

Activity and Learning Agreements Pilot

Programme Theory Evaluation

Working paper 2 –Signing Up to a Learning Agreement

*Claire Johnson, Rosie Page and Miranda Munro
Institute for Employment Studies*

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

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Presented by:

INSTITUTE FOR EMPLOYMENT STUDIES

Mantell Building

University of Sussex Campus

Brighton BN1 9RF

UK

Tel. + 44 (0) 1273 686751

Fax + 44 (0) 1273 690430

www.employment-studies.co.uk

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Executive Summary

Introduction and research aims

The Activity and Learning Agreements (ALA) Pilots were launched in 12 areas of England in April 2006. Activity Agreements are designed for young people (aged 16 or 17) not in employment, education or training (NEET) and operate in eight of the 12 areas. Learning Agreements are aimed at 16 to 17 year olds in jobs without training (JWT) and also operate in eight of the 12 pilots areas. Under a Learning Agreement (LA), young people take part in agreed activities, which must include undertaking a designated course. In some pilot areas they may receive a monetary bonus if they are successful (and in two areas their employers receive wage compensation). In three pilot areas neither the young person nor their employer receives any financial incentive.

This paper is part of the programme theory strand of the ALA Pilots evaluation. This is a realist evaluation method which focuses on testing some of the key 'theories' which underlie the ALA policy to identify which components of the policy work (or not), how, for whom, why, and in what circumstances.

The paper is based on research undertaken among a sample of young people in two Connexions Partnership areas where no financial incentive is offered. The sample was drawn purposively from young people who either signed up to or rejected a Learning Agreement (LA) between April and June 2007. The aim of this particular focused study was to gather evidence in relation to the 'kickstart' theory:

In Learning Agreement (LA) pilot areas where there is no financial incentive, it is the support, advice and guidance provided by the Connexions worker that will be enough to 'kickstart' the young person's interest in learning and induce them to sign up to a learning agreement.

Methodology

The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase, conducted in May and early June 2007, comprised discussion groups among Connexions staff delivering the

LA. The second phase, conducted from late July to mid-September 2007, comprised depth interviews with young people who had either signed up to the LA (24 interviews) or decided against it (16 interviews), during the preceding months.

Research with Connexions staff

Findings from the staff interviews enabled us to refine the kickstart theory by developing a model of how the LA appealed to certain groups of young people and how staff engaged with them to get them signed up. This model was then tested in research with young people.

One of the noteworthy factors arising from the adviser interviews was the use of a 'drip-drip approach' to engaging young people. Advisers said they used this approach with people who were not receptive at the time of the initial call to see if their situation had changed when they called again and whether they were more receptive to learning. This suggested the timing and context of the Learning Agreement offer was important.

Advisers said the main selling points for young people were that learning through a Learning Agreement was '*not like school*', because some young people were reported to have had poor experiences at school and did not like classroom-based learning. Another message advisers used to promote the Learning Agreement was that it could '*help you get on in life*'. They focused on the benefits of learning, such as increased opportunity at work and increased earnings.

Young people's contexts

Young people's attitudes towards education and the value of qualifications were mixed. Just because some young people had left school at 16, this did not mean they felt that qualifications were unimportant. The biggest 'pull' factor for young people to enter the labour market at 16 was the prospect of independence and earning some money for themselves. Others were 'pushed' into the labour market by negative experiences of learning whereas some young people just drifted into the labour market because they could not think of anything better to do.

Whether young people liked their job impacted on their orientation towards the Learning Agreement because it influenced what sort of learning or training they wanted to do. Those who were in a job they liked or that was related at least partly to a job they wanted to do in the future, were more interested in doing some work-related training. In contrast, those who were in a job they disliked tended not to be interested in doing work-related qualifications. They preferred to do a more general, transferable course such as a European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL).

Adviser role: 'kickstarter' and 'door-opener'

The majority of young people were already interested in doing some further learning, and were, therefore, initially pleased that the opportunity had been presented to them. Others, although not actively seeking learning opportunities, were open to the possibility and felt that it would help them to improve their job prospects over the medium term. This meant that for many signers the Connexions advisers were 'door-openers', helping them to find and apply for relevant courses, rather than providing a 'kickstart' for their interest in learning.

Why do young people sign a Learning Agreement?

Young people's reasons for signing a Learning Agreement largely seemed to fit the model described by advisers. The majority of signers agreed to do a Learning Agreement because they felt that they could improve their job prospects, and they would be able to either progress within the job they were in, or move to a different type of work in which they were more interested. An important reason for signing was that the Learning Agreement was 'different from school'. The majority did not link doing a qualification or training with a likely increase in pay.

Most signers were likely to agree that the Connexions adviser had made them confident both that they could achieve their learning aims and that doing learning was worthwhile.

The vast majority of learners did not feel their parents were an influence on their decision to take up the Learning Agreement (or not), although many reported that their parents were pleased or even 'proud' they were doing a course, so parents may have had an implicit influence.

Many non-signers already learning (or planning to)

The most common reasons non-signers gave for declining a Learning Agreement were that they were already learning (or were planning to), or that they did not understand what they had turned down. In addition, three non-signers were working with Connexions advisers in order to find a job with training (ie NVQs) that would then have been funded through a Learning Agreement. However, the young people had not been able to secure employment in the relevant job.

Among non-signers there was some scope for Connexions to return with the offer of the Learning Agreement at a later date. This suggests the 'drip-drip' approach used by the Connexions advisers will pay off among some non-signers over time.

Experience of learning and support

The majority of the young people who had signed a Learning Agreement had begun their courses by the time they were interviewed. However, in one area a number of

signers had not yet begun their learning after quite substantial periods of time. In some cases the young people concerned were waiting for confirmation that they had got through a required selection process to get onto their desired course. In other cases, however, it was not entirely clear to them what had caused the delay.

Connexions advisers offered tailored one-to-one support for signers and, for example, helped young people search for a job with training, completed application forms for courses and liaised with employers.

Support from Connexions a benefit of the Learning Agreement

Most signers regarded the main benefit of doing learning via the Learning Agreement rather than in another way as the one-to-one support they received from their Connexions adviser. Some said they would not have done any learning if it had not been for their adviser, although others felt that they would have done so eventually.

The personalised nature of the support and guidance was very important, in particular for those young people who had been 'turned off' school or college. It was crucial that these young people did not feel 'forced' into something which they felt they had already turned down by leaving education.

Others did not know they could do courses such as the ECDL, or improve their key skills without going back to do re-sits at college. This suggests that young people in jobs without training need more Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) about the breadth of learning options that might be available to them, particularly work-based training that is not apprenticeships.

Although some young people had discussed possibilities for further learning beyond their LA, most preferred to take things more gradually and were unsure of their next steps.

Circumstances affect likelihood of signing a Learning Agreement

There does not seem to be a 'type' of young person who is more or less likely to sign a Learning Agreement. The characteristics of signers and non-signers appear to be broadly similar. However, their experiences of work often differ, for example whether they are working in what they consider to be a 'good job', as do their medium-term goals, for example to return to education or to do a job that requires a qualification.

There are five types of (potential) learner into which young people broadly fit (see table below). For two types of learner the adviser's role is as a 'kickstarter', encouraging and supporting the young person to develop their interest in learning. In the other cases the adviser role is of a 'door-opener', directing young people to learning opportunities and channelling their existing interest in learning, rather than kickstarting it. In such cases, the support provided by the adviser kickstarts the learning itself, rather than the initial interest in learning. In some cases, in particular

among non-signers, Connexions advisers were not able to open the door to learning (ie by finding an apprenticeship). Other non-signers might be ‘go-getters’, but already have learning opportunities or progression available to them within their existing work.

Learner type	Background and circumstances	Interest in learning	Adviser role
Go-getters	Reasonable GCSEs, know what they want to do, have direction, employer might suggest they do some learning	Very interested in learning and likely to have approached Connexions for advice about this	Door-opener
Killing-time	Clear future plans - ie starting college (may have dropped out before), or working in a job for which they have to be 18	Interested in learning already. May approach Connexions or Connexions may approach them	Door-opener
Trying again	Know what learning they want (often an apprenticeship), and what job they would like (often skilled trades). Previously failed to get onto a relevant course	Interested in learning to secure favoured job which requires qualifications. Likely to have approached Connexions for help	Door-opener
Drifters and flitters	Move between different jobs/sectors, and circumstances change frequently. Unsure of what they want to do in the future and lack direction	Some interest in learning, but unsure what to do or how to go forward. Connexions likely to have approached them	Kickstarter
Stuck in a rut	Likely to have periods of being NEET, in and out of work, and change jobs frequently. Very low or no GCSEs. Usually low-skilled, low paid work and not sure of what they want to do	Want to improve prospects, but unsure how. Open to possibility of learning, but have not really thought about it before. Connexions has approached them	Kickstarter

1 Introduction

The Activity and Learning Agreements Pilots were launched in 12 areas of England in April 2006. Activity Agreements are designed for young people (aged 16 or 17) not in employment, education or training (NEET) and operate in eight of the 12 areas. Young people have to be NEET for 20 weeks to be eligible. They receive an allowance (three variants of which are being tested in different pilot areas) and in return receive continuous support and agree to take part in tailored activities designed to help them progress towards an employment or education and training outcome. Learning Agreements are aimed at 16 and 17 year olds in jobs without training (JWT) and also operate in eight of the 12 pilots areas (ie both pilots operate in four areas and they each operate separately in four others). Under a Learning Agreement (LA), young people take part in agreed activities, which must include undertaking a designated course. If successful, young people may receive a monetary bonus (and in two areas their employers receive wage compensation).

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) formerly the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), has commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), the Centre for Education and Industry (CEI) and the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) to undertake the evaluation of the Activity and Learning Agreement Pilots. The evaluation of the ALA Pilots has three main strands:

- **a quantitative element**, using surveys of young people to measure the impact of the pilots in comparison to a number of control areas
- **a programme theory element**, focusing on testing some key aspects of the policy to identify what works or not and why
- **a process evaluation**, examining how the pilots have been set up and delivered and the main implementation issues.

1.1 What is 'programme theory evaluation'?

Programme theory evaluation is considered a useful tool for conceptualising programmes, guiding evaluations, planning empirical research, and analysing *why* programmes are successful (or not). It seeks to identify the 'theory of change' that lies behind an intervention and assess to what extent, why and how this change has occurred. In doing so, any unintended as well as intended outcomes are considered. The results of this type of evaluation are *explanatory* rather than providing a clear-cut answer on whether a policy 'works', and can be fed back into the policy design in order to make improvements.

The guiding principle of this approach is that policy interventions are originally underpinned by theories. Pawson et al (2004) sum up the basic 'if-then' logic of this as follows:

'If we deliver a programme in this way or we manage services like so, then this will bring about some improved outcome.'

Realist Synthesis: An Introduction, Pawson R, Greenhalgh T, Harvey G and Walshe K, ESRC Research Methods Paper 2/2004

The theories that underpin interventions are informed by assumptions about a) the reasons for behaviour and b) what might cause that behaviour to change. But these theories are also mediated by individual, social and institutional effects that influence how policy is delivered. Hence, a key focus of programme theory evaluation is to examine how policy mechanisms are *supposed* to work and compare this to how they *do* work. The evaluation can then assess whether there is any gap between the two, and if so, explore the extent, nature and causes of that gap, and resulting impacts on outcomes.

The outcome is not to provide an unequivocal answer about whether the 'ALAs' work, but rather to highlight the components that inform the successful operation of the policy (as well as ones that hinder it). This will help to refine the theories implicit within the policy design to better articulate what works, for whom, how, and in what circumstances, so that this learning can be embedded into any subsequent revision of the policy, or nationwide roll-out.

The programme theory approach to evaluation adopted by this study has two main elements. The first is to identify, assess and refine the theories that underpin the ALA policy (the 'theory elicitation' stage). The second is to then test these theories via empirical research. This will take the form of a series of 'focused studies', each of which will be a discrete research project, linked under the umbrella of the identified programme theories.

1.2 Background

The theory elicitation stage presented 25 different theories and sub-theories which were formulated based on a review of related research and in-depth interviews with a number of key policy architects and stakeholders. These theories and sub-theories were collated under different elements of the ALA policy: financial incentives, agreements, personalised support, flexible options, brokerage and progression. The next stage of the study entailed prioritising which theories to investigate within a programme of 'focused studies'. In consultation with representatives from the Department for Children, School and Families (DCSF), Treasury and other key stakeholders, it was decided to prioritise research into the one-to-one support role of the Connexions worker in kickstarting young people's interest in learning and encouraging them to sign up to a Learning Agreement.

1.3 Hypothesis and research aims

The theory for investigation in this Working Paper is as follows:

In Learning Agreement (LA) pilot areas where there is no financial incentive, it is the support, advice and guidance provided by the Connexions worker that will be enough to 'kickstart' the young person's interest in learning and induce them to sign up to a Learning Agreement (the 'kickstart' theory).

This theory focuses on the young person's view of the 'something' on offer within the 'something for something' model. It focuses on the Agreement-only variant within the Learning Agreement pilots in order to elicit evidence about the impact of the support, advice and guidance on offer upon young people's attitudes towards take-up, isolated from the impact of the financial incentive. **The overarching aim of this study is to ascertain how and why the support and advice on offer to the young person persuades them to sign up to the LA (or not).** Within this, we will seek to investigate the relative influences of the information, advice, support and learning options available, on young people's decisions to participate.

Young people will have had the option of continuing in learning before – indeed some of them may have done so but then dropped out. This study will investigate *what it is* about the Learning Agreement offer that has renewed or kickstarted their interest in learning, independent of the influence of the financial incentive. The hypothesis suggests that it is the opportunity to access ongoing support and advice from the Connexions support worker that has levered their commitment. However, it could be other factors, such as parental or peer influence, employer influence, or simply the timing of the offer (eg they may not have had a clear idea of what learning or qualification they wanted to do previously, or simply lacked information on how to go about doing it).

The question of 'whether' the agreement-only option is attractive, and to what extent (in comparison with the incentivised LA options), will be covered by the summative evaluation which includes Management Information analysis of take-up across all variants.

1.4 Methodology

The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase, conducted in May and early June 2007, comprised discussion groups among Connexions staff delivering the LA. The second phase, conducted from late July to mid-September 2007, comprised depth interviews with young people who had either signed up to the LA or decided against it, during the preceding months. Two Agreement-only areas were selected for the study (Area 1 and Area 2).

1.4.1 Research among Connexions staff

Research with Connexions staff covered area managers as well as ground-level advisers working directly with young people. Discussions were conducted in both areas during late May and early June 2007.

The aim of this stage of the study was to examine how the agreement-only LA is promoted to young people; whether it is promoted differently to different groups of young people and if so, how and why; and what specific tactics are used by staff both to attract the initial interest of young people and to keep them engaged.

Outcomes and outputs from this phase

Findings from this stage enabled us to refine the kickstart theory by developing a model of how the LA appeals to certain groups of young people and how staff engage with them to get them signed up, independent of the influence of the incentive. This model could then be tested in research with the young people themselves. This section sets out how the theories were developed and presents the initial model of engagement based on the adviser interviews.

Engaging young people

One of the noteworthy factors arising from the adviser interviews was the use of a 'drip-drip approach'. Advisers said they used this approach with people who were not receptive at the time of the initial call to see if their situation had changed when they called again and whether they were more receptive to learning.

The 'drip-drip approach' was justified by advisers because they felt the context and timing of the offer affected whether or not a young person signed a Learning Agreement. Young people aged towards the upper end of those eligible were generally felt to be more responsive to the idea of learning because they had more

experience of working in a job without training and / or greater recognition that qualifications could help them to progress in the labour market.

Selling the offer

Advisers said the main selling points for young people were that learning through a Learning Agreement was 'not like school'. This was important because some young people were reported to have had poor experiences at school and did not like classroom-based learning. Another message advisers used to sell the Learning Agreement was that it could 'help you get on in life'. They focused on the benefits of learning such as increased opportunity at work and increased earnings.

A further 'selling point' of the Learning Agreement for the young person was felt to be that it could be a stepping stone to further learning, for example undertaking key skills as a first step to an Apprenticeship.

Advisers said that take-up of the Learning Agreement varied by sector, with young people in certain sectors less likely to take up the Learning Agreement, and that limited availability of provision could limit the offer. It was, therefore, important in the second stage of the project to speak to young people working in a range of sectors and from a range of geographies to capture any diversity of local learning provision available, to see how (if at all) this affected the offer from the young person's perspective. The availability of provision at the time it is needed was also identified as an issue. Suitable provision needs to be in place to capitalise on young people's interest in learning once it is 'kickstarted'.

