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IDENTIFYING THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY: A PRELIMINARY EXPLORATION IN TWO LOCAL AUTHORITIES

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we provide an account of a small-scale pilot study of the cost and perceived benefits of the educational psychology services in two comparably small local authorities in England. This study is preparatory to a more detailed examination of the costs and likely benefits of state provision of EP services in England. The work is contextualised by acknowledgement of the growing pressure on local authority services to trade and for schools to directly commission the services of educational psychologists.

Provisional findings indicate significant differences between the impact of the two services that participated. We offer speculation on the effects for local authorities and schools, and ways in which the study might be developed to provide more satisfactory answers to the questions of ‘what is the value of educational psychology in practice’ and ‘how best to deploy educational psychology services?’

Key Words: Educational Psychology; Costs; Benefits; Functions

BACKGROUND

In the context of current neoliberal economic policies (see for instance Davies & Bansel, 2007; Meegan, Kennett, Jones, & Croft, 2014), the cost of services provided by Local Authorities comes under scrutiny with ‘privatisation’ (partial or complete) increasingly encouraged (Bel & Fageda, 2010; Lowndes & Pratchett, 2011; West & Bailey, 2013). An explicit aim of governmental policy (under David Cameron’s premiership) has been to increase ‘choice’ for users and commissioners (though see Biesta, 2015 for a critique of this notion). Concerns have been expressed that in this context the health, well-being and resilience of both individuals and groups are jeopardised, with increasing inequalities and challenges to ethical practice anticipated (Harkes, Brown, & Horsburgh, 2014; Sugarman, 2015). However, there is a dearth of empirical research into the impact of these policies and concerns have been expressed that the quality of services is not adequately assured (Levin & Tadelis, 2010; Sellick, 2011). An especial concern for us is to provide evidence of how services that may safe-guard the well-being, social and educational inclusion of children and young people – those who will contribute most to tomorrow’s society – may be sustained and renewed. To do so it seems important to seek the views of those who provide and receive such services. In this paper we outline a small-scale pilot study of a means to assay the costs and benefits of educational psychology services. The study was conducted in two small unitary authorities in England. This preliminary research, financed by a grant from the Newcastle Institute for Social Renewal (NISR) at the University of Newcastle, was intended to assess the viability of developing a research project to explore the economic value of EPs in the context of changing economic policies in England.

INTRODUCTION

The costs of producing an educational psychologist (EP) are high. In England, most of the costs for training students after their first degrees are borne by the Exchequer. Fees for trainee Educational Psychologists are fully-funded for all three years of training and there is a tax-free bursary of £14,400 (£14,900 in London)³ for the first year. Since much of the following two years are spent on placements with Local Authorities (LAs), LAs (or other service providers / commissioners) are expected to provide the bursaries (or salary) for trainee EPs. In return for the support during training, newly registered EPs are required to work in England for two years⁴ following qualification.

³ The bursary will rise to £15,950 (£16,390 in London) for the intakes of 2016-18.

⁴ Failure to do so is likely to result in repayment of some or all of the costs of training.

Hitherto the Department for Education has provided funds for 132 EPs per year but this has now risen to 150 places per year for intakes in 2016, 2017 and 2018 (though the last is not confirmed) at a total cost of £21.79m. Therefore, it does seem reasonable to ask whether this expenditure represents good value for money. Moreover, LAs facing strict budget constraints want to understand the value they obtain for each component of expenditure. Currently the salary for fully qualified main-range EPs is in the range £34,273 to £46,244 pa.

CONCEPTUAL ECONOMIC FRAMEWORK

Evaluating the costs and benefits of education and educational services is problematic (Biesta, 2010a; Biesta, 2010b). Although some have argued that it is possible to translate methods of evaluation from medical sciences to the world of education (Cutspec, 2004; Levin & Belfield, 2015; Slavin, 2002), others have expressed doubts about the appropriateness of a positivist paradigm and the inevitable risks instrumentalising practice (Kvernbekk, 2011; Simons, 2003). We are very aware of the problematic nature of an enquiry into the cost / value of education and do not pretend that our evaluation can necessarily do justice to purposes and outcomes of education. But, in order to be pragmatic and seek evidence that speaks to the current political and economic agenda, we set out below a simple (we hope not simplistic) economic framework within which to critically consider the economic arguments that may be put forward for and against delivery of services that are of value and can make a difference.

