

Briefing paper: Staying on

‘Staying on’ refers to continuing in school past the school-leaving age; thus it is the voluntary complement to the compulsory SLA, and for that reason it is closer to the heart of our project, revealing changing values, attitudes, practices and behaviours of students and parents. Staying on has been studied from a variety of disciplinary and specialist interests. Economists consider it as a response to incentives such as future income (offset against deferral of present income and indeed present expenses). Sociologists see it as a reflection of, sometimes even an instrument of social reproduction – it’s one way in which stratification is maintained. Psychologists have sought to relate it to personality type. Guidance counsellors think it responds to better or worse guidance. Politicians have used it to justify ROSLA, or not – for them it’s a measure of demand for further and higher education. It is intimately connected to the labour market and to further and higher education opportunities – to some extent beyond our remit – but changes in those things will undoubtedly affect the decisions of 15 or 16 year olds to stay on to 18 – which is definitely within our remit. Our goal is to bring together all these factors to explain more comprehensively how and why staying on changes over time, and what it says about the experience of secondary schooling and expectations of secondary schooling, as well as experiences after secondary schooling. Gambetta 1987 represents the most serious attempt to get at the complex thought processes behind staying on, but it’s about Northwest Italy in the late 1970s, and it’s a serious criticism of British educational history that with all its richness and depth it has never managed to match or follow up Gambetta’s achievement. We can try to remedy this defect.

Economists have made the most concerted efforts to get at staying on. Initially they tended to view education as an ‘investment good’, and therefore the decision to stay on was seen as a calculation based on the prospects of future income, set against deferral of present income and present expenses. But they also granted that education could be viewed as a ‘consumption good’, representing something people want for its own sake, and which might then grow with disposable income even if future prospects were dim. Christopher Pissarides, a Nobel Prize-winning labour economist, made his early reputation with a series of papers (Pissarides 1981, 1982, 1983) that sought to explain why staying on grew rapidly in the late 1950s and 1960s, then slowed in the late 1960s, grinding nearly to a halt in the 1970s. He argued that educational demand grew with consumption until the late 1960s, and then slowed because the investment prospects of further education dimmed as the ratio between manual and graduate earnings shifted back in favour of manual work. In the 1970s, however, both investment and consumption factors were in evidence, for both boys and girls. Why did the ratio between manual and graduate earnings shift backwards? Pissarides thought that there was still buoyant demand for graduate skills, but that over-rapid expansion of FE and HE had led to over-supply, especially in tandem with the baby boom. One possible piece of evidence for this is that there were many more ‘qualified leavers’ (with two A-levels) in the late 1960s than university entrants, suggesting that the returns to staying on but not proceeding to university were being hit. The fact that the ‘investment’ returns on further education were



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apparently declining in the 1970s drew attention to human-capital theory and encouraged a ‘private rate of return’ approach to deciding the appropriate level of FE and HE to offer, though in fact little progress was made towards regulating supply in this period, and fluctuating demand was generally allowed to determine the appropriate level of provision (following the ‘Robbins principle’ that everyone who wished to and was capable of further education should be given it) (Williams 1984). Not much effort has been made to disentangle these various forms of ‘disillusionment’ that contributed to stagnating staying on rates in the 1970s and early 1980s: declining levels of consumption, declining graduate premium, ‘disillusionment’ of other kinds with FE and HE, awareness that expanding educational opportunity had principally benefited the already privileged (Shattock 1981). There has been surprisingly little follow-up to Pissarides, taking evidence from the period since 1980. As late as 1998 Hills and Glennerster were citing Pissarides 1982 as evidence on the demand for post-compulsory education in Britain (and see Bennett et al. 1992). The resumption of rising staying on rates over the course of the 1980s was thus analysed almost entirely on different bases. Whitfield and Wilson 1991 found that a number of new factors had to be introduced to explain staying on rates over the longer term: youth unemployment (but this cut both ways – inducing staying on to avoid unemployment, or offering youth-training alternatives), a shift towards white-collar employment (more evident in the later period). McVicar and Rice 2001 drew attention to rising participation in public examinations (and see also McIntosh 2001), which suggested that policy interventions might make more of a difference than the rates of return dependent on labour markets. A retrospective look at exam achievement (Clark et al. 2005) suggested that this might explain also the stagnation of the 1970s. The same study asked about changes in staying on between the 1958 and 1970 birth cohorts – i.e. between 1974 and 1986 – and concluded that the lower-ability segments of the later cohort were staying on but not attaining further qualifications, perhaps only seeking refuge from unemployment, while the higher-ability segments who stayed on also attained higher qualifications (a differential not evident in the earlier cohort). It also concluded that access to examinations explained most of the rapid growth in staying on after 1988, especially for girls. Thus the ‘consumption’ and ‘investment’ arguments for the earlier period have not been married up to the ‘examination’ arguments for the later period (see Mandler 2015 for an early attempt).