Developing a model of engagement

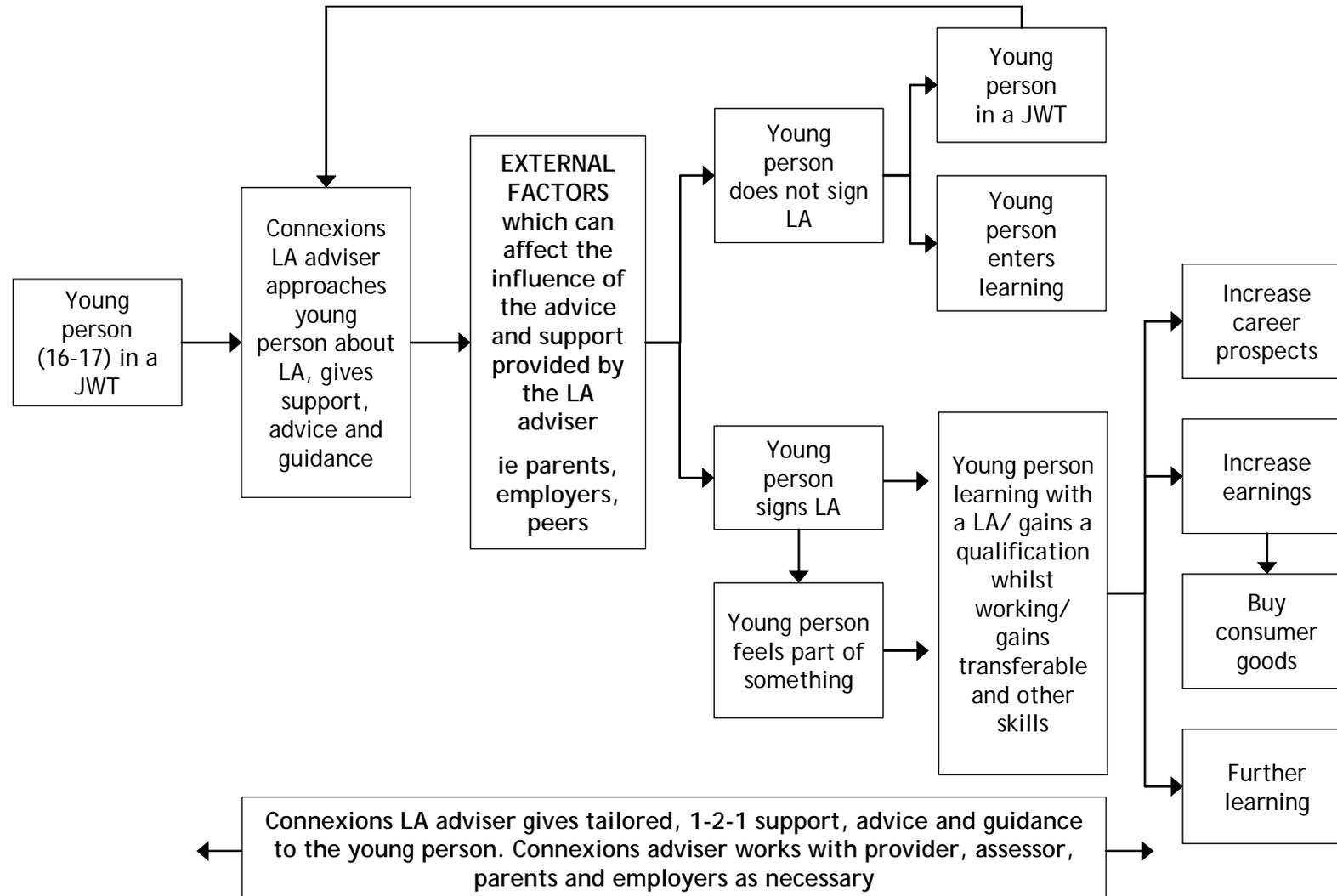
Figure 1.1 (overleaf) outlines the model of engagement that was developed as a result of discussions with Connexions advisers. It shows the importance of Connexions support, both as the catalyst to engagement and in providing stability and ongoing support throughout the process. The model shows the links advisers make between learning and the potential benefits, while also taking into account other factors that may influence whether or not an individual signs up.

The external factors (which could be a positive or negative influence) that may affect take-up include:

- the timing of the offer
- the readiness and attitude of the young person to make a change
- the young person's parents' views of learning
- the young person's employer's views of learning
- the young person's friends/peers

-
- the availability of suitable training at the time it is needed
 - the appeal of work-based learning and assessment to the young person, over classroom-based methods.

Figure 1.1: The model of engaging young people



1.4.2 Research among young people

The research with young people took place between late July and mid September 2007. It covered young people who had either signed up to or declined a Learning Agreement between April and June 2007, across both areas.

Generating the sample

The sample was generated with the assistance of the two Connexions areas involved, who administered a postal opt-out to all young people who had signed up or declined the LA within the qualifying period for the research. No sampling was involved at this stage.

After the two-week opt-out period had elapsed, the remaining contacts were supplied to IES and stored securely in accordance with Data Protection regulations. Interviews were mainly booked by the researchers involved, over the telephone. Recruitment proceeded reasonably well for signers, but was notably slower for non-signers.

Fieldwork

The fieldwork comprised depth interviews with young people. The vast majority of these were undertaken in person, although a small number were undertaken by telephone. This was mainly towards the end of the fieldwork period, although occasionally an interview was switched from face-to-face to telephone where it had not been possible to book up any more appointments in that area on the same day.

Interviews took place either in the young person's home, or, if they preferred, an alternative neutral venue such as a local café. Interviews were recorded and transcribed wherever possible, with the permission of respondents. Interview length varied considerably but averaged around 35 minutes for signers and 25 minutes for non-signers. A £20 High Street gift voucher was offered as a thank-you to each young person who took part in an interview.

Recruitment was more difficult than anticipated because there appeared to be a small number of inaccuracies in the sample, where young people who were recorded as having signed up to the LA did not appear to have done so (for example, they had not been working during the period they were supposed to have signed up, were not doing any learning or training, and claimed they had not spoken to anyone from Connexions for several months). A small number of young people recorded as non-signers also had little or no recollection of being approached about doing a Learning Agreement, although this may be related to the nature of their refusal, if they had declined quite quickly after a short cold-call from Connexions.

There were also (expected) problems with no-shows and interviews cancelled at the last minute by young people. This was often due to working variable hours which meant they could be called in to work at short notice to cover for other staff. The research team

sent out letter confirmations for all interviews, where time allowed, and also used texts to remind young people of their appointments. Some Sunday interviewing was attempted as it was felt young people may have had more availability on a Sunday and would be less likely to cancel at the last minute. However, of the eight interviews booked for Sundays only three were actually carried out.

Achieved interviews and sample profile

Table 1.1 provides a profile of the characteristics of the achieved sample. All the young people's names in this report have been changed.

Table 1.1: Characteristics and geographical composition of the achieved sample of young people

Characteristics	Frequency
Learning Agreement 'status':	
Signers	24
Non-signers	16
Area:	
Area 1	23
Area 2	17
Gender:	
Female	29
Male	11
Age:	
16	2
17	32
18	5
19	1
Ethnicity:	
Ethnic minority	1
White British	39

1.5 Structure of this Working Paper

The remainder of this Working Paper is structured as follows:

- Section 2 explores the educational and employment contexts for the young people who took part in this research.
- Section 3 unpicks the decision to sign up to a Learning Agreement, taking into account first impressions, the importance of the adviser role in the decision to sign up, and influence of other factors, such as parents or employers, on the decision.
- Section 4 examines the experiences of young people who had signed up to a Learning Agreement, in terms of the ongoing support they received from Connexions.

-
- Section 5 explores the perceived benefits of doing learning through the LA for signers, and looks at whether the LA is helping young people to kickstart learning in the longer term.

The conclusion assesses the research findings in relation to the original hypothesis, presenting an updated version of the model (informed by young people's perspectives) presented earlier in this section.

1.6 Acknowledgements

The authors would particularly like to thank all of the young people and Connexions staff who gave up their valuable time to participate in this research. In addition, Vikki McAuley at the DCSF and Professor Ray Pawson at the University of Leeds provided incisive and helpful comments both on the original proposal for this study and on the topic guides used with staff and young people. Gill Brown at IES provided invaluable administrative support to the research team in terms of helping to arrange interviews, sending out interview confirmations, acting as a remote 'personal safety buddy' to the interviewers, and formatting this Working Paper.

2 Young People's Contexts

In this section we examine young people's educational and labour market contexts, in terms of experiences and attitudes towards school, and experiences of work and learning since leaving school. We also look at their current labour market circumstances in terms of type of job, sector and pay, as these are all factors which may influence their decision to start a Learning Agreement or not. All the young people's names presented in this report have been changed to protect anonymity.

2.1 Experiences and attitudes towards education at 16

Young people's attitudes towards education and the value of qualifications were mixed. Just because some young people had left school at 16 did not mean they felt that qualifications were unimportant. Some had done so precisely because they felt their qualifications were enough to enable them to compete in the job market. Others felt they appreciated the value of qualifications more now that they had some experience of working in the labour market without them, or with low grades.

2.1.1 Views on school and qualifications

Some young people (around one-quarter of our sample) had attained reasonably good grades in their GCSEs (four or five A*-C grades). A few had obtained nine or ten GCSEs of which none was lower than a C. Among these, many had stayed on in sixth form or started college, but later dropped out.

Most of the others had fewer qualifications or lower grades (no higher than Ds), but still felt that they had enjoyed school, mainly for the social aspects.

A significant minority had actively disliked school – including a small number who had intermittent attendance in their final year – and these tended to have achieved the lowest grades (mainly Es and Fs) and be the most eager to get out into the labour market at 16.

'I hated school to be honest and wanted more money so I thought get out there, get a job, earn some money.' Alice, signer

This was not always the case, however: there were a couple of examples of young people who had done reasonably well in their GCSEs even though they reported having 'bunked off' for certain lessons in their final year, generally because they had disliked a particular teacher or found that subject 'boring' compared to other lessons.

Many of the lower-attaining young people reflected that they learned better in a more practical and hands-on environment than at school. A small number had already done vocational qualifications either alongside or instead of their GCSEs, for example a GNVQ in ICT, and NVQ Level 1 qualifications in Electronics, Joinery and Bricklaying. This meant that they were open to the idea of doing work-based learning, which they felt fitted more with their preferred way of learning:

'I wasn't really very good with studying. I don't like that type of work, using your brain and everything.' Tanya, signer

'I never really liked school; I've just not been a great school person. I'm good at practical things like making things; I built my own computer and stuff like that.' Zac, signer

A small number of young people had encountered personal problems in their final year which had impacted on their exam performance and their feelings about school. For example, one had become ill around the time of her GCSEs and needed an operation, while another described how his father had been seriously ill during the whole of his final year at school and this had made it difficult for him to concentrate on schoolwork and exams:

'Me dad went into hospital for a year at the start of that year so everything didn't seem that important, especially not school.' Zac, signer

Overall, there was a high degree of polarisation *within* signers and non-signers, with each group fairly evenly split between those who had achieved four or five C grades or above, and those who had achieved no grades higher than a D. Only two of our sample said they had not passed any qualifications at all at school and these were both among the non-signers group.

2.1.2 Reasons for leaving education at 16

Reasons for leaving education at 16 can loosely be categorised into 'push' and 'pull' factors according to experience of school and expectations of the labour market.

'Pull' factors

The biggest 'pull' factor for young people to enter the labour market at 16 was the prospect of independence, of not being told what to do any more and of earning some money for themselves. Many of the young people who had gone directly into the

labour market spoke about wanting to be ‘treated like an adult’ and saw getting a job as being a key step in this transition.

‘They treat me like an adult (at work), not like school.’ Daniel, signer

‘I’m learning more about my job and the outside world rather than just education.’ Nyssa, non-signer

Occasionally entering the labour market was a ‘stop-gap’ decision until they decided what type of course they wanted to do later in college, or until they reached the age of 18, when they could qualify to do particular age-restricted jobs such as care work.

‘I didn’t go to college because I didn’t know what I wanted to do really in college. So I just sort of took a gap year and I got jobs – like little jobs around for that whole year.’ Amy, non-signer

Some young people either had a formative ‘plan’ of what type of career they wanted, or wanted to ‘try out’ different jobs before they decided. Many of these young people valued work experience and/or work-based training above gaining other qualifications, in terms of getting a job and progressing in a career. Often they were entering occupations or sectors which have traditionally employed school-leavers and *can* provide fairly structured career paths for young people, particularly when combined with relevant work-based training, such as construction or estate agency. One young woman working in customer services for a financial company reported:

‘At school with friends and everything, I just can’t keep my head down. I just didn’t want to waste 2 or 3 years of learning and then not getting anything out of it. I just wanted a job where I could settle down and progress from there. So I thought it was better for me to leave school and look for a job.’ Nyssa, non-signer

A substantial minority of young people had moved into jobs which they had been doing at school on a ‘part-time and holidays’ basis, or through school work experience. This was a tempting ‘pull factor’ for some because they already had the promise of a job, or knew they could get work fairly easily just by increasing their hours in these existing part-time jobs.

‘She (her manager) said as soon as I turn 16 I’ve got a job, that’s why I went to that because I knew I already had a job, just by going back.’ Tanya, signer

This was also the case for a small number who went into jobs that family or friends of family had ‘fixed up’ or found for them.

‘Push’ factors

By far the most common ‘push’ factors for young people to leave school at 16 were negative school experiences and/or low attainment in their GCSEs. Few of the young people who had not achieved C grades in Maths and English considered taking re-sits either at school or college, largely because they felt that it would mean more of the

same negative experiences. This was particularly the case where they had disliked particular teachers. Many of these young people felt that they had 'had their fill' of learning.

'I just wanted to work really, college is too much like school.' Becca, non-signer

Drifting and exit by 'default'

Some young people spoke of drifting out of education and into the labour market because they could not think of anything better to do. They may have been vaguely interested in doing some form of further learning, but they were uncertain about what they wanted to do or how to go about it.

A small number of young people had left education at 16 almost by default, because they had not got around to applying for college in time, or because a college course they had wanted to do had closed down and there was insufficient time for them to find a replacement.

'My mum and dad was gonna move so I was gonna go college up there. But by the time they decided no it was too late to apply for college here, so I just went straight into work.'
Carly, signer

Equally, a small number reported they had initially wanted to get into college but had failed their college application. This was usually to do day- or block-release NVQ courses in construction subjects such as bricklaying, and tended to be because they did not have sufficiently high GCSE grades for Maths and English.

2.1.3 General attitudes towards education and qualifications

Generally young people valued 'qualifications' and regarded them as being an advantage in the labour market.

'They get you through the door. Employers won't look at you without them.' Mandy, non-signer

However, some made a firm distinction between academic qualifications and work-based qualifications. Generally, work-based qualifications were perceived to be more helpful because they were directly relevant to the workplace or to a particular job, and therefore could be used as 'proof' of skills and competence. This is consistent with previous research undertaken among young people in jobs without training (Anderson et al. 2006) which found that many of the young people interviewed had a positive attitude towards training and intended to return to learning at some point in the future. One young woman (who had done a one-year secretarial course after leaving school at 16) said:

'If you haven't got qualifications then you haven't got any proof – qualifications will prove that you can do things.' Claire, non-signer

Others reported that they needed to get particular qualifications if they wanted to enter a specific occupation or trade. One young man who was trying to get into an Apprenticeship as an electrician reported:

'If you haven't got any training they're not going to set you on.' Robert, signer

Many young people described how their views about the importance of qualifications had changed since entering the reality of the labour market.

'I think they're important because everyone wants them, but to me I've had lots of experience in plumbing and that, so I can hold my own. But I've no – I want paperwork.'
Zac, signer

'(Without qualifications) you just end up in a rubbish job like me.' Joanne, non-signer

However, a significant minority of young people dismissed the importance of gaining further qualifications altogether and had seen their views confirmed more strongly by their experiences of work. These often already had reasonable GCSE results and were in a job which afforded them the opportunity to develop new skills (through on-the-job, unaccredited training) as well as opportunity to take on a variety of roles or progress in terms of pay and promotion.