In a market economy, the value of a good or service is best indicated by its price. This price reflects both the cost of production of the item (supply) and its value to the purchaser (demand). If supply remains the same, then increases in price would indicate that purchasers are now placing a higher value on the item. If there are constraints on supply, the price will be forced up. If there are constraints on price, then excess demand will occur and rationing will be required.

If the public sector is the principal supplier or purchaser of a good or service, then price becomes a less reliable indicator of value because the final consumer (the real beneficiary) is not making the decision. There are very good reasons why, in some cases, beneficiaries might not be trusted to make good decisions on their own. Age is one reason. Children, for example, are unlikely to make reliable decisions about their own education because they may be unaware of the long-term consequences. Special expertise could be another reason. Thus, for instance, in most health care systems, doctors (particularly GPs) play an important role in decision-making about patient care.

It has been recognised that the closer public decision-making is to the final beneficiary, the more likely are decisions to be in the best interests of the beneficiary since the decision-maker will have both better information about the needs and wants of the beneficiary and be more likely to share some of the benefits. This reasoning lies behind the increasing devolution of funding to schools and GPs – and, to some extent, constitutional devolution itself.

However, as long as the decision to purchase is not made by the beneficiary of the good or the service, price remains an unreliable indicator of value. Therefore, it is important to find proxies for that value in order to estimate an appropriate level of supply. Estimating the social value of a good or service is based on two pieces of analysis:

1. identification and measurement of the positive impacts on all relevant stakeholders of supplying this item; and
2. placing a market value on these impacts⁵.

The first task involves the recognised difficulties of distinguishing the specific contribution of a single input to an output that requires the use of many inputs. For example, the educational attainment of a pupil requires the inputs of teachers, support staff, school buildings and equipment. How can one separate out the contribution of particular type of support such as that of an EP? In principle, some would say, education is no different than any other production process in which many inputs are

⁵ For a more detailed exposition of this process, see Papps and Dyson (2004).

involved. Producers will generally employ inputs as long as their contribution to the value of production (the value of their marginal product) is greater than or equal to their additional (marginal) cost. The particular difficulty in the case of education is that this contribution is seldom seen immediately and is not amenable to a simple valuation. In essence, the problem for the measurement of the impact of EPs is that of estimating the school production function. Although we are unlikely to be able to complete such an ambitious task in any detail, for present purposes it may prove to be a useful way to think about the problem.

This brings us to the issue of placing a market value on the impact. In general, the most effective approach is to identify the point at which there is a market impact. For example, a better learning experience can result in the improved attendance of pupils and, consequentially, higher attainment for those pupils. We know that better examination results are related to higher earnings⁶ and, therefore, the increased earnings can be used as the value of that improved education. There is now also evidence of the long-term social and economic impact of high quality educational intervention such as reduced criminality and anti-social behaviour, improved mental and physical health and better parenting of the next generation (see, for instance, Nores, Belfield, Barnett, & Schweinhart, 2005). Although these are very real effects, they may be harder to identify and attribute to a particular type of intervention than the impact on attainment.

As we have already noted, ever more funding is devolved to schools with the result that many of the decisions about the use of EPs are now in the hands of schools rather than LAs. As a result, instead of estimating the impact of EPs, there is the possibility that their remuneration could be used to assess their social value. On the other hand, it is not obvious that schools have a definitive view of the social value of EPs in terms of their impact on children's education. Part of the role of the proposed research could be to test schools' beliefs about this value.

However, the first step in either approach has to be an exploration of the role of EPs in the education process and the market forces that shape their remuneration.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main part of this scoping exercise was conducted by means of semi-structured interviews with key informants in two LAs⁷. In each LA, the informants were: the Director of Children's Services (DCS); the Principal Educational Psychologist⁸ (PEP); and the Headteacher of a Primary School. The interviews were carried out in late January/early February 2015.

The purpose of the interviews was two-fold:

1. to explore the ways in which EPs are currently deployed and the benefits expected to result from that deployment; and
2. to gain insight into the language used in discussing this deployment in order to inform the development of survey instruments for future research.

