

Raising the school leaving—while learning from another age

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In April 1947 the post-war Labour Government raised the school leaving age from 14 to 15 and paved the way for a further increase to 16 in 1972. Now, 65 years later, as the UK prepares to raise the 'education participation age' to 17 in 2013 and to 18 in 2015, new research reveals that the transitions of 1947 and 1972 met with more controversy and difficulty than previously thought.

In a study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Dr Tom Woodin and Professor Gary McCulloch of the Institute of [Education](#), London, analysed the debate surrounding the implementation of the 1944 Education Act, which ushered in the raising of the school age to 15, and later to 16.

They found that these increases in the school leaving age were not readily accepted at the time. "Our research has shown that they were treated at each stage as major changes and were brought in only with a great deal of sacrifice and compromise," said Gary McCulloch. "They were fiercely contested not only across parties, but also within the governments responsible for them and in many national and local bodies. There was debate and contention at the highest levels of government, and the opposition continued well after the changes were implemented. There were even attempts to bring the leaving age back to its previous level."

McCulloch and Woodin believe that other developments in education in the twentieth century, such as comprehensive education and mass [higher](#)

[education](#), have taken the spotlight away from the controversy surrounding past increases in the school leaving age.

Their study reveals how hotly the nation debated the topic in the 1940s. [Opinion polls](#) suggested a large proportion of parents were either indifferent or actively hostile to raising the leaving age for their children. There were divisions within the Cabinet from 1945 onwards, and in January 1947 a high-level Government committee recommended postponing the measure on economic grounds.

Many local education authorities also called for postponement as they calculated requirements: the school system would need 200,000 additional places, 13,000 new teachers, and innumerable prefabricated huts to ease overcrowding. There was a widespread view that the new National Health Service should take priority over the huge expenditure involved.

"Our research highlights some of the difficulties students, teachers and educational institutions will face as they adapt to the new leaving age," said McCulloch. "However, it also shows that the education system is resilient and can cope with change."

The coalition government has watered down Labour's original plans by saying it will not criminalise young people who opt out early, but Gary McCulloch believes the debate surrounding the education participation age is not yet over.

"There are many critics from across the political spectrums who argue that the increase is not justifiable and that there are higher priorities both in education and in other areas of social spending. It is likely that there will be considerable further debate within government and among people generally before 2015 when participation is due to be increased to 18. The historical experience of the raising of the school leaving age should

be given greater attention in weighing up both the benefits and the difficulties that this further change will bring."

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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