'I had loads of training (in first job) and in (current job). I can take that to my next job, if say I'm looking for another job that I want to pay more, I have all this experience, I have training in customer services, using the phones... I have a lot of training which would help me (more) than somebody that hasn't done it.' Nyssa, non-signer

'I know three of my mates that have gone to college and they're still in the same job as what I am. There's no favour there from going to college, they've just got an extra grade.' Tanya, signer

2.2 Experiences of work and learning since leaving school

Many of the young people in our sample had been uncertain about what to do on leaving school – the only certainty was that they knew they wanted to leave. This led to a range of trajectories at age 16. The majority of young people in our sample had gone straight into work although some of these had changed jobs several times. Around a quarter (ten) had either started college / sixth form and dropped out or completed a one-year course. A smaller number (seven) had experienced long periods of being Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), interspersed with short-lived jobs. Across all of these trajectories, most of the young people in our sample had contact with Connexions at some point, although for a variety of reasons.

2.2.1 Going to college

Of those young people who had started college or sixth form at 16, the majority left their courses early – some after just a few days, although one left after 18 months of a two-year course.

Reasons for leaving varied. The most common was that the course had not lived up to their expectations, in terms of the content and style of learning.

'I went to college for a year but I didn't enjoy it so I left. I'm going back... now I know what I want to do.' Jess, signer

'I did go into college to do Hairdressing because while I were at school I did my NVQ Level 1 in Hairdressing as a short course. I wanted to carry it on but it weren't the same, I weren't enjoying it as much... it were doing the same things over and over and over. And I get bored quite easy.' Casey, signer

The other main reasons for leaving college- or sixth-form courses was lack of interest or choosing 'the wrong course'. Previous quantitative research among 16-18 year old early leavers from further education (FE) and work-based learning courses has found that choosing the wrong course or the course not living up to expectations was the most common reason for early leaving (Simm et al., 2007). Some young people tended to have 'drifted' into the course because they could not think of anything better to do, and 'drifted' back out again, or else changed their mind about which subjects they were studying.

'It was alright but my timetable was a bit awkward and I think I chose the wrong subjects and it was too late to change, so I dropped out.' Lisa, signer

Occasionally this was hastened by the opportunity to do a job which seemed more to their interest. For example, one young man had dropped out of A-levels after his uncle offered him a job as a tyre fitter, with a view to doing a Level 3 Apprenticeship in Motor Vehicles Studies.

A small number had simply fallen behind with the work through difficulties with the level of the course, lack of interest in the subject, or juggling it with other commitments such as part-time work. One young person was advised to leave because he had fallen so far behind: *'they just told me it would be best if I left instead of getting kicked out'*.

2.2.2 Going into work

The importance of family contacts and previous work experience

Common avenues into a job at 16 tended to be through family contacts or through an existing part-time or holiday job. Roughly one-third of the young people in our sample who went straight into work followed this route (14). Interestingly, it was

much more common for young people who had signed Learning Agreements to have found their job via family contacts or previous work experience, compared with those who had declined. This may be related to the types of job involved. For example, a number of signers were working in construction jobs; they had got the job through a family member or friend, and they had to do some form of work-based training if they were to fully qualify in the trade. This meant that they were often more open to doing some learning. Similarly, it may be related to the more positive relationship between the young person and their employer.

Different transitions into and within the labour market

Overall, five broad groups of young people emerged from the patterns of job entry and job transition in our sample, and these are outlined below.

- 'Go-getters'. These young people mainly had good or reasonable GCSEs, or had 'topped up' low GCSEs by doing a vocational course afterwards. Usually they were very ambitious and generally had a plan of the type of work they wanted to do and how to progress into it. Although some recognised the value of qualifications, most rated work-based training more highly than general academic qualifications such as doing AS or A-levels. A sub-group of the 'go-getters' were a small group, mainly of young men, who had a clear idea of the job they wanted to do (usually in a skilled trade). They were working in a relevant entry-level construction job such as labouring, but lacked the grades to get into an Apprenticeship or relevant NVQ course.

Pen portrait: Tanya (signer)

Tanya has just turned 18. She left school at 16 with mixed GCSEs ranging from B to G. She always wanted to do care work and worked part-time in a café until she was old enough (17). She has been working for a care agency for just over a year now and they have provided her with various short courses such as first aid and manual handling. She is paid around £6.60 per hour, higher for working at weekends. She wants to do a care-related qualification and progress in care work over the next 5 years.

Pen portrait: Gary (signer)

Gary gained mixed GCSEs ranging from B to D. He left school at 16 to go into an entry-level bricklaying job which was set up for him by a friend of the family. He had always wanted to do this type of work and very much enjoys it; he has been in the same job for over a year. He is keen to become fully qualified as a bricklayer so that he can progress and earn more money. However, he has failed entry to NVQ Level 2 Bricklaying course due to his low GCSE grades for English and Maths. He would like to continue working as a bricklayer but he needs the qualification to progress. He wants to stay in construction and become multi-skilled - eventually he wants to train as a joiner or electrician and become self-employed.

Pen portrait: Claire (non-signer)

Claire left school at 16. She obtained 8 GCSEs mainly at D grade. She always wanted to work in an office and did a one-year secretarial course after leaving school, which she passed. Since then she has done three different office jobs, and has recently started a new one earning £12,500 per year. In all her jobs she has used her skills and received (un-accredited) training.

- 'Killing time'. These young people generally had reasonable or mixed GCSEs. They usually had an idea of what they wanted to do, but had to wait until they were 18, or were working as a 'stop-gap' until they could start college. Some had started college already and dropped out, but were planning to return.

Pen portrait: Leanne (signer)

Leanne left school at 16 and got mostly Ds in her GCSEs. She got a full-time job at the café where she used to work on Saturdays almost straight after leaving school. Her plan is to do care work and she knows of a specific agency which will provide her with a job and training once she is 18. Her sister did the same job. At the moment she is earning money from her waitressing job so that she can afford driving lessons, as she will need to be able to drive to do home-based care visits.

Pen portrait: Greg, (non-signer)

Greg is 17. He got reasonable GCSE results (Bs, Cs and Ds) and started A-levels in Maths and IT, and a BTEC in Business, at college. He dropped out after a few months because he had got too far behind in his coursework. Originally he started looking for a job in Accounts but found he needed better qualifications. Over the past few months he has worked in a call-centre, which he left because he didn't like the work, and is now working part-time as a waiter. He plans to return to college in September as he would still like to become an accountant, and will be doing A and AS-levels.

- 'Drifters and flitters'. This group generally had mixed or low GCSE results (eg grade C to E) and were unsure of what sort of job they wanted to do. More often than not they had moved between a variety of jobs and/or sectors, or started and dropped out of college, and were lacking in career direction or just simply 'trying out' various options until they found something they liked.

Pen portrait: Carly (signer but then changed her mind)

Carly will be 18 in December. She left school at 16 with mixed GCSE grades ranging from C to G. She had no idea what to do when she left school and considered various options, including college, and different jobs. At various points she has wanted to do courses related to sports, beauty and drama. During this time she has done two different retail jobs, neither of which she has much interest in. Both were part-time and low-paid. She initially signed up to the LA but then couldn't decide which learning option to do, and in the end personal problems made her change her mind. At the moment she is considering working on a cruise ship.

- 'Stuck in a rut'. These young people tended to have low or very low GCSE results (eg grade Es or below) and a few had spent extended periods NEET. They generally worked in very low-skilled and low-paid jobs and were unsure about what sort of job they really wanted, or – if they had an idea – how to go about getting it.

Pen portrait: Zac (signer)

Zac is 17 and left school last year. He missed a lot of his final year at school due to family problems. Initially he was predicted to get good grades in his GCSEs but because he had missed so much coursework, he only got Ds and Es. He didn't want to do re-sits as he disliked school. He has done lots of informal labouring work since leaving, but had no formal work. He feels he can 'hold his own' in various jobs like plumbing and fencing, but he has no qualifications to prove it, and doesn't really know what sort of job he would like to do.

Pen portrait: Joanne (non-signer)

Joanne turned 17 in May. She never really liked school and stopped attending from her early teens. She was NEET for around nine months before getting a job at a local catering company, with help from Connexions. She has no qualifications, which she now regrets as she dislikes her job and is paid 'not very much'. She has no clear idea of what sort of job she would really like.

2.2.3 Influence of parental attitudes to education and employment

Most young people reported that their parents were either positive or ambivalent about them staying on in education at 16. Some reported that their parents had been disappointed when they had dropped out of college courses, or had actively tried to encourage them to stay on:

'They definitely saw it as a failure.' Mandy, non-signer

More young people said that their parents simply let them get on with it and make their own decisions, as long as they were happy.

A few reported that their parents felt it was more realistic for them to leave school, get a job and look for work-based training than to stay on and do more academic qualifications:

'They thought it was better really because I'm not exactly bright so I probably wouldn't have got the grades I wanted even if I had stayed on at school.' Samantha, non-signer

There was only one young person whose family had directly influenced him to leave college, and this was only because they knew he was not enjoying his course. He had been 'tempted' from his A-level course by the offer of a job from his uncle:

'I was talking to him about leaving school and he said well why don't you come and work for me and get qualified in that instead.' Daniel, signer

A small number who had been NEET at various points reported that their parents or wider family network had helped them by 'looking out' for job opportunities. Some young people who had been NEET for extended periods reported coming under pressure from their parents either to find a job or to go back into education.

2.2.4 Previous contact with Connexions

Many young people – across the full range of trajectories – had been in some prior contact with Connexions since leaving school. Ironically this tended to be less common among the 'go-getters' who generally had a clearer idea of what they wanted to do and needed less support from Connexions to make the transition into employment – although not necessarily employment which automatically had the training they needed attached.

Most young people had previously approached Connexions for ad hoc jobsearch support such as looking at job boards in Connexions drop-in centres or getting help to write a CV. Many of those who had experienced periods being NEET had received more ongoing support, for example a few had attended Entry to Employment (E2E) programmes which they said had helped them to get their first job.

A small number of young people had received or were still receiving Connexions support for more pastoral issues such as housing problems. One young man reported that he had received mentoring and anger management support via Connexions, while he was still at school.

This is important because it shows that Connexions already has a ready-made profile among this group of young people, even if the young people were not being systematically 'tracked' because of their status in a job without training. Most young people had positive or ambivalent attitudes towards Connexions before they were approached about doing a Learning Agreement; only a handful were negative and this tended to be because of a perceived lack of tailored support.

2.3 Current circumstances

The vast majority of the young people in our sample were either in work or in college at the point they were interviewed. A few were NEET at the time of the interview although some of these were still on their Learning Agreement while Connexions helped them to find a new job. One had worked part-time at a newsagents until the company went out of business; one had done intermittent work as a roofer and in a warehouse, but was currently unemployed; and one had only really done informal paid work, cash in hand, for friends of his father. He was looking for a more legitimate job that would offer him more stable employment and a steady income.

2.3.1 Employer size and sector

Among those who were working, the vast majority were employed in small establishments employing ten or fewer staff. Included within these, some were working in branches of larger nationwide companies, in particular in the retail sector. A couple of the young people worked in large processing centres of financial companies and one worked at the head office of an estate agency.

The main sectors of employment were retail, office/administrative work, and catering. There was a strong gender distinction and young men tended to be working more in trades such as construction or motor vehicle repair, whereas young women worked in retail, office/ administrative work, catering and care.

The main distinction between signers and non-signers within our sample was that non-signers appeared more likely to be temping or to have shifted between different jobs, something which may make it more difficult for them to settle on a course because they feel less secure in their work.

2.3.2 Working hours

Young people were divided fairly equally between those contracted to work full-time (30 hours/week or more) and those contracted to work part-time. Among those working part-time, the number of contracted hours ranged from a minimum of four hours per week in one job at a retail store to around 24 hours per week. However, almost all the young people who were on part-time contracts had variable hours, and covered shifts for people off sick or on holiday. It was not uncommon for them to be in a job contracted for 16 hours/week but actually be working the equivalent of full-time, over 30 hours/week, on a regular basis.

Signers were fairly evenly split between full-time and part-time; however, non-signers predominantly worked full-time.

2.3.3 Pay levels

At the time of the research, the National Minimum Wage for young people aged 16 and 17 was £3.30 per hour. This rose to £4.45 per hour for people aged 18 to 21, and £5.35 per hour for those aged 22+.

There was an interesting distinction in terms of pay between signers and non-signers. Just four of the signers in our sample earned £5 per hour or more, whereas nearly all the non-signers did (even those working part-time). This remained the case when comparing young people in the same region (as 'going rates' may be different). Overall there was almost a £1 per hour difference in the average hourly rate of non-signers (£5.37 per hour) compared with signers (£4.43 per hour). Although this is based on a small purposive sample it is something to investigate further in the

quantitative element of the evaluation because it potentially impacts on the potency of the message that doing learning 'will improve your pay'.

Young people's living circumstances, peer groups and previous experience of employment impacted on how they felt about their level of pay. For example, one young woman who had been NEET for a few months before getting her job was initially happy just to be working and did not mind that she was working for the minimum wage of £3.30 per hour in her part-time retail job. Since then she had obtained a second part-time job for £4.45 per hour, to top up her weekly pay, as she realised that £3.30 per hour did not stretch very far. Another young woman was relatively happy earning £4 per hour in her part-time job as this was all she needed to cover her outgoings and save up to pay for driving lessons – she lived at home with her family and still received a small weekly allowance to top up her earnings.

Those in relatively low-paid jobs did compare themselves with their friends. Although some said they earned around the same, others were conscious they earned less. Usually they were comparing themselves to friends working in large national chains, while they worked for small independents. One mentioned she had been for an interview at a nationwide supermarket chain offering £6.50 per hour, which she found 'amazing'.

Some young people were on a 'training wage' – usually around £80/week for a full-time week. Although they were not particularly happy with this they usually accepted it as being 'the norm'. The most recent published research into apprenticeship pay rates found that take-home pay averaged £114/week among 16-18 year olds (Ullman and Deaking, 2005). Most young people expected that their pay would increase rapidly once they became fully qualified, for example one young man was told he would be earning £200/week once he achieved his NVQ Level 2. This was particularly the case for young men working in general construction jobs, who aspired to learn a trade, but less so for young women working in trainee administrative roles, where future pay progression appeared less clear-cut.

There was evidence of pay progression, either in the same job or between different jobs. One young woman had started working in a national catering outlet on leaving school at 16, earning £3.95 per hour. Her wage had increased in each of her two subsequent jobs and, now aged 18, she was earning £5.60 per hour and working in an office-based job. Another (aged 17) had negotiated a pay rise for herself:

'It were £3.30 but because I were doing everything, I turned around to my manager and says it's not fair that I'm getting paid the least and having to do everyone else's work. So she went well are you thinking about leaving? I said well yeah, seriously I am. And she went, if we give you a pay rise will you stay? I said yeah, how much, and now I'm on £4.45.' Casey, signer

2.3.4 Whether young people liked their job

There was a real mixture in terms of how much young people liked their job. This was usually influenced by the following factors:

- whether they saw it as related to a long-term career
- whether they felt they had opportunities for progression/promotion
- whether they got on with their colleagues/manager
- whether they found the work itself interesting or enjoyable
- whether they were happy with the amount they got paid.

Whether young people liked their job impacted on their orientation towards doing the Learning Agreement because it influenced what sort of learning or training they wanted to do. Those who were in a job they liked or that was related at least partly to a job they wanted to do in the future, were more interested in doing some work-related training. In contrast, those who were in a job they disliked tended not to be interested in doing work-related qualifications. They preferred to do a more general, transferable course such as a European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), or, if they had low GCSE grades for Maths and English, to work on improving their key skills.

3 Deciding Whether to Sign a Learning Agreement

In this section we explore how and why young people become engaged in the Learning Agreement, including how different factors appeal – or not – to different young people. We also examine the role of various influencing factors on young people’s decisions to sign up or not, in particular the role of the Connexions adviser in this process.

3.1 Engaging young people

The majority of signers, and to a lesser extent non-signers, were already interested in undertaking some learning prior to hearing about a Learning Agreement. This meant that for many signers the Connexions advisers were ‘door-openers’, helping them to find and apply for relevant courses, rather than providing a ‘kickstart’ for their interest in learning. The vast majority of both signers and non-signers had some contact with Connexions before the Learning Agreement, either at school or once they had left.

Young people were engaged in one of three ways: a ‘cold’ call from Connexions (although most young people had heard of Connexions or been helped by them in the past); going to a Connexions drop-in centre or contacting Connexions themselves; or through an employer or work colleague.