The interviews were conducted as fluid and open discussions intended to elicit as much information as possible but without leading the informant. We had a list of issues which we wished to explore and each interview addressed all items on the list although they did not necessarily do so in the same order. The list of issues for discussion with each type of informant is attached as Annex B.

RESULTS

From our analysis of the transcribed interviews (using a paradigm discussed by Roe (1994)) two broad themes emerged :

⁶ See, for example, Hayward et al. (2014)

⁷ Key indicators for two LAs are shown in Annex C.

⁸ In the event, one of the PEPs was unable to meet us and we interviewed a senior colleague instead.

1. All interviewees articulated the view that EPs could and did deliver services of value to schools, their pupils and the wider community; and
2. There was a general perception that there was currently a shortage of EPs in **the region(s) served by these two services**, and perhaps nationwide.

Although the market context in which EP services operate is interesting and important, the focus of our research is the educational and economic value of EPs. Therefore, in what follows **our main focus is on** the first theme and we provide some detail about the extent to which it was evidenced in what we heard from interviewees from both LAs, but also indicate differences that we noticed **and how different services may position themselves with greater or lesser advantage in the 'market place'**.

The interviews revealed that the EP service (EPS) in the two LAs had reacted quite differently to budgetary pressures over the past five years. One (Dijon⁹) had pared back services to little more than statutory assessments and a minimal level of support for individual pupils. As a result, Dijon had considerably reduced the staffing of the EPS, which was now unable to respond to schools' requests for additional services with independent EPs and private companies appearing to respond to many of these requests. However, the Headteacher we met in this LA was clear about the fact that it would be preferable to buy services from the LA's EPS because of continuity of delivery and of the benefits of the deployment of EPs from that service that accrued for her and the children in her school.

On the other hand, the EPS in Lyon had taken advantage of the fact that much of the funding that had financed the EPS had been devolved to schools. The service had, therefore, developed an offer that provided strategic support for school staff development as well as operational support for individual staff and pupils. The number of EPs in this EPS had increased as income from schools increased. Table 1¹⁰ shows the number of EPs in each LA over the last five years.

(Table 1 about here)

These effects are reflected in the EPS budgets. For the financial year (2015-16), Dijon had an EPS budget of £407,713 while Lyon had an EPS budget of £649,077, even though Lyon had only 2/3 of the number of children. This larger budget was not the result of greater generosity on the part of Lyon's Treasurer; over 50% of Lyon's budget was derived from "Additional Buybacks by Schools" and "Other Fees & Charges".

Discussions with the interviewees identified five distinct functions for EPs in the two LAs. These ways are not mutually exclusive and an EPS will decide what mix it will supply, usually in cooperation with the schools it serves. These functions do not necessarily represent the *consultative approach* that will be integral to the intentions and operational style of many EPs – indeed that many EPs might espouse as an over-arching function. In summary, we have identified

1. **Statutory Assessments**

In appropriate circumstances the LA has a legal obligation to undertake these assessments. It may be tempting to consider that the number of assessments (and the resulting Statements of SEN or, since 2014 Education, Health and Care Plans) is outside LA control and depends only on the inherent characteristics of the child and perhaps the family circumstances. However, given the evidence that early intervention can result in the child taking a different trajectory (Heckman & Masterov, 2007), it is not clear that an EHC plan is always a positive outcome. It is also the case the psycho-educational environment can be a significant determinant of a child's educational development (Skwarchuk, Sowinski, & LeFevre, 2014; Thomazet, 2009). For all children, of course, it means that they should be able to access the education and appropriate resources they need **from that point**. However, for some children – indeed, it may be for many children – it means that they failed to receive what they needed at an earlier point. Therefore,

⁹ The two LAs have been pseudonymised out of respect for the identities of participants and a love of France.

¹⁰ **Following comment from a reviewer of the submitted paper figures in tables have been rounded for simplicity and to preserve the anonymity of the services.**

it should not necessarily be considered that any deficits are attributed to the child but rather may be consequences of interactions within the educational environment (human and/or physical). For these children, the assessment is a sign that they have been failed by the education system at an earlier stage. For the education system itself, this failure is expensive because a positive assessment results in additional resources being required.