This brings us back to Gambetta and his attempt to consider together a wider range of explanations for the decision to stay on. As a sociologist, he is interested in both ‘pull’ and ‘push’ factors, the latter hardly being considered in much of the economic literature, which looks more at ‘incentives’ and less at who is being incentivized. Gambetta is interested in the working-class family in a period of social, economic and educational change. What makes poorer families more likely to support staying on, apart from having more money, or the prospect of more money? Surprisingly, he doesn’t think educational background itself has much independent effect. Occupational background does – different occupational groups have different norms and expectations about the value of schooling. Working-class families tend to ‘over-adjust’, too, lagging behind their actual material resources in their educational



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choices (just as middle-class families are ‘over-ambitious’, making educational choices that might not pay off, just because they are normal in their peer groups). In other words, ‘cultural capital’ is not decisive, but ‘culture’ is. Working-class parents are also less familiar with educational structures and so tend to accept even those that disadvantage them (e.g. early stratification devices such as streaming and subject choice). Middle-class parents are more likely to take more immediate advantage of new opportunities (thus the tendency to ‘persistently maintained inequality’ when educational opportunity expands, until middle-class saturation levels are reached). Working-class children are more sensitive to setbacks and they tend to have shorter time-horizons. One consequence of this is that the longer working-class students stay on, the higher their chances of success are (compared to other students at the same stage). Girls tend not to stay on, but if they do stay on they persist longer. In short, Gambetta finds ‘a dense combination of mechanisms’, a mix ‘of what one can do, of what one wants to do and, indirectly, of the conditions that shape one’s preferences and intentions’, not only decisions based on investment and consumption (and decisions made for you about access to examinations), but also a ‘game’, ‘where there is no stable solution’, dependent on other people’s choices, changing policies, changing norms themselves based on changes in class cultures and the life-course (Gambetta 1987, 167-77).

Some of these insights can be used to think about the evidence of parental attitudes to staying on. Middle-class parents in the 1950s had more control over their choices and drew confidence from their knowledge and their class norms. Working-class parents in the same period had little control, little confidence and little knowledge, and were mocked for these deficiencies. But this did not stop them from wishing for more education for their children, without wanting to blame their children when they failed to attain it, a ‘contradiction’ for which they were also mocked (see further Mandler 2014, 14-15). Policymakers used these ‘contradictions’ to postpone giving most working-class children access to the examinations that would lead to FE and HE until the 1980s (Brooks 2008). The Crowther Report of 1959 unusually granted that although most people accepted the SLA of 15 they also complained of the unfairness of selection which condemned most of their children to ‘an abbreviated schooling’ (Ministry of Education 1959). Middle-class parents assumed that their children would stay on, while working-class parents were forced to leave this decision to some imponderable consideration beyond their control, such as their children’s ‘native ability’ or performance on the 11+. Even so, acceptance of the SLA was still seen by the most sympathetic observers as evidence of an anti-educational ‘climate’ in working-class circles (e.g. Vaizey 1962, 117) rather than lack of opportunity. Hopes were invested in the rising aspirations of the children, even if their parents were seen to be resistant. Some change even in overt parental attitudes was evident by the later 1960s, however. Some of this at least must have been due to a change in opportunity – parents of children in comprehensive schools were much more likely to support ROSLA, to encourage staying on, and to expect progression to HE. A stronger consciousness of the merits of educational equality surely also played a part. Parents’ aspirations were very high for their primary-age children; if those aspirations dropped as their children aged, that may only have evinced a continuing desire not

to blame children, most of whom were not going to progress (Bynner 1972). As we've seen above, these rising aspirations must be responsible at least in part for the 'over-supply' of 'qualified leavers' that emerged by the late 1960s. There then intervened the swings and roundabouts charted above until the late 1980s, by which point more equal access to examinations ensured more equal takeup of staying on, such that lower-occupational groups made the greatest gains between 1988 and 1997 at least (Blanden et al. 2005, Machin and Vignoles 2006, using 1970 and a 1980 cohort composed from survey data).

None of the above really addresses what students do when they stay on. Emphasis has been placed on examinations. In fact the British system, unlike the German, gave very little opportunity to do anything else until nearly the end of our period. There were few 'sandwich' or 'work release' arrangements combining apprenticeships with vocational or general education. There were lots of apprenticeships, but they lacked an element of school education. Continuation schools and junior colleges had never taken off. Some apprenticeships in the 1960s did incorporate one day of vocational education in FE college but this had pretty much vanished by the 1980s (Machin and Vignoles 2006). However, the advent of NVQs (1988), GNVQs (1992), 'modern apprenticeships' (1995) and Educational Maintenance Allowance (2004) did improve the mix of educational experience at 16-18, though not all of these measures necessarily added much value, and some of them recruited students from unemployment rather than employers (Wolf 2002, Heath et al. 2013). This and ROSLA to 18 takes us beyond our period, however.

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