3.1.1 ‘Cold’ calling

Among the signers it seemed not to be so much ‘cold’ calling as ‘lukewarm’ calling. Nearly all the signers and non-signer had some prior contact with Connexions, whether that was through a careers adviser at school, or at a drop-in centre for help and advice with issues such as job search, housing or courses once they had left.

Most signers and some non-signers explained how during the ‘cold’ call they agreed to a meeting with a Connexions adviser to further discuss their options, so the adviser

could fully explain to them what was involved. Nearly all these signers said that they were already willing and interested in doing some learning, primarily (as will be discussed later) because they wanted to improve their job prospects and / or qualifications. For example, one signer said:

'I wanted to do it, when she spoke to me I did want to do it. I thought well you know it's a good opportunity to take and then I might as well go for it...'

Interviewer: 'So it was quite good timing in the way that she phoned you up at a time when you were thinking you might want to do it [some learning]?''

'Yeah!' Lucy, signer

3.1.2 Young people approach Connexions

A number of young people (both signers and non-signers) said that they had initiated contact with Connexions and through this had found out about the Learning Agreement. They did not approach Connexions about the Learning Agreement, but for help with finding courses or with job search. Reflecting their orientation towards working rather than learning on leaving school, more young people initially approached Connexions for work-related rather than learning-related queries, and particularly for help with finding a 'better job' if they were already in work. However, some young people initially contacted Connexions for help finding work when they were unemployed.

Those who contacted Connexions primarily with a learning enquiry included signers and non-signers. These young people were often interested in how they could apply to do apprenticeships and were looking for help in doing so.

3.1.3 Through an employer or work colleague

A small number of signers said they found out about the Learning Agreement primarily through their employer or work colleague. One signer who worked as an administrator in a cleaning company said that her manager had approached her and asked if she would be interested in doing a course at work.

Sometimes there was a 'learning role model' at work who was doing some learning alongside work and who advocated doing this to the young person. For example, one signer who worked in retail said that:

'I found out from there because a girl who works there, was like "oh I'm doing an NVQ in customer service and retail, you should do it as well, it's really good". And I was like "yeah, I might do actually", and then I just got into it from there.' Sarah, Signer

This suggests that Connexions advisers could work with employers where there are other learners, as in the case of employers using their local Learning and Skills

Council (LSC) Train to Gain service. Young people would then have a 'learning role model' and the employer might already be receptive to workforce development.

One signer said his employer (who was also his uncle) had got in touch with Connexions to ask about learning and the possibility of his nephew doing an apprenticeship in motor vehicle studies.

3.2 Reasons for signing a Learning Agreement

Most signers had a positive first impression of the Learning Agreement offer. The majority of young people were already interested in doing some further learning, and were therefore initially pleased that the opportunity had been presented to them. Others, although not actively seeking learning opportunities, were open to the possibility and felt that it would help them to improve their job prospects over the medium term. Some young people particularly mentioned that being able to learn *alongside* work gave them a positive first impression of the Learning Agreement. Work was the priority for many, and their past negative experiences of school and/ or college made them determined not to go back to learning in a similar environment.

Young people's reasons for signing a Learning Agreement largely seemed to fit the model described by advisers in the first stage of this project. One key difference was the weight that young people placed on the Learning Agreement being 'different from school'. Also, perhaps surprisingly, the majority did not link doing a qualification or training with a likely increase in pay.

This section discusses each of the main 'messages' used to encourage young people to sign a Learning Agreement in turn, from the perspective of the young people.

3.2.1 LA can help you get on in life

The primary reason why the large majority of signers agreed to do a Learning Agreement was because they felt that they could improve their job prospects by doing a qualification, and they would be able to either progress within the job they were in, or move to a different type of work in which they were more interested.

Filling a gap or improving qualifications

The majority of signers felt that a Learning Agreement would improve their job prospects by filling in a gap in their qualifications. Most had not achieved five GCSEs A*-C, and several commented that their qualifications were limiting the type of work they could apply for and their job prospects. Some mentioned that employers looked for a certain level of qualifications when they recruited staff. For example, one signer explained:

'I aren't getting nowhere because I haven't done no qualifications and I aren't really doing anything, I'm still trying to look for a job [that they wanted to do] and it [the course via the

Learning Agreement] is on a night time...the more qualifications I get the more chance I've got of getting jobs.' Zac, signer

A stepping-stone to a better job or the job I really want

Most non-signers agreed with the signers that learning and gaining a qualification would help them to improve their job prospects and the type of work they could apply for. Some signers had started a Learning Agreement specifically to help them to get into a different type of work over the medium term and to gain a wider range of opportunities in the labour market. One signer said:

'... it [the Learning Agreement] will mean that I'll be able to do more jobs because they'll [employers] see that I've got the qualifications, they'll see that I've got the experience and rather than employing somebody that's got no experience, they'd want to employ someone with more experience and with qualifications.' Casey, signer

A couple of signers had started IT courses, such as the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) and Computer Literacy and Information Technology (CLAIT), with the aim of gaining a qualification that would enable them to move from their current work to office-based jobs. One young person working in the construction industry said that he would be able to move into higher roles on site, rather than *'just being a labourer'* after doing his Learning Agreement. Another young person, also working in construction, said that if he had not signed a Learning Agreement then he would have *'ended up working in a factory'*. There were a number of young people who were working in, or who aspired to work in, the construction industry, but had been unable to do so for various reasons, such as failing entry tests for courses. The Learning Agreement, combined with support from the adviser, seemed to work well for this group of young people, helping them to enter the type of work they wanted.

Another signer had enrolled in an NVQ in Health and Social Care so that she would have a greater choice of care agencies and care homes to apply for work with in the future. She felt that having the NVQ Level 2 was an advantage as it is required by law that a certain proportion of employees are qualified to this level.

3.2.2 It's not like school

The majority of signers (and some non-signers who were not planning to go back to college) liked working and, as was reported earlier, had disliked school. Therefore an important reason for them considering, or signing up to, a Learning Agreement was that it was not like school and they could continue to work alongside doing the learning. For example, one signer said they would not have started a Learning Agreement if it involved classroom-based learning:

'... that's why I done it because I didn't want to go back to college.' Kate, signer

Another young person agreed that the mode of learning was one of the reasons why she signed a Learning Agreement:

'the one that I'm doing is work based training so I'm not stuck in a classroom all the time, writing all the time. Because that's one of the things that I didn't enjoy at school, just sat down, I like to be active and doing things on learning, it's easier to learn that way, a lot easier.' Casey, signer

Some non-signers also described how the learning 'not being like school' was an attractive aspect of the Learning Agreement, although they had still not signed for circumstantial reasons:

'It's not just sitting studying from books, it's getting out and doing things.' Craig, non-signer

An important reason why many young people said that they would be reluctant to go back to college or a classroom environment was because they were '*treated like a kid*' and this was not the case with learning through work. Some also mentioned they liked the fact that they had been able to *choose* what learning to do rather than being told what learning they had to do.

A minority of signers *were* doing classroom-based courses, such as key skills, and although they were sometimes less likely to agree strongly that the Learning Agreement was different from learning at school, they did describe how the environment within the classroom was different in terms of the respect they felt they got from the tutor, and the increased flexibility compared with school or college (for example, that they could take a break if they needed it).

3.2.3 It will improve pay

The majority of signers disagreed that the Learning Agreement would improve their pay, although they did think that they would have better job prospects and a wider range of jobs available to them. Overall the possibility of increased pay was not a strong reason why young people signed a Learning Agreement. Many of them associated pay rises more with experience or age. Perhaps this was on the basis of the difference in statutory minimum wages, as many in this group had been working for less money in the same job as some of their older colleagues. For example, one signer said:

'In some jobs it could improve my pay but I don't know whether it will, like in shops and things like that, I don't think it will because I think that goes on your age anyway.' Casey, signer

However, some young people, particularly in sectors where you needed to have a qualification to undertake the job, and which had structured progression based on qualifications (such as the construction industry), were more likely to agree that completing a qualification through the Learning Agreement would improve their pay.

For example, one signer doing an apprenticeship described how his pay would increase from £150 to £200 per week when he was fully qualified.

One non-signer working for a large financial services company had strong opinions as to why doing a qualification via the Learning Agreement would *not* have improved her pay. She felt that her employers valued experience over qualifications and rationalised this because she did the same job as people with degree-level qualifications:

'If I did this NVQ thing I don't think it would improve pay. The reason being it's because you can go and you can learn and have A's and A stars and whatever, and go to a job and they're not even looking for your grades or what kind of qualifications, they're looking for experience. Because in my job, in my team there's people that have got degrees and what not and they're working and doing the same job that I'm doing, and probably getting the same pay that I'm getting as well.' Nyssa, non-signer

3.2.4 It's not a big commitment

There seemed to be two schools of thought as to whether or not the Learning Agreement was a 'big commitment'. Some young people said that it was not a big commitment as they could do it at work, or for just a couple of hours in the evening. In contrast, other young people (both signers and non-signers) said that it was not worth signing a Learning Agreement or doing some learning unless you were committed to it. For example, one signer said:

'it is a big commitment and if you don't commit yourself then you could either just pass, but not very well, but the higher grades you get the better job you will get, so it is a big commitment.' Lisa, signer

Some young people (particularly those working full-time) were also concerned with having to 'juggle' work and learning. For example, one non-signer said:

'I said my job is hectic as it is and I don't want to be juggling around with doing this course or whatever with my job, because my job is that hectic.' Nyssa, non-signer

3.2.5 Learning at your own pace

The majority of signers agreed that they could learn at their own pace under the Learning Agreement, although this seemed to depend on the type of course that the young people had signed up for. For example, NVQs and work-based qualifications were thought to be more flexible, as were ECDL and computer based courses delivered in learning centres. Other courses, such as key skills, which required attendance at a college at a particular time, were thought to be less flexible, and learners on these courses were less likely to agree that they could learn at their own pace.

Being able to learn at their own pace was not a particularly strong reason why young people signed up to the Learning Agreement, although some did see it as a benefit of the type of learning they had chosen.

One non-signer described how being able to learn at her own pace would have caused her difficulties because she lacked self-discipline and felt this might have meant that she drifted:

'how long will it take you to do that then if you're gonna learn at your own pace? Some people, if you had a job – if I were gonna use it, and if I were doing an NVQ course and I did it because I can learn at my own pace, then I wouldn't get anywhere. Because I'm coming home from work, and I'd be so tired.' Nyssa, non-signer

3.2.6 The role of the adviser in signing up

Most of the signers said they were already interested in doing some learning when they approached Connexions or were called by Connexions. Rather than kickstarting their interest in learning in the sign-up process, the adviser seems to have had a key role in increasing the confidence of signers so that they believe they are capable of learning, advising them about suitable learning options and opening the doors so that they actually sign up. Young people viewed Connexions advisers as a very positive element of the sign-up process.

Increasing young people's confidence

Most signers were likely to agree that the Connexions adviser had made them confident both that they could achieve their learning aims and that doing learning was worthwhile. This was particularly important if young people had previously negative experiences of learning, including difficulties getting into a course or dropping out of a course in the past.

At the sign-up stage, the offer of on-going support throughout the learning meant that many signers believed that, if they encountered problems, these could be overcome with the help of the Connexions adviser. One signer who was apprehensive about starting a course because she would not know anyone in the group said that her Connexions adviser said that *'she'd be there for me'* and this increased her confidence about signing. The adviser had also arranged for her to go bowling with her new course mates before the course started to help her to make friends and to feel more confident about going.

Other signers said that the Connexions adviser made them feel confident by talking to them about what would happen step-by-step. For example:

'The way they talk about it and what you will be doing on the course, they make you feel you can do it.' Rebecca, signer

A small number of signers said that their adviser attended their initial assessment or first session with them to help them through it as they were not confident that they could do it by themselves. One signer said:

'When I first went to the college to do my assessment it was like my first day at school all over again, I was really nervous. But my Key Worker met me there and was really kind and generous, she made me feel more relaxed and I wanted to do it more.' Keelee, signer

Other signers, some of whom had failed entrance exams for courses before, explained that their Connexions adviser had helped them to revise for pre-entry assessments and increased their confidence that they would be able to pass this time. One signer who had already applied for an apprenticeship and been rejected said that with the help of his Connexions adviser:

'I feel more confident now and have revised a bit more than I did last time.' Robert, signer

One non-signer who has since decided to go back to college to study for A-levels also said that the Connexions adviser made him feel confident about doing some learning.

Offering careers information, advice and guidance

With signers who were unsure as to what course they wanted to do, a key role of the Connexions adviser in signing them up to a Learning Agreement was to help them to choose an appropriate course. Indeed, some young people ended up doing courses that they had either not heard of before or would not have thought about otherwise.

For example, one signer who was working in a shop, but whose long-term plan was to work in and then own a bar, explained that his adviser had helped him to choose his course. They decided that doing a customer service NVQ would be better for him than an NVQ in retail as it would be more transferable to the area of work he was interested in in the long term.

Another signer who worked in an estate agency said that the Connexions adviser had helped her decide between three possible courses. She chose to do a Business and Administration NVQ after her adviser explained that this would provide her with a wider range of job opportunities than if she did a more specialised course, such as the estate agency NVQ. This was particularly important as she was not sure how long she wanted to continue in that field of work.

Several signers reported that, prior to speaking to Connexions, they had not heard about the course that they were currently doing. One signer said that she might have otherwise started a correspondence course that was advertised on television, as she was unaware that she could combine doing a course with work. Another signer said:

'The adviser just sort of helped me do it and helped me find out about it. I wouldn't have known what way to go about it before.' Lucy, signer

Others knew that the course they were enrolled on existed, but were unsure as to how to enrol. For example, one signer said:

'I knew you could do things like this but I didn't know how to do it. Connexions made it more easier that they could do it for me.' Kate, signer

A number of signers explained that they were offered a number of different courses and were then able to choose which they wanted to do. This helped to make them feel in control, motivated and that they had more choice than at school.

Searching for a job with training

For one signer who had approached Connexions when she was out of work for help with job search, an important role of the adviser was finding her a job *with* training. She started an apprenticeship and said that she would not have been able to find a job with training without the help of her Connexions adviser.

Completing the application forms

A small minority of signers said that their adviser had helped them to enrol on their course by completing their application form with them. For those young people easily deterred by this stage of the process, the adviser had a vital role in ensuring that, after their initial interest, they went on to enrol in the learning. In this respect the Connexions adviser had a 'sustaining' role, making sure that initial interest was seen through to enrolment and beyond.

Liaising with employers

Another role the advisers had in the sign-up process was liaising with employers, although only a small number of signers reported that their employer was involved in their learning, or at least supported them doing a course. Some mentioned that the Connexions adviser had met with them and their employer together to help explain about the learning and the support that they would need.

One signer whose learning was yet to start and who had since lost her job said that this role was particularly important as she found it hard to approach her employer about training. Another signer who worked in retail explained that she did not want to tell her manager about the possibility of her learning in order to change career direction:

'I talked to a few people at work, obviously that I know would keep it quiet, I didn't want to tell my manager straight away because I'd think she would get rid of me, and I'd have to leave my job.' Carly, signer

Addressing barriers to learning

The main barrier to taking up learning for most young people seemed to be lack of confidence and lack of awareness of options. In one instance a non-signer who Connexions had been helping with job search said that if he had been able to take up the course they were discussing then he might have had difficulty paying for travel to and from the course. He reported that the Connexions adviser had reassured him about this and said that if the learning did go ahead then his travel costs could be reimbursed. For most signers the costs associated with learning had not been a barrier to sign-up.

One non-signer said that if she had gone ahead with the course she was planning to do then she could have had difficulties having time to travel to and from the course:

'I'd have had to travel to [local town] every day and back and it would have been a pain.'
Carly, signer

3.2.7 Parental influence

The vast majority of learners did not feel their parents were an influence on their decision to take up the Learning Agreement (or not), although many reported that their parents were pleased or even 'proud' they were doing a course, so parents may have had an implicit influence. Just two signers explicitly said that one of the reasons they signed was to '*keep their parents off their back*' or because of their '*nagging mum*'.

3.2.8 Understanding the offer

There were a minority of signers who claimed that they did not initially understand what they had been offered, but had signed in spite of this:

'She [the Connexions adviser] told me about different kinds of training and what sort of training I could do. And the Learning Agreement sounded like the best one to me. But I still don't understand it fully, like what it all entails.' Casey, signer

'The adviser said it was just part of the process and was a new thing they were doing and I thought that everyone was doing it. I thought that anyone who went to see her, that an Learning Agreement happened automatically.' Lisa, signer

There were also some non-signers who struggled to recall any details about what the Learning Agreement they had turned down would have involved (see section 3.3.1).