Where EPs do nothing other than statutory assessments, they may seem to have an essentially passive role. They are effectively part of a gate-keeping mechanism responsible for the allocation of additional resources. Since it is the LA that has the responsibility to provide these assessments, the value of an EP for this activity is simply the cost of the EP to the LA. This cost will consist of salary and all on costs such as pension contributions, employers National Insurance Contributions, office accommodation, equipment and other expenses.

However, the gate-keeper could be seen to have an active role in preventing misuse or the exhaustion of scarce resources. The cost of employing EPs might thus be partially offset against savings made elsewhere.

We wonder if there are some indications in the data in Table 1 of this happening. For example, in Lyon, all requests for statutory assessment resulted in a Statement, whereas in Dijon the number of requests and the number completed varied over time. We suggest that this is possibly indicative of an EPS (in Lyon) that was actively managing the situation. Thus, here, we speculate, a Statutory Assessment might only have been initiated when there was clear evidence that a Statement was the most appropriate response. We believe that this interpretation is justified by noticing how changes in the number of requests per annum appears to have been closely matched to the number of statements issued in Lyon. Also, it is worth considering that in Dijon for the now much smaller number of EPs a greater proportion of each EP's time was likely to have been taken up by producing the reports required for each statutory assessment, leaving significantly less time for other, proactive / pre-emptive, work. We also wonder if another consequence might be noticed in terms of recruitment – as work becomes increasingly 'reactive' might a service so situated seem gradually less attractive for potential applicants, gradually less able to retain staff and, ultimately, unviable?

2. One-to-one working with an individual pupil, the family and the teacher

Such pupils are usually identified by school staff, who express concerns about a pupil and his/her educational progress. Ensuing EP work may often comprise 'assessments' of the child's ability / needs; it may sometimes take the form of something more therapeutic. Either of these interventions may inform the school / LA and form part of the case that may be made to indicate that a statutory assessment would be warranted. Schools might also use information / ideas that emerge from such work as the basis for their own strategies to help the child make progress within the school with better ('cleverer') use of the resources they already have.

In principle the contribution of the EP in this situation will be the difference in the educational attainment of the pupil with the EP intervention as compared with that of a similar child without the intervention. An ethically and methodologically more viable strategy might be to use multiple single case designs in which for each child a number of baseline measures / observations are taken before an EP becomes involved and the several more during / after EP intervention. Such an approach might also include the use of 'Goal Attainment Scaling' (see, for instance Kleinrahm, Keller, Lutz, Kölch, & Fegert, 2013; Ruble, McGrew, & Toland, 2012), focusing on a few goals and asking key players (the EP, SENCO, the young person and parent/carer) to scale the extent to which the goal has been attained. The triangulation of the measures by the various informants could supply very useful data.

In any case, matching pupils robustly may be quite tricky and there may be multiple issues for the EP to address and it may be useful, for this initial research to focus on issues about misbehaviour.

3. Working with a group of teachers at the request of the school
 Schools can request guidance on developing strategies or interventions to help manage individual or groups of pupils' behaviour, or to help them support pupils with specific conditions such as autism. In providing such services the intention of an EP might be that the teachers will become more effective in teaching such pupils whose performance or attainment will then improve in some critical way. In principle, the contribution of the EP will be reflected by an improvement in attainment of that group. The problem here is that this contribution may well be masked by the additional resources available to these pupils following a statutory assessment. More work is needed to identify the path by which the EP's specific contribution operates here.

4. Working with a group of teachers to deliver an educational initiative
 Such an initiative might have originated in the school or the LA. In either case, it will not be good enough to attribute improved attainment to the EP because many professionals will be involved. This will be a difficult activity to evaluate because initiatives will differ and the role and contribution of the EP is likely to differ across initiatives. If this is a substantial part of the time of the EPS, a detailed study of each initiative is likely to be required.

5. Working with the school to develop a strategic approach to early intervention to meet the needs of all pupils
 The strategic approach may include elements of all of the activities above. The difference will be that the strategy will be a joint enterprise between the school (or group of schools) and the EPS and that work done in the school by the EP will be proactively guided by the overall strategy rather than by (often emergency) more reactive responses to particular needs identified by the school or parents. Key characteristics of this approach are likely to be:
 - teachers are empowered to deliver early interventions to address pupils' needs before they become critical;
 - teachers have the skills to deliver these interventions and the confidence to identify pupils who require the specific expertise of the EP.

