

# The right to choose

**Colin Waugh (24/9/08)**

**T**he 19/9/08 *TES* 'FE Focus' carries two reports and an editorial about some new OECD figures. These figures show that in 2006-07 Britain came third from bottom amongst developed countries in terms of young people staying on in education.

The first article homes in on the statistic that in Greece, where people can leave at 14, 93 per cent of 15-19 year olds stayed on. In Britain the equivalent figure was 70 per cent. The second article focuses on the fact that in the Czech Republic, where people can leave at 15, 90 per cent stayed on.

Research indicates that this 'problem' stems partly from the lack of jobs with proper training and/or day-release. The editorial says the courses that are on offer should be made more attractive. It ends by saying 'Compulsion should be replaced with a lifetime two-year entitlement to fully funded education - to be taken when people are ready'.

Two questions are missing from this debate. First, why do people assume that staying-on is necessarily a good thing - ie regardless of who stays on and for what? Secondly, whatever happened to freedom of choice?

The *TES* assumes that a course is worth doing if it gives you skills or knowledge which Britain needs to compete against other countries.

Now unless you think we should go back to being a pre-industrial society, it's hard to

deny the need for proper technical, technological and scientific education and training. Again, there's not much mileage in denying each individual worker, or the working class in each country, the chance to compete against others on the basis of expertise.

But that does not mean that technical education, any more than academic education, can be valid on its own. It needs to be integrated with the right sort of general education - which means, not GCSES, A-levels etc, but rather, systematic conceptual enrichment.

It's also not true that competition between workers in different countries must go on forever. Real education would help people challenge this assumption, both in their own minds and in the world.

The *TES* rightly focuses on the question of freedom of choice. But it assumes that we want free choice because compulsion does not work - ie will not get more people to stay on. For example, it quotes former UCU leader Paul Mackney, who now works for NIACE. He in turn quotes Plato: 'Knowledge which is acquired under compulsion obtains no hold on the mind'.

The problem is that this could mean just that compulsion makes teaching inefficient. But the key issue is this: people who are old enough to choose, which includes 16 year olds, should have the right to choose whether they want to be in formal education or not.

The Government is taking away this right, and we should try to stop them.