3.3 Reasons for not signing a Learning Agreement

A small number of non-signers said that the course they were considering would have meant that they had to travel a long distance to attend. However, the most common reasons for not signing were that they were already learning (or were planning to), or

that they did not seem to understand what they had turned down. Reasons for not signing up are discussed in more detail below.

3.3.1 Lack of understanding about the Learning Agreement

When talking to some non-signers it was clear that they had not fully understood what was on offer with the Learning Agreement and what they had declined. Advisers and signers alike said that after initially agreeing on the phone, they tended to arrange a face-to-face meeting to discuss the Learning Agreement in more detail. Perhaps some non-signers who did not agree to a further meeting and simply received a phone call from Connexions did not have the chance to take on board what doing a Learning Agreement would involve.

For example, one non-signer did not think that you could continue to work alongside learning as part of a Learning Agreement, and thought that in order to take part they would have to give up their job. Another non-signer thought she had heard of Learning Agreements while she was at school, but she could not recall any detail about what they meant or what was involved. This was also after prompting with examples of local branding of the Learning Agreement.

3.3.2 Learning through another route

A number of non-signers said that they were learning through another route already. For example, one was undertaking an NVQ in Catering, funded by her employer; another was doing an NVQ Level 3 in Health and Social Care through her employer; and another an NVQ in Childcare, which was funded by her parents while she volunteered at a nursery.

Other non-signers were planning to go back to college in September, including doing (or re-starting A-levels). Some of these were working as a stop-gap, although only one had deliberately taken a 'year out'. The rest had left school or dropped out of college intending to work, but then decided to return to education. One of these non-signers described the Learning Agreement offer as being attractive as a stop-gap before he went back to college, but it was not a priority for him as he always had this option in mind:

'I thought it [the Learning Agreement] would be alright at the time until I did go to college and get a job.... I thought it would be pretty helpful to do it because if it's as well as a job then it's even better. But I just didn't get around to it.' Greg, non-signer

3.3.3 Did not get the job they applied for

Three non-signers were working with Connexions advisers in order to find a job with training (ie NVQs or apprenticeships) that could then have been funded through a

Learning Agreement. However, the young people had not been able to secure employment in these jobs, and so as a result did not sign a Learning Agreement.

3.3.4 Circumstances changed too frequently

Three non-signers said that they were still unsure what they wanted to do, and their work circumstances kept changing, so they did not feel they could commit to learning at that time. One of these had a range of different jobs that she wanted take forward and said that what she wanted to do kept changing from week to week. Another was on a temporary contract when she was approached by Connexions so was not sure if she would still be working in that job or industry for the duration of the course that was suggested, and that was why she turned it down. For young people who are not settled in their employment, some types of qualification which could continue if they changed employer, such as key skills, could be preferable. However, work-based qualifications tended to be favoured over classroom-based courses as they were 'not like school'.

Another non-signer was not sure whether she wanted to work or go back to college and was applying for a number of different courses and jobs at the same time. She said that the timing of the Connexions approach did not fit as she had not settled on what to do yet.

In all of these examples there was scope for Connexions to return with the offer of the Learning Agreement at a later date. This suggests the 'drip-drip' approach propagated by the Connexions advisers will pay off among some non-signers eventually.

3.3.5 Progression is available at their current employer

One non-signer said that she would not have had time to study alongside work as she found her job was stressful. She worked for a large financial company and was proud of the progress she had already made and felt that this would continue without gaining a qualification.

'I said my job is hectic as it is and I don't want to be juggling around with doing this course or whatever with my job, because my job is that hectic...without doing that [a Learning Agreement], I feel that I've come so far and I think without doing it I can go further.' Nyssa, non-signer

3.3.6 If they don't like their current job, learning options can be limited

One non-signer who was working in a warehousing job that he viewed as temporary agreed to meet Connexions about the Learning Agreement because he wanted to do some learning and improve his future prospects. He said that his choice of course was limited to an NVQ in warehouse operations as this was related to his current job. He

had no interest in doing this as he did not intend to stay in this field in the long term. He has since started to look for an apprenticeship as an electrician.

3.4 Signers' views on why some young people decline

Signers' views of why some young people may not want to sign a Learning Agreement were wide-ranging and often differed from the views of non-signers. Perceived reasons for declining the LA included:

- it was too much commitment/ effort to work and learn at the same time
- young people had a negative experience at school or college and were deterred from learning
- young people were not confident about meeting new people
- some young people are happy in their current job
- people don't want to earn less money (a reason usually given by apprentices who felt that people who signed a Learning Agreement would have to earn a training wage rather than the higher wage they were used to)
- young people had not been given the right advice (ie they did not fully understand how different learning through the LA can be compared with learning at school)
- some young people just do not want to do any more learning.

3.5 Who is likely to sign up and who isn't?

This section concludes that there is no type of person more or less likely to sign a Learning Agreement; rather, it has more to do with their circumstances at the time they are approached.

3.5.1 Circumstances influence whether (and when) a young person signs

There does not seem to be a 'type' of young person who is more or less likely to turn down a Learning Agreement. The characteristics of signers and non-signers appear to be broadly similar. What does seem to differ is their experiences of work, for example working in what they consider to be a 'good job', or their medium-term goals, for example to return to education or to do a job that actually requires a qualification.

The majority of signers who were approached by Connexions were already thinking about doing some learning, and some were actively looking for courses. Even the non-signers generally said they were open to learning and viewed it as something that would enhance their job prospects. The majority of young people had mixed or low GCSE results.

There were a number of young people who did not seem to have understood what was on offer with the Learning Agreement. Some young people may not have had any experience of work-related training, so may find the concept of NVQs and other work-based training quite alien and difficult to understand. The way in which the Learning Agreement is explained needs to make it as clear as possible. Indeed, even some signers said that they were not sure of what would be involved, and this suggests that the Learning Agreement could be simplified and/or explained more clearly. Nevertheless, there will always be some young people who are not willing to give Connexions advisers enough time on the phone to explain it before turning it down, or who are wary of agreeing to a face-to-face meeting because they associate learning with school or college.

4 Experiences of Learning and Support

This section will consider the experiences of the young people interviewed who went ahead and signed a Learning Agreement. It will begin by discussing the time taken for their learning to begin and, where applicable, the support offered by Connexions in the interim. It will then go on to explore the young people's impressions of their chosen courses, including any difficulties encountered, and the level of support they received from both Connexions and their employers while learning.

4.1 Time taken for learning to begin

The majority of the young people who had signed a Learning Agreement had begun their respective courses by the time they were interviewed. Two had even completed theirs. Of these, one – who had initially done a CLAIT – had now moved on to doing an ECDL, also through a Learning Agreement. The other had completed an ECDL and was now preparing to return to college full-time to study for A-levels, having dropped-out the previous year.

For many, learning was quick to get off the ground, often taking as little as a week or two. Those who had started new jobs specifically so that they could do a related qualification were usually given a month or so to get to grips with these jobs first, which they felt was a good idea. However, many of those who were already settled in jobs were simply invited to start at the earliest time convenient to them. For example:

'It's on a Wednesday. I was busy the first Wednesday so I started the one after that.'

Emma, signer

'It was set up in about a week. And she [the assessor] come in the next week and that was it, I was already able to do it.' Louise, signer

4.1.1 Delays in getting started

For some young people, there were slight delays in their learning being started due to various bureaucratic reasons and/or inefficiency. This typically caused some

frustration to the learner but was not a major issue. For example, one boy described how his work-based NVQ took around six weeks to get going:

'I thought it dragged out a bit. But there was quite a lot of paperwork to do. I had to see [name] a couple of times, some woman from [the training provider] because she forgot to get me to sign something.' Jason, signer

There was only one case in Area 1 where there were severe delays and the young person was still waiting to start a work-based NVQ after *'two or three months'*. This was despite she and her employer having both physically signed a Learning Agreement some time previously. Unsurprisingly, she was getting very frustrated. Although she had been assigned an adviser and had had some contact with her, she had still not been given a satisfactory explanation as to what was causing the delay:

'I think she's called me twice ever and I know she's really trying but she still doesn't know what's happening. I think she needs to have another meeting with my boss or something but I'm not sure why.' Tanya, signer

In Area 2, however, such severe delays were more common and a number of signers had not yet begun their learning after quite substantial periods of time. In some cases the young people concerned were waiting for confirmation that they had got through a required selection process to get onto their desired course. In other cases, however, it was not entirely clear what had caused the delay. Some young people were beginning to feel quite disillusioned and pessimistic or were even starting to think about making alternative plans for learning. For example, one girl described how she had signed up to do a key skills course around three months before but was still waiting for it to start:

'They keep ringing me every couple of weeks and telling me it's nearly ready to go but then no one gets back in touch. I'm not getting my hopes up now as I don't think it's going to happen.' Rebecca, signer

4.1.2 Support from Connexions while waiting for learning to begin

The level of support offered to the young people by Connexions during these waiting periods was mixed. In some cases Connexions were very supportive, either through chasing employers and the various other parties involved, or sometimes simply through keeping in regular contact:

'They phoned me and was in touch by e-mail. They just talked about what I could progress on to after the ECDL.' Jess, signer

In other cases, the young people had heard little from Connexions and did not feel they were well supported during this period.

4.2 Experiences of learning

4.2.1 Types of courses

In Area 1, most signers were doing either IT courses run through training providers (eg ECDL, CLAIT) or work-based NVQs. The latter typically involved an assessor coming to visit the young person at work once or twice a month to observe them and review a progress record. Occasionally another person at their place of work would be doing the qualification too, so the assessor would visit them both simultaneously. More typically, however, the assessor would visit just them and the support involved would be very much one-to-one and individualised. One girl described her experience of doing an NVQ in customer service and retail:

'They just like follow you around while you're working, and they follow you around, see how you put the clothes on the hangers, see what you're like with the customers, see how tidy you keep the shop.' Louise, signer

In contrast, in Area 2 most signers were either doing apprenticeships involving a day-or block-release from work to attend a local college or training provider, or else were taking more classroom-based key skills courses – most commonly to brush up on their English and Maths following poor GCSE results – at a learning centre, often through evening classes.

4.2.2 Worries and/or concerns prior to starting learning

The vast majority of young people reported that, before starting their respective courses, they had no particular worries or concerns. A few mentioned concerns about various different issues, although in all cases these were quickly resolved. Concerns mainly revolved around what the learning would involve as many young people only had experience of classroom-based rather than work-based learning. There were also some concerns about meeting other people doing the course. For example:

'I was a bit confused over how it was going to work but it's been ok. I didn't think there would be – we've got the booklet full of the questions and they tell us what to do, what time and when it's got to be done by. Deadlines and that... thought I'd have to work through it all by myself but they told me I can ask different people for help as long as I'm not copying their work.' Kate, signer

'I was worried it was just gonna be like going back to school and just learning again. Because that was what college was like, that was like just being back at school, but it was not, it was so different, I enjoyed it more.' Alice, signer

'I guess my main worry were what were the people like that I were gonna be there with every week but they've all been fine.' Emma, signer

Some apprehension about meeting others was not uncommon amongst those doing courses at a training provider. Several said they were quite nervous before their first

sessions about not knowing anyone. However, this apprehension was short-lived as they quickly got to know people. One girl even commented that she had ended up *'meeting some really great people through it'*. Sometimes Connexions helped to address this problem by accompanying the young person to the first session or organising social activities (eg bowling) involving other young people doing the same course.

4.2.3 Pace of learning

In all cases the young people felt that they were free to complete their Learning Agreements within their own personal time-frame and all agreed that they very much liked this approach. This was true regardless of the type of course being studied. For example:

'It was, you could choose how many hours you wanted to do but you had to stay for an hour at least and I did, I think I did two or three hours a week.' Jess, signer

'Obviously you do get your action plans to make sure you don't just not do it. But it is, like you don't have to do it there and then, you can sort of do half of it one week, the other half the next week, do it all at the beginning, all at the end. It's your own, you do it however you want to do it.' Rachel, signer

4.2.4 Time commitment required

None of the young people felt that the time commitment required by their Learning Agreement was overly burdensome. Those doing work-based qualifications were all able to fit their learning fairly easily into the working day. The amount of time spent on work-based qualifications varied from approximately two hours a day to approximately one hour a week. One young person, who worked as an office junior, even said that she appreciated having something extra to do at work during less busy periods:

'Sometimes at work we get really quiet days so I've got really hardly anything to do so it's good really because I'm not just sitting there with nothing to do, I can just get on with that.' Katie, signer

A minority had occasionally taken Learning Agreement work home, although this was usually through choice rather than necessity. For example, a girl who worked in an estate agents office described how:

'I have brought my folder home twice I think. Just because at work I'm supposed to sit down and do something like in a block of time. At work because I have to do it in between calls and stuff, it sort of your head's all over the place, you're not concentrating so I take it home. But you could easily enough do it at work.' Rachel, signer

4.2.5 Difficulties encountered

For those doing courses through an external training provider, occasions sometimes arose when they were unable to attend for various reasons. Most commonly this was because of work pressure, although personal appointments, occasional transport difficulties and extreme weather conditions were also mentioned. However, in all cases this was understood by the training provider and some flexibility was allowed:

'Sometimes if we were really short-staffed at work then I'd sometimes have to go to work because we didn't have enough staff. So I had to postpone doing the ECDL. They were OK, as long as you didn't miss too much.' Jess, signer

Work pressures sometimes became a problem for those doing work-based learning also, although this was less common. Again assessors were understanding and happy to make some allowances. A girl working as an office junior explained that:

'Sometimes I have to cancel my visits with her [the assessor] because I haven't done it because I've been busy at work. But then sometimes I can get loads done in a day.' Katie, signer

Perhaps surprisingly, those doing courses which involved visiting a college or external training provider did not complain of difficulties getting there or of the transport costs involved (with the exception of one, discussed later in this section, for whom this was a major reason for deciding not to go ahead with a Learning Agreement after all). This was despite the fact that the majority were having to cover these costs out of their own pockets.

Only one of the young people interviewed had a major complaint about how her learning was going. Connexions were trying to help her resolve this. Her complaint regarded her NVQ assessor not being available to her as often as needed:

'She's quite busy so I never really see her that often, I've only seen her three times I think since I've been working there. If you finish all your work, sure enough you can e-mail her asking for more. But you're not gonna understand it if you do.' Rachel, signer

4.2.6 Overall impressions

A minority of signers had only recently begun their courses so had little to say so far and/or felt they had not yet had time to form accurate impressions. However, for those who had progressed further into their courses, experiences were generally very positive. Virtually all said they would recommend others in their situation (ie 16 and 17 year olds in jobs without training) consider signing a Learning Agreement. One young person doing a work-based NVQ reported that she was enjoying it so much that another girl at work had decided to sign up to the same course, also through a Learning Agreement.

Many mentioned that they appreciated the independent, one-to-one nature of the learning they were doing and noted the contrast of this approach with learning at school. Again this was true both for those studying at training providers and those doing work-based learning, as illustrated by the following two examples:

'If you're doing it at college and there's a lot of other people doing it then if you get really stuck they're like "oh yeah just try". Just like a one to one, it's like always you that he's paying attention to, which is really good.' Louise, signer

'It's just one teacher but there's quite a few different people in the class but they're all doing different things, so you just work on your own and do what you're doing.' Jess, signer

4.3 Contact with Connexions during the Learning Agreement

4.3.1 Ongoing support

Many of the young people interviewed were full of praise for their Connexions advisers. They liked having them as a touchbase and appreciated the continuity of being able to see the same adviser each time. In many cases the support received was mainly pastoral. The young people felt they could contact their advisers at any time about any problem large or small and that they would be there to listen. In Area 2, in particular, several talked of having quite friendly relationships with their advisers, which sometimes even extended to meeting them informally for coffee or engaging in social activities based around the course. This is well-illustrated by the following example:

'You feel more like she's not someone that's just there and part of it, she feels more like a friend. Because you talk to her, and you get to know her. She doesn't just like go on about what I'm doing, she goes on about what she's been doing, other stuff and it makes you feel more comfortable. You forget that you are in a learning environment and you think that you've just got together with a group of friends. We're all off bowling soon so that's good.' Zac, signer

In other cases the support offered took more of a practical nature. For example, one young person, who was applying to do a key skills course, described how his adviser helped with his application, coming out to talk to him when he found problems with it. He also had to sit an entrance test and she offered him much encouragement in preparing for this, to the point where he commented that he felt more confident and had revised more than he would have done otherwise. Sometimes the support received could even be described as 'advocacy' support, for example dealing with training providers and/or employers on the young person's behalf.

