From 1<sup>st</sup> April 1948, LEAs were required to provide, free of charge, a minimum of 330 hours per year of compulsory physical, practical and vocational training to young people up to the age of 18 within 'normal working hours'. An estimated 1,200 County Colleges would have been required to provide for what, once again, would effectively have been a compulsory system of day-release for all young people not in full-time education. However, once again, the plan failed. Again, most employers were opposed to raising the participation age but, despite this, local authorities pressed ahead and submitted their plans to Whitehall. There were, however, many competing demands for scarce funds in the post-war era – not only other educational priorities but the demands of constructing and expanding a range of other public services in a time of austerity meant that central government funding for the County Colleges was not forthcoming. Perhaps unsurprisingly, few of these institutions were ever established; although, interestingly, it was not until the 1988 Education Reform Act that the requirement for LEAs to provide County Colleges was formally repealed.

Tension between the Board of Education and the Ministry of Labour over youth policy contributed to the prevailing climate of negativity towards the County Colleges in the years following the end of the war. However, the principle of RPA to 18 was remarkably durable and the 1959 Crowther Report attempted to revive the County Colleges. The Crowther Report is more well-known for its other recommendations, such as the raising the school-leaving age to 16; the creation of a nationwide system of comprehensive schools; and making public examinations available to a greater range of pupils. However, Crowther also advocated compulsory part-time education and training for all 16-18 year-olds not undertaking full-time education. Unfortunately though, government was reluctant to act upon most the recommendations of the Crowther Report. Comprehensive schooling was never fully established, and raising the school-leaving age to 16 did not take place until 1972-73. Meanwhile, RPA to 18 was again allowed slip quietly off the agenda.

## **Conclusion**

In comparison to previous attempts to raise the age of participation to 18, RPA 2013-15 is a far less radical plan. Engaging in education and training until 18 (and beyond) has already been normalized. The demise of Britain's industrial infrastructure has been accompanied by the collapse of the traditional youth labour market; most young workers are now part-time employees and often full-time students. In addition, the minimum requirement of 280 'guided learning hours' of education or training a year is a less ambitious figure than in previous attempts to increase compulsory participation to the age of 18. Furthermore, whilst most employers vigorously opposed the Day Continuation Schools and the County Colleges, there is little protest from business and industry about the current RPA agenda. Whereas in the past increasing the age of participation to 18 would have required significant sacrifices by employers no such compromises will have to be made this time. In fact, RPA provides an open invitation for companies to access public money. The legislation upon which RPA is based, the 2008 Education and Skills Bill, allows employers offering formally accredited training to receive public funding and, where training is not accredited, 'flexible and low burden' ways to allow recognition for funding will be created. Many companies, including McDonalds and Tesco, are already taking advantage of such arrangements and are receiving s. Where employers do not provide training it will be provided free of charge elsewhere - although there will be no requirement to pay young people for study leave. Thus, it unsurprising that there is little opposition to RPA on this occasion. The current attempt to extend compulsory education appears to be almost completely on employers' terms (Waugh *et al*, 2008).

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