



Helping young people back into work and training

Emily Tanner, Susan Purdon, John D'Souza and Steven Finch



The Activity Agreement Pilots (an initiative using financial incentives, intensive support and tailored activities to encourage disengaged young people back into education, employment and training) had a small but positive impact on participants, according to research conducted by NatCen for the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

- One-fifth of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) long term who were eligible for the Activity Agreement Pilot actually took part.
- Participation in the pilot had a small but positive impact on young people's involvement in work and learning-related activities during the 12 months after becoming NEET. The largest shift was in the take-up of personal development activities, in which 26 per cent took part as a result of the pilot.
- The benefits of taking part in the pilot were sustained in the short-term, three months after the programme had ended. Thirteen per cent took part in positive activities during this period as a result of the pilot.
- Young people had more positive attitudes towards the future and learning as a result of taking part in the pilot.
- The prior experiences of participants influenced reasons for taking part in the pilot, the activities they engaged in and what they got out of the experience.
- The impact evaluation was part of a wider programme of research carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), the Centre for Education and Industry, University of Warwick (CEI) and NatCen.

Background to the Activity Agreement Pilots

Activity Agreements are designed to encourage young people who have not been in education, employment or training (NEET) for some time to take up learning or employment with training.

Drawn up between young people and their Connexions Personal Adviser, the agreements are individually tailored programmes designed to break down barriers to participation and to identify specific steps a young person will take to move into education, employment (preferably with learning) or training.

While they participated in the Activity Agreement Pilots (AA), young people received one-to-one support and advice and a weekly allowance – paid only if they fulfilled their weekly agreement.

Three different models of financial incentive were piloted in eight areas between April 2006 and March 2008, managed by Connexions Partnerships.

Connexions also managed the pilot of Learning Agreements (LAP) aimed at young people in jobs without training. In the lead-up to raising the participation age in 2013 and 2015, AA and LAP tested approaches to engaging young people.

A consortium of the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), NatCen and the Centre for Education and Industry, University of Warwick (CEI) evaluated AA in three different ways in order to understand whether it made a difference and if so, how:

- An impact evaluation, using a quasi-experimental design to compare AA participants and matched comparison young people.
- A process evaluation to examine implementation issues.
- A programme theory element to test some key aspects of the policy.

This summary is based on the impact findings.

Just under one-fifth of the long-term NEET young people eligible to take part in AA actually did so. This low coverage limited the success of the programme for NEET young people as a whole.

The pilots had a small but positive impact on participants

The impacts of AA were measured using a quasi-experimental design based on comparing participants with matched comparison young people who lived in areas where AA did not operate. With this approach, it was possible to say how many young people had outcomes that were as a direct result of AA.

The largest impact of AA was on personal development activities (eg, confidence-building and healthy living). With AA, around 30 per cent of participants report doing some personal development activities in the 12 months after first becoming NEET; without AA, the figure would be just 4 per cent.

A small percentage of AA participants (around 3 per cent) entered work-based training as a direct result of AA, and around 7 per cent took up training towards a qualification, who otherwise wouldn't have.

Around 17 per cent of AA participants entered paid work without training in the 12 months after first becoming NEET compared to 27 per cent for the comparison group. So AA appeared to delay some young people's entry to paid work without training in the short term.

The short-term (ie, three-month) post-participation impact of AA was to generate an approximate 13 percentage point shift in outcomes: away from non-activity, or employment in jobs without training, and towards work-based training and studying. This was a small, but nevertheless, positive impact.

AA also had a small, but positive impact on attitudes. Across a range of measures, between 5 and 10 per cent of participants demonstrated more positive attitudes towards education, employment and the future in general as a result of their participation.

Participants themselves identified a range of benefits from taking part

Most AA participants had positive views of the activities they took part in and felt that they had benefited from them. They mentioned a range of benefits of participation, the most common being:

- gaining in experience/confidence (31 per cent);
- help with job preparation (26 per cent);
- the advice or support from Connexions (21 per cent);
- having something to do (19 per cent);
- getting qualifications or skills (18 per cent); and
- getting help to find an education course (17 per cent).