Other young people required more of a holistic approach to support involving working alongside a mainstream Connexions PA to resolve personal issues that were not directly related to the Learning Agreement. For example, one girl was facing difficulties regarding her living situation. She had had to move out of her mum's

house suddenly after a disagreement and, at the time of the interview, was camping-out with friends. Although she had a second adviser (other than the one supporting her through her Learning Agreement) to help her deal with this issue, it was clear that the two advisers were working closely and successfully as a team to help her and together had been able to offer her a great deal of support.

4.3.2 More 'arm's-length' support

For others there had been less contact with Connexions, although they generally did not feel they needed much support and were happy with this arrangement. Several commented that they knew they could contact their advisers if they had a problem but that, since they had not encountered any major problems, they had so far not felt the need to do so. One girl, who had been a poor attender at school, commented: *'If I need him I go in and see him, so it's just when I need to.'* She went on to explain that she very much likes this approach as *'It's not like they're always checking-up on you like they don't trust you.'*

4.4 Support from employers

4.4.1 Positive experiences

Many employers were happy for the young people to be learning and in some cases were even very supportive. Employers of those starting apprenticeships requiring day-release to attend college were usually particularly understanding as they recognised that the young person needed to do this to qualify in their chosen trade. These employers usually operated in sectors where this way of combining work and learning was traditional and very much accepted as the 'standard' route to becoming fully-qualified. For example, one boy who was doing an apprenticeship to become an electrician said of his employer:

'He thinks I'm just getting on with it. He's fine about giving me a day off every week because I need to do the course to qualify.' Robert, signer

Some employers showed an interest by regularly asking how courses were going. Others offered direct help. For example:

'I've sort of said that I have to spend some time doing the work, just sat at the tills and during the day. He just asked me how it's going, he's not got a problem with it at all I don't think.' Jason, signer

'She said go for it, she was happy to let us learn. She's helped me with my questions when I get stuck, she talks me through them and I write notes.' Kate, signer

In some cases where the young person was doing a course unrelated to their job, employers were very flexible in allowing them time to attend their college or training provider as required. One girl who worked in a playschool was allowed time off each

week to do an ECDL course. Another who worked in a pub kitchen explained how her employer very willingly arranged her shifts around her CLAIT course.

4.4.2 The decision to tell one's employer

However, some young people saw no need to tell their employers about their learning since it was unrelated to their work. They simply went ahead and did their courses outside work hours in their own time and were happy with this arrangement. A few were even fearful that they would lose their job if their employer felt they were not entirely committed to it and/or had long-term plans to work in another unrelated field.

One young woman in an office-based job described how Connexions had asked her whether they could approach her employer about possibly giving her time off for training, but she told them not to. She would rather her employer did not get involved and did not see the point of asking them because she felt they would not agree to giving her time off work:

'I'm a big part of work and without me they're not really in working motion. They wouldn't agree to it.' Keelee, signer

Where Connexions *were* permitted to make such approaches, they were usually very successful. The young person often appreciated having a third party make this approach rather than having to do so themselves:

'The initial meeting was me and my boss and [name] from Connexions. Then she sort of talked it through with me and then talked it through with him [boss], to save me asking his permission sort of thing. But it was all fine.' Jason, signer

Only in one case did an employer actually refuse to have anything to do with a Learning Agreement after discussion with Connexions. The young person concerned, who was working fairly low part-time hours, said that she felt OK about this and that she planned to pursue the Learning Agreement anyway, as it could be fitted around her shifts:

'I can do it without them anyway because I can choose which days I do it and I'll just go in on the days I'm not working.' Rebecca, signer

4.4.3 Difficulties with employers

One young person's employer was very unsupportive of her learning, despite the fact that she had chosen her job specifically because it was an advertised apprenticeship. She explained that:

'It's supposed to be an admin apprenticeship but all I do is answer the telephone. So I'm still looking around and [Connexions advisers] and people are helping me find somewhere else because it's not really helping. Because I thought I was gonna be doing all admin work,

on my apprenticeship, it's gonna be hard for me to get the evidence together that I need to pass the NVQ. Because I'm not doing any of it. Basically I answer the phone all day.'

Rachel, signer

Connexions, who had found her the apprenticeship in the first place, had tried to resolve the situation but had been unsuccessful, with only very small token changes being made by the employer. They were therefore currently trying to help her find a new job which she could transfer her apprenticeship to.

4.5 Early leavers

None of those interviewed had left their courses early. However, there was one girl who signed up but then changed her mind before starting. This was due to a variety of reasons, including family problems at the time:

'I took the interview and I went down there, did the interview and everything and then there was a week's silence and I sat and actually thought about everything and there was a lot of family problems at the time and a lot of things that were just going wrong and I couldn't take it in at the time.' Carly, signer

Had she been doing just a short course, such as a CLAIT, which could have been done alongside her existing job, she may very well have gone ahead with the Learning Agreement. She had in fact been planning to do a year-long course which would have required her to leave her current job and begin a new one in a completely different field. She felt this would have been too big a commitment for her to cope with at that particular time. She would also have had to travel to another town each day, and she stated that the travel time and costs involved would have been a problem for her.

5 Future Plans for Learning?

In this final section we explore young people's plans for learning in the future. In particular we explore whether non-signers feel they are likely to take up the Learning Agreement if re-contacted by Connexions, and whether signers have plans to progress to further learning once they complete their Learning Agreement. We also look at signers' perceptions about the benefits of doing learning through a Learning Agreement.

5.1 Perceived benefits of doing learning via the Learning Agreement

Most signers regarded the main benefit of doing learning via the LA rather than in another way as being the one-to-one support they received from their Connexions adviser. Some said they would not have done any learning if it had not been for their adviser, although others felt that they would have done so eventually. For the most part this was related to the particular job they were in, whether they needed qualifications to progress, and whether they had long-term plans to stay in that job.

5.1.1 The main benefit of doing learning via the LA

The majority of young people felt that the one-to-one support offered by their Connexions adviser was the main benefit of doing learning via the LA rather than in a different way. Many young people appreciated that they could get support from Connexions if they were having problems, even if they had not needed any additional help so far. This extra support was particularly important for some young people who had previously negative perceptions of learning or saw themselves as having under-achieved or 'failed' in the past:

'You can get more help can't you. There's more explained to you probably, you've got people helping you instead of doing it independently.' Kate, signer

The personalised nature of the support and guidance here was very important, in particular for those young people who had been 'turned off' school or college. It was

crucial that these young people did not feel 'forced' into something which they felt they had already turned down by leaving education:

'You're not being forced into it, like she says "do you want to go back to college?" and I said no, so she said "right then, fair enough, we'll work around it"... she won't push you into it, she's not like that.' Tanya, signer

This underlines the importance of offering a range of provision through a mix of different providers, so that the learning on offer can be tailored to what the young person wants as far as possible.

For many young people the support provided by Connexions had made the difference to them signing up in terms of both making them more aware of their options and building confidence that they could achieve:

'I probably wouldn't have done it if it wasn't for Connexions. I think she sort of helped me through and made it sound easy. I wouldn't have known that way to go about it before.' Lucy, signer

5.1.2 More aware of learning or training options?

Some young people felt that doing the LA had not made any difference to their previous awareness of learning or training options. Often, these young people were already trying to get into college or do an apprenticeship, or had dropped out of college in the past.

Among those who did feel it had made a difference, the main factor was that they previously had little awareness of ways to combine work and studying, without doing a full apprenticeship. Many did not realise that they could do work-based qualifications such as NVQs, without having to go to college.

'If I'd have to go to college then I probably wouldn't want to do it. I'm glad I can do it at my work.' Katie, signer

Others did not know they could do courses such as the ECDL, or improve their key skills without going back to do re-sits at school or college. This suggests that young people in jobs without training need more IAG about the breadth of learning options that might be available to them, not just apprenticeships.

5.1.3 Think differently about learning and work?

Again, some young people felt that doing the LA had not made them think any differently about learning and work. Often they had plans (whether concrete or vague) to learn again anyway and Connexions had helped them on the route to that learning.

Those that felt doing the LA had made a difference to the way they felt about learning or work tended to report that their ‘horizons’ had been broadened in terms of what learning could involve:

‘It’s made me realise it (learning) doesn’t have to be like school.’ Emma, signer

As well as this, many spoke of more positive feelings towards work and greater recognition of the importance of training and qualifications:

‘They made me feel different about working but I was always quite motivated to learn. With working they’ve made me more aware that there’s always training available and you can always build on your qualifications so that it looks good on your CV and makes you more attractive to employers.’ Jess, signer

5.1.4 Think differently about own abilities?

Although some young people were already confident about their abilities to progress in work, or about going back to learning full-time, many in our sample felt that doing the Learning Agreement had made a real impact on their self-confidence. This often led to greater confidence that they could achieve qualifications and progress beyond the level of their school qualifications:

‘I think I can achieve higher now.’ Kate, signer

For those in work they disliked, this also led to more positive feelings about the future, and their chances of progressing into a better job:

‘Sort of makes you realise that you can find a job that you want to do and you can do it.’
Rachel, signer

5.2 Progression to further learning

Although some young people had discussed possibilities for further learning beyond their LA, most preferred to take things more gradually and were unsure of what their next steps might be. It was important for Connexions advisers to be sensitive to this and not be seen to ‘push’ young people towards further learning. Allowing young people the space to progress at their own pace and the feeling that they were in control of this process was very important to them and to their positive view of the Learning Agreement.

5.2.1 Views on further learning

Young people who had embarked on learning through the LA were asked whether they had discussed possibilities for learning again in the future, after completion of their current course. There were more who said that they had not discussed this rather than had. Mainly this was among young people who had completed their course via the Learning Agreement, or who were coming to the end of it.

This was important as the majority of young people did not want to feel ‘pushed’ towards learning again in future. Although they had signed up to do learning via the LA, for many this was quite a big commitment that had to be managed in conjunction with responsibilities at work, varying working hours, and other non-work commitments. A few of the young people in our sample were also going through family problems or problems with housing, which meant it was important they did not feel ‘overloaded’ with further learning.

It did seem that most young people were given the space to decide for themselves, without feeling pushed into it:

‘They didn’t push on the matter because I said basically I’ve never really agreed with the learning environment. So they just said the option’s there if you want it.’ Jeff, signer

‘It feels like there I can just say I don’t really want to and they’ll just be like well yeah, that’s alright, that’s fine.’ Zac, signer

A number of young people did want to do further learning – such as those applying for apprenticeships – and their Learning Agreement was helping them on the way to that goal, for example by improving their key skills so they could get into the course.

As has already been discussed, others had quite firm plans to do particular learning or training once they reached the age of 18, related to the type of work they wanted to do. This was often either care work or work in skilled trades:

‘My dad’s work has said they’ll be able to get me into (plumbing). As soon as I start work with them (when I’m 18) he’d get me into college with it.’ Brett, signer

5.2.2 Are non-signers likely to reconsider?

Many of the non-signers were already doing some form of learning or training at the time of the interview, and therefore re-considering the LA was not really an option for them.

Among those who were not currently learning or training, the majority were unsure about whether they would sign up if someone re-contacted them, mainly because they remained unsure about what sort of course they would like to do, or about how long they were going to stay in their job (one was on a ‘temp-to-perm’ contract).

Two young people said they would definitely be interested if Connexions re-contacted them about doing the Learning Agreement. One of these had been employed on a three-month probationary period at the time of the initial refusal, as well as being unsure how much she liked the job. Now, though, she had been made permanent and was also enjoying the job more:

‘Now I’ve got a permanent job and I’m just a bit, should I really... I wouldn’t mind getting qualifications in animal care, if I didn’t work here any more I could go start at a vet’s or something like that.’ Becca, non-signer

Just one non-signer who was not already doing or about to start learning, said she would definitely not be interested in doing the Learning Agreement if re-contacted. Her main reasons were that her job took up too much time and she felt that at this point in her career she would rather progress through building up work experience, than through doing any learning or training:

'If I'm not doing it, I'm not really bothered because I don't feel it's gonna hold me back from doing anything else... I might want to do it later on in life but right now, learning and experiencing working life now is enough for me at the moment.' Nyssa, non-signer

5.3 Longer-term plans

5.3.1 Staying in the same job?

Signers were split almost equally between those who wanted to stay on the same job once they finished their course and those who wanted to leave. Generally, those who wanted to find a new job were unhappy with their pay, their hours (they wanted to work full-time rather than part-time) or how they were treated:

'I'm looking for new jobs now. If they offered me a lot more money and a lot more respect from my manager I'd stay a few months, but not forever.' Carly, signer

One young woman who had recently finished an ECDL course through her Learning Agreement felt she had 'outgrown' her job in catering, and wanted to look for office-based work instead:

'I do enjoy working there... but I don't really want to stay doing that forever. It's just not really me any more.' Tanya, signer

Interestingly, among those non-signers who were not already planning to go back to college full-time, there was a greater tendency to want to stay in their current job. This was largely because they felt it offered progression, or because it they had got it after a period of uncertainty, such as an extended time being NEET, or working on a temporary basis.

5.3.2 Looking to the future: a year and five years' time?

The majority of young people had at least some aspirations as to what they wanted to be doing in a year's time. Most of those in learning or training mentioned completing their course or continuing with it if it was planned to last two years. Among those who wanted to get a new job, most aspired to be in a better-paid job or 'working in an office'. A few young men had very firm plans to be learning a trade, as they had a specific job offer for when they reached 18.

Looking to five years ahead, some young people still had no real future plans and most commented they did not think that far ahead. Among those who responded,

most had aspirations either to progress in the same field they were in now, or to change to a completely different field (such as working in travel and tourism/working abroad). Those who wanted to progress in the same field often worked in sectors with quite clear-cut progression routes, such as care, or worked in administrative jobs where they felt there was scope for promotion either in their current job or by moving around different companies:

'Working my way up.' Tanya, signer

'In a year's time I'll be doing my NVQ Level 3, it takes about a year and a half, and then probably five years hopefully going towards social services and more training in that.'

Carly, non-signer

A few of the young men who were about to embark on apprenticeships or other courses in skilled trades mentioned they would like to become self-employed and run their own business in five years' time.

For those young people who were in less satisfactory jobs currently, the main aspiration was to be *'hopefully in a job that I like'*.

6 Conclusions and Implications

In this section we look at what the findings mean in the context of the initial theory being tested, which is that:

The support, advice and guidance provided by Connexions are enough to induce the young person to sign up to a Learning Agreement and/or 'kickstart' their interest in learning.

A typology of five types of young people is developed and the role of the Connexions adviser is discussed. Other issues affecting sign-up are noted before a revised model of engaging young people is presented.

6.1 Kickstarter and door-opener role for advisers

From the interviews with signers and non-signers there seem to be five types of (potential) learners into which young people broadly fit. All the young people we spoke to had an active interest in learning or were open to it. What seemed to affect their likelihood of signing up to the LA was:

- their circumstances,
- the depth of their prior career planning or direction, and
- whether they had the confidence and motivation to approach Connexions.

Table 6.1 illustrates how the role of the adviser differs between five different 'types' of young people. In two cases the Connexions role is as a 'kickstarter' as the theory suggests, encouraging and supporting the young person to develop their interest in learning. In the other cases the Connexions adviser role is of a 'door-opener', directing young people to learning opportunities and channelling their existing interest in learning, rather than kickstarting it. In such cases the support provided by the adviser kickstarts the learning itself rather than the interest in learning.

