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The influence of education funding policies on vocational STEM choices: A Review of the UK All Party Parliamentary Group on Sex Equality

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EVENT DETAILS

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Location: LONDON, UK

On the 14th January 2015 there was a meeting of the UK All Party Parliamentary Group on Sex Equality to discuss vocational education for young women in the UK. This group meets every couple of months and has different gender equality topics. This time STEM education was a core issue. The role that formal apprenticeships play preparing people to work in STEM varies greatly amongst countries – even those who are neighbours in Europe have quite different apprenticeship systems and give vocational education quite different status. However, although the statistics about the numbers of students involved can be very different, the impact of funding policy for vocational education is likely to be similar; and it was government funding policy that was identified in this meeting as having a major impact on the continued under-representation of young women in STEM vocational education.

The four speakers at this event were: Carole Easton, Chief Executive of the [Young Women's Trust](#), an organisation particularly concerned about young women's education and employment; Nadine White, a trainee at the Young Women's Trust; Adrian Belton, Chief Executive of the [Construction Industry Training Board \(CITB\)](#), an organisation concerned to improve construction education at all levels; and Nicky Morgan, Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities.

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In Britain youth unemployment is three times higher than adult unemployment: 14.9% of people aged between 18-24 are registered as unemployed compared with 4.8% of adults aged 25-64. In the UK there are presently 475,000 young women not in education, employment, or training (known as NEETs). This is 170,000 more than there are young men. This differential is not recent; it has existed for the last 10 years.ⁱ For many of us who are familiar with the patterns of increased female participation in universities and paid work it can be a shock to realise that a parallel movement is not happening at lower educational levels.

You may grow out of the label 'NEET' simply by growing older but the penalty in later years for this time spent as a NEET means that you will be more likely than other young women or than male NEETS, to be unemployed in the future or stuck in low paid work. This issue seems to be the outcome of large numbers of young women who are disengaged from the education system and of the fact that others choose training in traditionally female employment where the jobs market is saturated, such as hairdressing.

Adrian Belton reported on changes to the construction industry in the UK but he pointed out that these seemed to be at the professional rather than skills levels of the sector. The Construction Industry Training Board, for example, now has 5 women and only 4 men. 10% of the UK workforce is involved in construction but women are only 10% of this construction workforce. When this is disaggregated by level, 40% of professionals in the construction workforce are women, but they are only 2% of manual trades. Less than 2% of applicants for construction apprenticeships are womenⁱⁱ.

Nicky Morgan reported on the positive changes that statistics are showing about the UK gender pay gap. The Chancellor of the Exchequer in his Autumn budget statement announced that the gender pay gap had narrowed significantly under the present UK government. Since then feminists have replied that this is due to men's earnings decreasing rather than an improvement in women's earnings. Morgan also asserted that women under the age of 40 in the UK were now earning, on average, more than men in the same age group. She wanted to set a picture of overall improvements for UK women, against which to see this problem faced by young women. Feminists in the room did not look completely convinced by the positive statistics which certainly disguised the fact that young women were facing particular challenges. They also failed to take account of the fact that after 30 or so years of campaigns to increase the numbers of women getting training and employment in STEM, women are still not entering the same sectors of industry as men.

A discussion followed the presentations in which people identified much of the problem as being at the school level. It seems pointless to rehearse the old arguments about teenagers making gendered choices and getting poor careers advice. The question is why does this continueⁱⁱⁱ? A major structural issue emerged in the discussion, to do with the way schools are funded. Schools are paid for keeping young people at school. There is no incentive for them to advise pupils to leave and join an apprenticeship scheme at 16 or 17. Students who are performing well are encouraged to stay at school until they are 18 and then to go to university. Students who are not performing well are encouraged to stay at school to improve their examination results, but if they leave after 17 without the qualifications to enter an apprenticeship they will be unable to access free education at the lower level that will qualify them to get onto an apprenticeship.

It was also reported that schools set up the kinds of employment-related courses for jobs that students aspire to. So many schools run hairdressing courses (taken by girls) although there are not enough jobs in the industry to absorb all the aspiring hairdressers. They will not set up construction courses because these are expensive and students do not choose to take them. Schools need financial incentives to offer students those STEM related courses in areas where there are jobs, as well as financial incentives to channel students onto apprenticeships.

In this journal we regularly see papers that explore the influence on student's educational and career choices of parents, gender identity, peer group pressure, media stereotypes etc., but we have never had one that focused on the influence of education funding policy in discouraging young women from exploring non-traditional training.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ See http://www.youngwomenstrust.org/what_we_do/inquiry (Accessed 26.01.2015)

ⁱⁱ See <http://www.citb.co.uk/> (Accessed 26.01.2015)

ⁱⁱⁱ See http://www.wisecampaign.org.uk/files/useruploads/files/news/not_for_people_like_me.pdf (Accessed 26.01.2015)