This approach could result in improved attendance and attainment, and a reduction in the rate of requests for EHC plans. All of these outcomes can be attributed to the EPS as long as the strategic approach is the only way in which the school has changed its delivery of education, because the strategy could not have come into being without the EPS.¹¹

Table 2 summarises this analysis.

(Table 2 about here)

LIMITATIONS AND ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED IN FUTURE RESEARCH

This was a very small-scale study. Although the views represented may not be representative of many schools we have taken steps to seek confirmation that this provisional analysis is not wildly idiosyncratic. Thus, since completing the data gathering and an early draft of this paper we have convened a meeting of interested parties. These included LA administrators, PEPS, EPs, Head-teachers, and representatives of Newcastle University's Institute for Social Renewal, the AEP, and the DfE. The meeting took the form of a workshop in which participants were encouraged to collaborate in critiquing our findings and suggesting questions for further work. In summary there was general acceptance of the validity and value of the findings, and interest in pursuing the enquiry.

Although the data suggest clear differences in the functioning of EPs in these two LAs, a number of undetermined factors could account for these differences. Future research will need to develop a much

¹¹ Of course, the strategy could not have come into being without the school but, if the school could have developed and delivered the strategy without the EPS, it would have done so and saved the additional cost of the EPS.

clearer picture of the processes by which EP activity might be associated with how schools function, the beliefs and practices of staff, and pupils' development. Further, we recognise that we have at no stage attempted to distinguish between what an EP Service can provide and what may be offered by individual educational psychologists. We can see that that is potentially an important distinction.

In preparing this paper we have, on the basis of the views of a small sample of participants, presumed the importance of outcomes such as educational attainment, attendance, exclusion, and statements / EHCs. We understand that these do not necessarily cover the full, nor necessarily the most important, components of education, nor necessarily the unquantifiable value of either EP services or the work carried out by educational psychologists in practice. Crucially, we have also taken no account of perceived purposes of education and schools, and the current diversity of educational settings. Clearly, in order to contribute to (but also challenge) the developing educational agenda in these neoliberal times, a richer picture is required of the relationship between the ingredients in a given key indicator: pupils' educational attainment, and how educational psychologists and Educational Psychology Services may be perceived to facilitate the interaction of these ingredients.

In developing a larger scale project we think that it will be useful to explore the factors affecting LAs' choice of the mix of activities to be undertaken by EPs and the size of the EPS. However, as we have alluded to earlier in this paper we would also like to seek the views of other commissioners of EP services and the work by EPs that is most valued by them. Increasingly this has to include the views of staff in schools, academies, and other agencies. On the basis of our discussion with participants in these initial enquiries and in the discussion in the subsequent feedback session, we are certain that EPs are highly valued. Exactly what they are valued for, and what price might be put on their heads are conundrums still to be worried over. In developing the next phase of our investigation we think that the use of Theory of Change (see De Silva et al., 2014; Jackson, 2013) and/or Social Sequence Analysis (Andrew, 1995; Cornwell, 2015) to map the views of a much wider representation of this problem could be very helpful.

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ANNEX A: LIST OF ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

Points for discussion with DCS

1. How does the EPS contribute to your overall strategy for children and families?
2. How has your spending on the EPS changed over the last 8 years:
 - a. Absolute/relative?
3. How does the EPS work with other parts of your department?
4. What outcomes do you think you get from the EPS?
5. What would you do if the EPS did not exist?
6. If we were talking about the valuation of the EPS outcomes, who would you consider to be the primary stakeholders?
For example, would you be primarily interested in:
 - a. Cost savings to your department?
 - b. Cost savings to the local authority?
 - c. Cost savings to other stakeholders?
 - d. Improvement to life chances of children?
 - e. Improvement to lives of others?
 - f. Anything else?

Points for discussion with PEP

1. Could you tell me a bit about the development of the EPS and explain how it operates at the moment?
 - a. Objectives
 - b. Methodology/activities
 - c. Size
2. What outcomes are you trying to achieve for children and families?
3. What are the main constraints you face?
4. What is the main source of your funding? Charging?
5. Do you have competition from private sector providers?
6. How has your budget changed over the last eight years:
 - a. From LA?
 - b. From charging?