Table 6.1: The role of the Connexions adviser for different 'types' of young people

Learner type	Background and circumstances	Interest in learning	Support from Connexions	Adviser role	Implications for LA policy
Go-getters	Reasonable GCSEs, know what they want to do, have direction, employer might suggest they do some learning	Very interested in learning and likely to have approached Connexions for advice about this	Help with finding courses, perhaps also liaising with their employer	Door-opener	Different role for Connexions adviser than the theory. Importance of using the LA offer flexibly to tailor to individual needs
Killing-time	Clear future plans, such as starting college (may have dropped out before), or working in a job that requires them to be 18	Interested in learning already. May approach Connexions or Connexions may approach them	Possibly job or course search	Door-opener	
Trying again	Know what learning they want to do (often an apprenticeship), and what job they would like (often in skilled trades). Previously failed to get onto the relevant courses	Interested in learning to secure favoured job which requires qualifications. Likely to have approached Connexions for help	Help with applying for course, and the pre-assessment process. May include support with revising for entrance exams / interviews	Door-opener	
Drifters and flitters	Move between different jobs/sectors, and circumstances change frequently. Unsure of what they want to do in the future and lack direction	Some initial interest in learning, but unsure what to do or how to go forward. Connexions likely to have approached them	IAG about careers, career planning, increasing confidence and channelling interest. Motivates them to learn	Kickstarter	High level of one-to-one support (both initially and throughout any learning) likely to be required. Learner's circumstances change frequently and often lack direction - career planning will be an important aspect of adviser support. Training must be available to start soon after LA signed to maintain motivation. Likely to be difficult for Connexions to keep track of as circumstances change frequently. This perhaps supports the use of an employer-based approach to introductions
Stuck in a rut	Likely to have periods of being NEET, in and out of work and changes jobs frequently. Very low or no GCSEs. Usually low-skilled, low paid work and not sure of what they want to do	Want to improve prospects, but unsure how. Open to possibility of learning, but have not really thought about it before. Connexions approaches them	Providing information, advice and guidance. Career planning, building and increasing young person's confidence and interest in learning. Possible additional support such as attending first day of learning provision. Often key skills courses are most appropriate to boost qualifications and as a stepping stone to other learning in future	Kickstarter	

Those young people who require ‘kickstarter’ help are likely to require more time and support from the Connexions adviser than those learners who require help with ‘door-opening’. In some cases, in particular among non-signers, Connexions advisers were not able to open that door (ie by finding an apprenticeship, or job with a Learning Agreement attached). Other non-signers might be ‘go-getters’, but already have learning opportunities or progression available to them within their existing work and so turn the Learning Agreement down. Alternatively, non-signers might be ‘killing-time’, waiting for the start of a course, or working in a job until they reach a certain age and can work in their preferred sector and therefore do not take up a Learning Agreement.

6.2 Other issues affecting sign-up

There were some non-signers (and indeed some signers) who did not fully understand the Learning Agreement offer, and clearly this will have an impact on sign-up. The offer needs to be presented as simply and clearly as possible so that young people are able to grasp it quite quickly and easily.

Some non-signers appeared to lack direction and were undecided about a career path, which was probably a factor in them not committing to a Learning Agreement. Young people in this situation many need more information, advice and guidance before they can make a decision about learning and commit to a course.

More speculatively there may be a group of non-signers who are just not interested in learning and advisers alluded to the fact that this group existed:

‘If they’re generally not interested or don’t care about it, there’s no amount of selling in the world. If you’ve got that little spark of interest to work with them you’re ok.’ Adviser

We did not interview any young people who were totally against the idea of learning. As with any research there will have been an element of self-selection, and perhaps learners who were not interested in learning and have refused support from Connexions point blank also did not want to take part in the research.

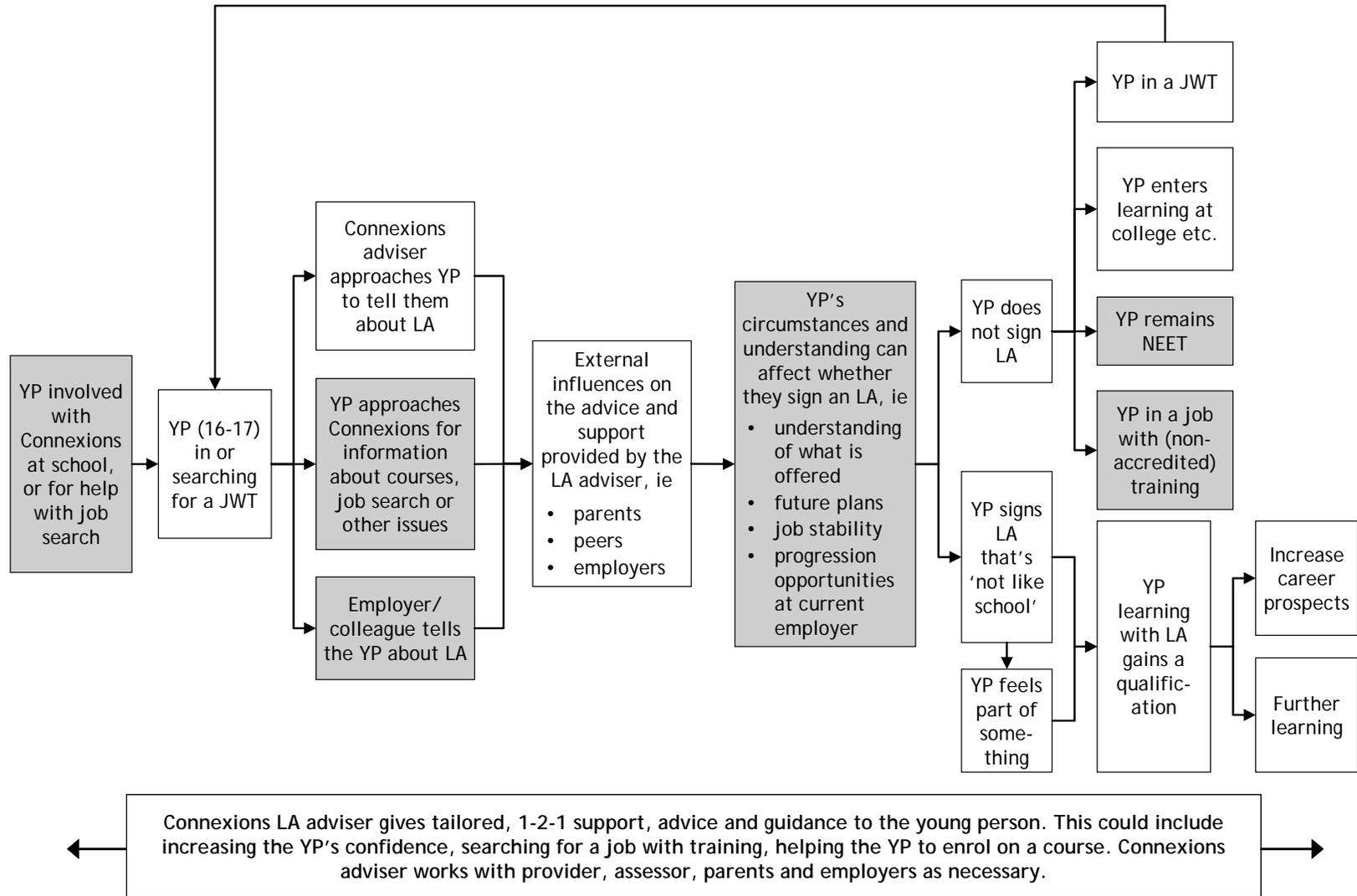
6.3 A new model of engaging young people

In light of the interviews with young people we have revised the model of engagement presented in Chapter 1. Connexions support and advice is important for some as the catalyst to engagement and for most in providing stability and ongoing support throughout the process. The model shows the links advisers make between learning and the potential benefits to promote the Learning Agreement, while also taking into account other factors that may influence whether or not an individual signs up.

The main differences between this model and the first are highlighted in grey and include the wider range of ways in which young people first engage with Connexions, with the addition of employers and approaches initiated by young people.

We have also added different factors influencing whether or not a young person signs up. They include the young person's understanding of the Learning Agreement and the extent to which they have future career plans. The link between learning and increased pay has been removed as the vast majority of young people did not make this connection. Lastly, two further groups of young people who do not sign a Learning Agreement have been added to better reflect the diversity of situations among young people who do not sign up.

Figure 6.1: Model of engaging young people



7 Bibliography

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Appendix 1: Opt-out Letter to Young People

Address

Date

Dear (Young Person's Name),

Research on young people, work and training

(Name of area) Connexions is helping with a research study on young people, work and training. This research is being carried out by The Institute for Employment Studies (IES).

Why have I been sent this letter?

From the records we hold on young people in (name of area), you have been chosen as someone who could help us with this study. However, taking part in this research is entirely your choice.

What does the research involve?

The research involves taking part in an interview with a researcher from IES. The interview will be about your experiences of education, work and training and will take less than an hour. The researchers are especially keen to talk to young people who have either started a Learning Agreement, or who have decided not to do one.

Interviews will be held in your home, or somewhere else if you prefer. IES will give you a **£20 gift voucher** as a thank-you for taking part. The voucher can be used in various shops like JJB Sports, Virgin Megastores, Boots, New Look, WH Smith, etc.

What will happen to the information I may be asked to provide?

You will not have to answer any questions you don't want to. Everything you say will be **confidential** and will not be passed on to anyone else. No one will be identified in the research report.

What happens next?

If you **do not** want anyone from IES to contact you about this research, please phone (name of area) Connexions on (telephone number) **by (date)** and we won't give your contact details to IES. Please quote the reference number at the top right of this letter.

If you are happy to be contacted, a researcher from IES may ring you in the next few weeks to find out if you're interested in taking part. If you decide to take part, they will arrange an appointment with you.

Thank you for your help.

Signed by Project Manager

Appendix 2: Topic Guide - Interviews with LA Staff who Recruit Young People

The main aim of the study is to find out how and why (or why not) the support, advice and guidance provided by Connexions is enough to induce the young person to sign up to a learning agreement and / or kickstart their interest in learning.

A. Introduction (2-3 mins)

This section is to give the respondents background to the study, to reassure them about confidentiality and to ask permission for the interview to be recorded.

Introduce self and IES – independent research organisation

Tell them about the research project:

- The aim
- two areas – independent of the financial incentives,
- interviews with staff and then young people
- questions focus on a very specific part of the Learning Agreement process
- we are after the practitioner's perspective on the induction period, and are interested in their observations, and ideas on the topic

Expect interview to last about 45 mins (depending on how much they have got to say)

Confidentiality – and between the group – not to be discussed outside

Ask permission to record the interview

Do they have any questions they want to raise now? They can also ask questions at the end of the interview if they want.

B. Background (5-10 mins)

The aim of this section is to get some background information about the members of staff and how the recruitment is set up.

- Ask to introduce themselves – name and job title
- What does your role involve? What are your responsibilities? Do you have responsibilities for recruiting/ engaging/ supporting young people?
- Do you cover specific areas or work across the pilot?
Probe: geographical, sectors etc.
- How are the Connexions staff involved in the LA structured in this area? Who has responsibility for recruiting young people, who has responsibility for engaging/ supporting young people?
- Are any other organisations involved in the recruitment for the LA or engagement of young people in the LA? If so, which? Why is that (and why are they not recruited solely through Connexions?)

C. Initial engagement of young people (30-40 mins)

In this section we focus on how young people find out about the LA, how they are initially influenced to participate in it, and what influences their engagement. We also cover perceived reasons for non-participation. What role does the advice and guidance (in the form of 1-2-1 support) have in attracting them?

The format of the LA

- Could you describe the elements of the LA? What is ‘the offer’ in this area? Does ‘the offer’ differ between PAs? Between young people? Between employers? If so, how?
Probe: information, 1-2-1 support, mentoring, action planning, learning brokerage, in-learning support, end of learning support, interest and ability assessments, group discussions/ support
- In your experience, what are the common reasons why these young people are not undertaking learning already?
Probe: lack of support, lack of IAG, employer, want to earn, lack of provision, personal choice, found learning difficult or boring at school
- How do young people hear about the LA? *Probe: Direct marketing, friends, employers, parents, approaching connexions for other support / advice, PAs.* Via which source is the greatest volume of interest? Why? Has it changed over time?

Marketing and recruitment strategies

- Is there a marketing strategy – how was this designed, by whom? Are young people involved in the development of the marketing material?
- What was the reasoning behind the marketing strategy? Why was this strategy chosen rather than something else?
- *Who* is the target of the marketing? Why is that? Why those and not (young people/ employers/ parents)?
Probe: Young people, employers, parents, stakeholders
- Do you target specific groups of young people or employers in the marketing and recruitment? (i.e. sectors, geographies, size of employer, other characteristics). What is the rationale for this?
- What types of marketing have been used? Which are the most successful?
Probe: leaflets, careers fairs, approaching employers, press coverage, events, case-studies of successful learners and employer etc
- Have there been any changes to the marketing approach over time? Why? What was the reasoning behind this?
- Which aspects of the LA are promoted to young people? Why? What is the key message?
Probe: i.e. one-to-one support, mentoring, access to learning, careers guidance, undertaking something different to current job
- Do you have to 'sell' the LA to the young person or are they generally interested already? Do you have to 'sell' the LA to employers?
If they do 'sell' it: Could you tell me how you 'sell' it? Which elements of the offer do you emphasise? Why?
- Could you give me a pen picture of the sort of employers that tend not to be interested? Why do you think this is?

ASK if market to employers:

- How does the LA appeal to the employer? What makes the offer attractive?
- Take me through the reasoning of an employer, as you see it, for getting involved in the initiative? Where is its appeal? What's the most important aspect of the offer to an employer? Which is the least important?
- Put yourself in the shoes of an employer. What do you think they expect from the LA?

-
- What would you say from the perspective of an employer, is the most important influence on engaging with the LA? Which is the least important influence on engagement for an employer?

ASK all:

- What other support is available for this group of young people? Or for this group of employers? What do you think makes the LA more / less attractive to them than other types of support?

Influences on engagement and non-engagement

I'd now like to focus on the reasons why young people take up the Learning agreement, and what influences them, and the reasons why some young people do not take part.

- How do you think the LA appeals to the young person? What makes the offer attractive?
- Take me through their reasoning, as you see it, for getting involved in the initiative? Where is its appeal? What's the most important aspect of the offer to a young person? Which is the least important?
- Why don't some young people engage in the LA?
Probe: move onto mainstream learning, become ineligible (i.e. in terms of hours worked), just don't want to learn, employer not supportive, learning not available or available learning is not what they're interested in, learning too slow/ starts at the wrong time
- Take me through their reasoning, as you see it, for NOT getting involved in the initiative? How could the appeal of the LA be increased for young people who turn it down?
- Could you paint me a picture of the sort of young people who tend not to be interested in the LA? Why do you think this is?
- Put yourself in the shoes of the young person. What do you think *keeps* them interested in the Learning Agreement? Does this change over time?

Probe:

- Staff / PAs – advice and one-to-one support
- Parental influence
- Peer influence
- Employer influence

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- Influences of the learning options – are courses available in subjects, flexibly, at the right level, in the right timeframe? Are other courses needed (i.e. not accredited), tasters?
 - Timing of the offer
 - The act of making an agreement
 - Any other influences?
 - Which of these, from the perspective of young people, would you say is most important/ influential? Which (from the perspective of a young person) is least important/ influential?
 - How does the young person's relationship with their employer affect whether or not they take-up and continue with the Learning Agreement? Could you paint me a pen picture of the type of employer that is typically supportive of the young person and one that is less so?
 - Could anything else be offered to further encourage young people to sign up to the LA? What about the offer to employers?

D. Moving forward (10 mins)

In this section we aim to find out how (if at all) the LA helps young people to progress in learning/ have their interest in learning 'kickstarted'.

- Do you think involvement in the LA affects a young person's likelihood of taking up further learning?
If yes: What factors are important in ensuring this? Probe for: Employer support? Individual motivation? Advice from college/ learning provider? Parental influence?
- What do you think are the benefits of taking part in a Learning Agreement for the young person?

Prompt if necessary:

- Does the LA help the young person to become more capable to find information about learning and careers for themselves? How?
- Does the LA increase awareness of training opportunities through the workplace for young people and employers? How?
- Does the LA raise aspirations of the young person or change their attitudes to learning and work? How?
- Does the LA give the young person a sense of direction or insight into their capability? How?

- Is there anything else you would like to add about attracting and engaging young people in the Learning Agreement?

Thanks and close

Any further questions about the research?

Appendix 3: Topic Guide - Interviews with Participants

The main aim of the study is to test the theory that **the support, advice and guidance provided by Connexions is enough to induce the young person to sign up to a learning agreement and / or kickstart their interest in learning.** In this topic guide there are some early questions about the young person's background and experience of learning and work in order to get the interview moving and to provide some contextual information.

The section timings are guidelines only and should be viewed as a maximum rather than as an average.

A. Introduction (5 mins)

This section is to set the young person at ease and give them some background to the study, to reassure them about confidentiality and to ask permission for the interview to be recorded.