This range of benefits would appear to reflect the flexible and responsive characteristics of support under AA.

AA participants typically took part in a range of activities while on the programme and had positive views of these activities:

- Job-related activities (ie, work-experience placements, work-related skills, work taster courses) were most common, taken by 72 per cent of participants;
- Personal development activities (eg, confidence-building, healthy living, sport/outward bounds, and specific skills development such as drama) were taken by 64 per cent;
- College-based activities (ie, activities relating to going to college or doing formal qualifications, and/or basic skills) were taken by 61 per cent.

Among the mix of activities offered, work experience placements appeared to be distinctive in involving a longer time commitment and being an individual, rather than a group, experience. Participants rated work placements very positively.

Participants valued the support from advisers

Most participants had weekly contact with their personal advisers with sessions lasting on average just under an hour. They valued this form of individual support.

Meetings with personal advisers were used to review the activities of the previous week, plan for the next week, gain help with looking for a job or college course and general mentoring, support or advice.

Participants tended to leave the programme before 20 weeks

Although AA was designed to provide up to 20 weeks of support to participants, there was flexibility in the amount of time that participants stayed on it. Only about two out of five participants stayed for the full 20 weeks.

Among participants who left AA before the 20 weeks was up, about one in three left for the positive reason of taking up work or studying while a further one in six said that they had completed the programme, perhaps meaning that their courses or activities had come to an end. The remaining half of early leavers left early for more negative reasons such as not enjoying the activities or other aspects of the package.

Participants who were involved in personal development activities stayed on the programme longer, on average, than those doing job-related activities, reflecting their need for a greater level of support.

Why did young people take part?

Young people took part in AA to make progress towards finding a job (36 per cent) and to have something to do (35 per cent). A quarter of young people said that they took part to support their education, one-fifth thought it would provide useful experience and just under one-fifth said that they took part for the money. Other participants sought experience that would be a first step in the direction of finding a job, such as gaining new skills and meeting people.

Among the young people who decided not to take part in AA, the main reason given was the positive one that they were doing or planning to do other things (26 per cent).

Even though the young people were motivated to take part more by activity-related goals than money, the allowance was an important element of the agreement. Young people were more likely to take part in AA if they lived in the areas offering a higher weekly allowance. This fits with other parts of the evaluation which found that the allowance acted as an incentive to get people involved.

Helping young people back into work and training

How did participants differ from other NEET young people?

The NEET young people were mostly single and living with their parents. More than one-third reported irregular attendance at school in their final year and only 15 per cent achieved 5 GCSEs at A*-C grade.

Compared to NEET young people who did not participate in AA, participants were younger, more likely to be male and living with their parents, and less likely to have children.

Methodology

The impact of AA was measured by comparing the activities of AA participants with a matched comparison group of young people.

Interviews were carried out with 3,331 young people in AA pilot areas, including 1,018 AA participants, and 2,291 young people in comparison areas where the pilots were not being implemented.

The young people were 16- and 17-year-olds who were classified as long-term NEET having not been in employment, education or training for a minimum of 15 weeks.

Interviews were also carried out with parents (or on behalf of parents) in most cases where a young person lived with a parent.

Survey interviews were carried out between January 2007 and March 2008 using a mixture of face-to-face and telephone interviewing.

A follow-up survey was carried out with 229 of the AA participants in April and May 2008 to investigate the attitudes and activities of former AA participants some time after the programme had ended.

NatCen has recently been commissioned by DCSF to investigate the longer-term impact of AA on participants through a second follow-up survey in 2009.

Obtaining the reports for this study

The full report of these research findings, *Activity Agreement Pilots: Quantitative Evaluation*, by Emily Tanner, Susan Purdon, John D'Souza and Steven Finch, (April 2009), was published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

The main findings from all strands of the evaluation are reported in *Activity Agreement Pilots Evaluation: Synthesis Report*, by Jim Hillage, Claire Johnson, Becci Newton, Sue Maguire, Emily Tanner and Susan Purdon (2008), published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

These and other reports of the AA and LAP evaluations can be downloaded free from www.dcsf.gov.uk/research.