Points for discussion with Headteachers

1. How much use do you make of the EPS?
2. Do you use private sector providers
3. What outcomes do you think you get from the service?
4. What are your school objectives and how do the outcomes delivered by the EPS contribute to their achievement?
5. How do you decide between spending on the EPS and other spending?
6. What would you do if the EPS didn't exist?

Annex B: Demographic characteristics*

	Total Population	% unemployed	Total number of children on 1ry school roll	Number of Primary Schools	Total number of children on 2ry school roll	Number of Secondary Schools
Dijon	138,000	13	12020	40	7900	7
Lyon	92,000	14	7640	28	5700	5

*Figures rounded to the nearest integer for simplicity and to preserve the anonymity of the services.

Table 1: Descriptive (raw) data for the two LAs by financial year

		2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
No. of EPs (exc PEP), FTE	Dijon	5.4	5.4	5.0	4.0	3.6
	Lyon	2	3.45	4.7	5.7	6.7
Number of children 0 – 16*	Dijon	28,500	29,600	29,900	29,900	30,000
	Lyon	19,300	19,200	19,100	10,000	19,000
% FSM	Dijon	33.5	35.5	37.6	38.5	36.9
	Lyon	23.4	24.5	24.9	25.5	24.9
No. of Requests for Statutory Assessment**	Dijon	130	100	110	130	110
	Lyon	50	20	70	60	45
No. of Statements issued†**	Dijon	60	60	60	110	80
	Lyon	50	20	70	60	40
Proportion of Requests resulting in Statements, %**	Dijon	50	60	50	90	70
	Lyon	100	100	100	100	100
Proportion of children receiving Statements, %	Dijon	0.21	0.21	0.20	0.37	0.26
	Lyon	0.26	0.10	0.37	0.32	0.24

* figures rounded to nearest 100

** Data published from the SEN2 survey, relating to requests for Statutory Assessments and Number of Statements written, has been rounded to the nearest 10 and the low numbers of pupils not issued with a Statement following assessment have been suppressed. The submitted data is not available for any years prior to 2014's return (based on 2013). This means that it appears that all children assessed received a statement when it was not necessarily the case.

† Data was gathered before the enactment of new legislation (2014) in which Statements of SEN were replaced by 'Education and Health Care Plans' (EHCs).

Table 2: Summary of Functions undertaken by EPs

Function	Objective	Potential Indicators of Economic Value	Comments
Statutory Assessment	Deliver advice required for EHC plans	<i>Pro rata</i> on-cost of an EP to the LA	Potential for some employment costs to be offset against savings in resources.
One-to-one working	Ensure a particular pupil obtains appropriate support	For individual pupils receiving this support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved engagement in learning; leading to • Economic value of improved educational attainment* 	Effects may be observed using an analysis of the progress of matched pairs of pupils, multiple single case studies, or the use of Goal Attainment Scaling.
Working with a group of teachers at the request of the school	Ensure a particular group of pupils obtain appropriate support	For the group of pupils receiving this support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved engagement in learning; leading to • Economic value of improved educational attainment 	Comparator schools will be required. It may be difficult to identify such comparators if most schools follow a similar strategy. Again, the waiting list control and a series of single case studies might be worth considering.
Working with a group of teachers to deliver an educational initiative	Contribute to the initiative meeting its objectives	Depends on the initiative	Evaluation of impact could be taken from the evaluation of the initiative.
Working with the school to develop a strategic approach to early intervention	Ensure that all pupils have the support they need at an early stage	For the whole school, teachers have improved skills for early intervention leading to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fewer EHC plans • Improved attendance; leading to • Economic value of improved educational attainment 	Because of the pivotal role of EPs, their contribution could be estimated by comparison with schools taking a more traditional approach.

* For pupils at KS3 and below, the expected impact at KS4 can be derived using a transition matrix estimated from the National Pupil Database. There are a number of matrices estimated at national level (see, for example, www.raiseonline.org) or tools exist for the estimation of relevant matrices at school or LA level. The value of achievement at KS4 has an economic value in terms of increased earnings and is estimated using data from the Labour Force Survey. See Hayward *et al* (2014).