- Introduce self and IES – emphasis that we are an independent research organisation and not related to Connexions, the government or anyone else
- Tell them about the research project: It is about what attracted you to the Learning Agreement (LA) and what influenced you to sign up.
- Reassure them that everything they say in the interview is confidential and anonymous which means that it will not be linked to them by name. Ask permission to record the interview.
- They can refuse to answer a question at any time if they would rather not do so, and they can stop the interview at any time.
- Expect interview to last about 45 mins (depending on how much they have got to say)

- Do you have any questions you want to raise now? They can also ask questions at the end of the interview if they want.

B. About the young person (10 mins)

The aim of this section is to get some background information about the young person, including their experience of education and work

Previous experience of education

- Age they left school and age now. When are they 17/18? Did they stay in school until the full school leaving age (i.e. the summer after their 16th birthday) or did they leave earlier?
- Did you stay in learning after you left school, or did you start work (or something else)? *Probe any experience of education post-school and why they left.*
- *Ask those who left school at 16: Why did you decide not to continue studying past 16? Probe: wanted to work, wanted to earn money, couldn't find a course they wanted to do, found learning boring, didn't like school*
- Did you get any qualifications at school? Explore which ones and grades.
 - If none, do you regret not getting any qualifications at school? Why/ why not?

Current circumstances

- What are you doing at the moment – working, studying, training or something else? *Probe for all current activities*
- Confirm whether they are doing/ have signed a Learning Agreement with Connexions (we will ask more about this later).
 - If so, how long have they been doing it?
 - *If no longer doing it ask whether they finished it or whether they left early. Probe how long they were doing it and when they started / left.*
 - *If they say that they did not sign up to a LA swap to non-participants guide.*

If working:

- What sort of work do you do? How many hours a week do you work? How long have you been in this job? What type of business is it? How many other people work there?
- Before you started on the LA, what if any training did you get in your job? *Probe: Induction training, on-the-job training, shadowing etc.*

- How much do you get paid? *Probe for hourly rate and average per week.* What do you think about that? How does it compare to your friends?
- When you left school did you have a clear idea about what sort of work you wanted to do? Since you left school has the work you have done been what you expected? *If not, probe for what is different about it.*

Attitudes to education

- How important do you think training and qualifications are to getting a good job? Why do you say that?
- Do you live with your parents / family? Are they working?
 - *If yes: what jobs do they do?*
 - *What did they think about you leaving school / getting a job? Probe for parents' attitudes towards education/ training.*

C. Initial engagement (30 mins)

In this section we focus on how young people find out about the LA, how they are initially influenced to participate in it, and what influences their engagement. We also cover perceived reasons for non-participation. What role does the advice and guidance (in the form of 1-2-1 support) have in attracting them?

First impressions of the LA

- How did you first find out about the LA (direct marketing, friends, approached by Connexions etc)?
 - *If through Connexions / friends: What did they tell you about it?*
 - *If Connexions explore whether it was a cold call: Did Connexions make contact with you or did you get in touch with them? How did you feel about this? Have you spoken to anyone from Connexions before? What do you think of Connexions?*
- What were your first impressions of the LA, when you found out about it? *Probe: why did you think that?*
- What did you think about having an adviser? Why did you think that?
- Did you sign up at the time you first heard about the LA, or did an adviser re-contact you at a later time to discuss it again?
 - *If recontacted: How many times did an adviser contact you before you signed up? Why did you not want to sign up when the adviser first contacted you? What (if*

anything) changed to make you want to sign up? *Probe: did anything change at work / in how you felt about your job?*

- Did the adviser have to persuade you, or were you already interested in doing some learning when you heard about the LA? Why was that?

Signing up

- Why did you decide to do a Learning Agreement? What appeals most to you about it? Spontaneous and then *prompt for: getting 1-2-1 support/ advice from adviser, getting/ improving qualifications, doing learning that is linked to improving their current or future job/ prospects*. *Probe: Why?*
- Here are some things that people have said about their **reasons for signing up to do a Learning Agreement**.
 - Which of these, if any, do you agree with? *Probe for whether they agree strongly or just agree*. Why is that?
 - Which ones, if any, do you disagree with? *Probe for whether they disagree strongly or just disagree*. Why?
- SHOW SORT CARDS WITH STATEMENTS AS FOLLOWS:

I signed up to the Learning Agreement because ...

- It's different from learning at school.
- It's a first step to doing a course or job I really want to do.
- It will improve my pay
- It will improve my job prospects.
- I can learn at my own pace.
- It's not a big commitment.
- My Connexions adviser helped me to decide what course I wanted to do.
- My Connexions adviser made me feel more confident about doing a course.
- Do you think there are any other reasons why people sign up to doing the Learning Agreement? What are they? *Probe additional reasons*.
- Did you have any worries or concerns about getting involved in the Learning Agreement? If so, what sort of things were you worried about? How were they overcome? *Probe for support/ advice from Connexions*.
- Do you think you would have done any learning without having talked to a Connexions adviser? If not, why not? *Probe for role of Connexions adviser*.

- If you were telling someone else in your situation about the LA and it was your job to persuade them to take part in it, what would you say? *Probe if necessary: What's the most important thing you would tell them about? Why is that?*

Not signing up

The Learning Agreement is only available to young people aged 16-17 who are working (in jobs without any access to training). Thinking about people in this situation...

- Why do you think some people might NOT want to take up a LA?
Prompt if necessary: move onto mainstream learning, just don't want to learn, employer not supportive, learning not available or available learning is not what they're interested in, learning too slow/ starts at the wrong time, job takes up too much time
- What sort of young people do you think tend not to be interested in the LA? *Probe if necessary: What sort of jobs are they doing? What did they think of school? Why do you think this is?*
- How could doing a LA be made more attractive for young people who turn it down? *Probe: Why would that help, do you think?*

Engagement during the LA

Moving on to discuss your experiences of the Learning Agreement so far...

- How often are you in touch with your adviser? What do you think about that?
Prompt if necessary – is it too often, about right, or not often enough?
- What sorts of things have you discussed or done with your adviser? *Prompt if necessary: finding the right course, informing my parents / employer of progress, completing application forms for training, career planning, developing my CV etc.* How do you feel about this?
- Have you started your learning under the Learning Agreement yet?
 - *If no:* When is it due to start? How do you feel about that? Is your adviser supporting you in the meantime? *If so, probe for how.*
 - *If yes:* How soon after your first meeting with the adviser were you able to start your learning? Was this length of time ok? How (if at all) did your adviser support you while you waited for your learning to start?

Learning module (ASK ONLY THOSE CURRENTLY LEARNING)

- What training are you doing? How many hours a week? Is this in work, or in your own time? *If relevant: Why are you doing it in your own time and not in work?*

-
- Do you have to attend a training provider or college? If yes, how long does it take you to travel there? Is it easy to get to? How much does it cost to get there?
 - How easy or difficult has it been to keep learning / training?
 - What / who has helped you? Probe for role of Connexions support.
 - What / who has made it difficult (if anything)?

Employer support for learning

- Is your boss involved in the Learning Agreement / did they sign anything about it?
 - If yes: What do they think about you doing this learning? Have they done anything to help you?
 - If no: Why not? *Probe for whether they wanted their boss to be involved and why / why not.*

Early leavers module (ASK ONLY IF LEFT LEARNING AGREEMENT EARLY)

- Why did you leave the LA / learning?
 - *If not clear*, How easy or difficult were you finding the qualification itself?
- Did you talk to anyone about the problems you were experiencing?
 - *If yes*, Who? What did they say? What did they do as a result of this conversation?
 - *If no*, Why did you not speak to anyone about it?
- Is there anything that would have helped you to keep doing the qualification / training? If so, what? If not, why not?
 - Who could have provided this?
- What (if anything) could have been changed about the LA to keep you interested in it?

D. Moving forward (10 mins)

In this section we aim to find out how (if at all) the LA helps young people to progress in learning/ have their interest in learning sustained.
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Benefits of the LA

- Some people do courses on their own, rather than through the Learning Agreement. What do you think are the benefits of doing learning through the Learning Agreement?
- *Spontaneous then prompt if necessary:*
 - Has the support from the adviser made you more aware of your training options? How?
 - Has the support from the adviser made you think differently about learning and / or work in any way? How?
 - Has the support from the adviser changed how you feel about yourself, and your abilities and what you can achieve?

Further learning and progression

- Did your adviser discuss future possibilities for learning once you have completed this course? If yes, what sort of things have you talked about?
- Do you think you will do more learning after this course? Why / why not?
- What sort of qualification would you most be interested in doing? *Probe for progression.*
- Is there anything that stops you from doing any more learning? If so, what?
- What are your work plans when you finish the LA? Do you want to stay in this job? Why / why not? *Probe: promotion / higher wages etc*
- Where do you see yourself in a year / 5 years time?

Closing the interview

Thank them for their time. Ask if there is anything else they would like to add.

Explain what happens next with the research – written up – would they like any more information about it?

Give them the voucher and ask them to sign the receipt for it.

Appendix 4: Topic Guide - Interviews with Non-participants

The main aim of the study is to test the theory that the support, advice and guidance provided by Connexions is enough to induce the young person to sign up to a learning agreement and / or kickstart their interest in learning. In this topic guide there are some early questions about the young person's background and experience of learning and work in order to get the interview moving and to provide some contextual information.

The section timings are guidelines only and should be viewed as a maximum rather than as an average.

A. Introduction (5 mins)

This section is to set the young person at ease and give them some background to the study, to reassure them about confidentiality and to ask permission for the interview to be recorded.

- Introduce self and IES – emphasise that we are an independent research organisation and not related to Connexions, the government or anyone else
- Tell them about the research project: It is about the Learning Agreement (LA) and why you didn't take part.
- Reassure them that everything they say in the interview is confidential and anonymous which means that it will not be linked to them by name.
- They can refuse to answer a question at any time if they would rather not do so, and they can stop the interview at any time.
- Ask permission to record the interview.
- Expect interview to last about 30 mins (depending on how much they have got to say).

- Do you have any questions you want to raise now? They can also ask questions at the end of the interview if they want.

B. About the young person (10 mins)

The aim of this section is to get some background information about the young person, including their experience of education and work

Previous experience of education

- Age they left school and age now. When are they 17/18? Did they stay in school until the full school leaving age (i.e. the summer after their 16th birthday) or did they leave earlier?
- Did you stay in learning after you left school or did you start work straight away (or something else)? *Probe experience of learning post school and why left early.*
- *Ask those who left school at 16: Why did you decide not to continue studying beyond 16? Probe: wanted to work, wanted to earn money, lack of IAG, found learning boring, didn't like school*
- Did you get any qualifications at school? Explore which ones / grades.
 - *If none, do you regret not getting any qualifications at school? Why/ why not? Why do you think you didn't get any qualifications?*

Current circumstances

- What are you doing at the moment – working, studying, training or something else? *Probe for all current activities*
- Confirm whether they are doing/ have signed a Learning Agreement with Connexions or not (we will ask more about this later).
 - If they say that they are doing a LA swap to participants guide.

If working:

- What sort of work do you do? How many hours a week do you work? How long have you been in this job? What type of business is it? How many other people work there?
- When (if at all) was the last time you did some training or learning related to your job? *Probe: Induction training, on-the-job training, shadowing etc.*
- How much do you get paid? *Probe for hourly rate and average per week.* What do you think about that? How does it compare to your friends?

-
- When you left school did you have a clear idea about what sort of work you wanted to do? Since you left school has the work you have done been what you expected? *If not, probe for what is different about it.*

If studying:

- What are you studying? When did you start this course? Did you speak to a Connexions adviser about this course? *Probe details of when and whether they also discussed a LA at the same time.*
- Why did you decide to do this course? What are you looking to get out of doing it? *Probe: better career prospects, increased earnings etc*
- What (or who) influenced you to start this course? *Probe: employers, parents, Connexions adviser, friends*

Attitudes to education

- How important do you think training and qualifications are to getting a good job? Why do you say that?
- Do you live with your parents / family? Are they working?
 - *If yes: what jobs do they do?*
 - *What did they think about you leaving school / getting a job? Probe for parents' attitudes towards education/ training.*

C. Initial engagement (10 mins)

In this section we focus on how young people find out about the LA. We cover reasons for non-participation and perceived reasons for participation. Why wasn't the support on offer enough to attract them to sign a LA?

First impressions of the LA

- Have you ever been offered something called a Learning Agreement? *Add if necessary, this would have been offered by Connexions and would have involved taking up some learning alongside your work*

If the respondent can recall very little about the LA: Learning Agreements are for young people who have left school and are working (in a job without access to training). Under the Learning Agreement you would be able to do work-related training or learning at your place of work or in your own time. According to Connexions, you didn't want to take up a Learning Agreement. Now I want to ask you a bit about that. We want to know what people who are NOT doing it think, and why you weren't

interested in taking it up. Remember this interview is confidential which means that no one else will know what you personally have said.

- How did you first find out about the LA (direct marketing, friends, approached by connexions etc)?
 - *If through Connexions / friends:* What did they tell you about it?
 - *If Connexions:* Did Connexions make contact with you? How did you feel about this? Have you spoken to anyone from Connexions before? What do you think of Connexions?
- What were your first impressions of the LA when you found out about it? *Probe: why did you think that?*

Making the decision whether or not to sign-up

- You have said that you didn't take up a Learning Agreement. Why was that? *Probe: didn't want to undertake learning, I was already training at work, I didn't have time, personal circumstances etc.*
- Did the Connexions adviser try to persuade you to take up learning?
 - *If yes:* What sorts of things did they say? Why did this still not encourage you to take part?
- Was your boss involved in your decision NOT to do a Learning Agreement?
 - *If yes,* what did they say?
 - *If no:* Probe for whether they wanted their boss to be involved and why / why not.
- Here are some things that people have said about their **reasons for signing up to do a Learning Agreement**.
 - Which of these, if any, do you agree with? *Probe for whether they agree strongly or just agree.* Why is that?
 - Which ones, if any, do you disagree with? *Probe for whether they disagree strongly or just disagree.* Why?

■ SHOW SORT CARDS WITH STATEMENTS AS FOLLOWS:

I signed up to the Learning Agreement because...

- It's different from learning at school.
- It's a first step to doing a course or job I really want to do.
- It will improve my pay

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- It will improve my job prospects.
 - I can learn at my own pace.
 - It's not a big commitment.
 - My Connexions adviser helped me to decide what course I wanted to do.
 - My Connexions adviser made me feel more confident about doing a course.
 - Do you think there are any other reasons why people sign up to doing the Learning Agreement? What are they? *Probe additional reasons.*

The Learning Agreement is only available to young people aged 16-17 who are working (in a job without training). Thinking about people in this situation...

- Why do you think some people might want to take up a LA?
Probe: want to gain a qualification, want to earn more money, like learning, the support from the Connexions adviser etc.
- What sorts of young people do you think WOULD sign up to a Learning Agreement? Why do you think this is?

Re-contacting by Connexions

- Has a Connexions adviser tried to contact you again about the LA since you first said no?
 - If yes:* what did you think of this?
 - What (if anything) happened as a result?
 - Why did you say "no" again?
 - Had your reasons for not wanting to take part changed at all? If so, how?
- If an adviser from Connexions was to re-contact you at a later time to discuss the LA again do you think you would be interested? Why / why not?
 - If yes:* What would have changed to make you want to do it?
- How do you think a Learning Agreement could be made more attractive (for people like yourself who chose not to do it)? What (if anything) would make you interested in doing it?

D. Moving forward (5 mins)

In this section we aim to find out how (if at all) the LA helps young people to progress in learning/ have their interest in learning 'kickstarted'.

Benefits of the LA

- Did anything positive happen as a result of your discussions with the Connexions adviser, despite you not signing up for a Learning Agreement?
- *Spontaneous, then prompt if necessary:*
 - Has the support from the adviser made you more aware of your training options? How?
 - Has the support from the adviser made you think differently about learning and / or work in any way? How?
 - Has the support from the adviser changed how you feel about yourself, and your abilities and what you can achieve?
 - Anything else?

Further learning and progression

- Do you think you will do any learning in the near future? Why / why not?
 - Did the advice from Connexions have any influence on this?
- What sort of qualification would you most be interested in doing?
- Is there anything that stops you from learning?
- Do you want to stay in your job for the foreseeable future? Why / why not?
- Where do you see yourself in a year / 5 years time?

Closing the interview (5 mins)

Thank them for their time. Ask if there is anything else they would like to add.

Explain what happens next with the research – written up – would they like any more information about it?

Give them the voucher and ask them to sign the receipt for it.

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