

Overcoming poverty and increasing young people's participation

Becci Newton and Jonathan Buzzeo consider lessons from the evaluation of the Youth Contract for 16-17 year olds

Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) have been the focus of research for many years. Studies demonstrate that factors that trigger entry to NEET include: low socio-economic status; bullying at school; exclusion and absenteeism; low attainment; special educational needs; disabilities and poor mental health; low level or lack of parental support; being in care or a young carer; involvement in crime or deviant behaviour; and teenage pregnancy. Research also shows that the path to NEET status is 'often complex and formed of multiple personal and social issues' (Welsh Local Government Association, 2008). Young people identify reasons why they have become NEET, which include problems with authority and discipline structures within school and educational environments, and an ingrained sense of failure resulting from earlier, negative experiences in the education system.

Consequences

The consequences of becoming NEET overlap with the factors that make being NEET more likely. For example, those who are NEET are over-represented in substance misuse, and criminal and anti-social behaviour statistics; they also show a heightened risk of later-life homelessness (Vernon, 2006). Being NEET becomes persistent: almost half of those who are NEET at age 17/18 remain NEET one year on (Crawford et al., 2011).

Lifetime 'scarring' results from being NEET, which affects the ability

of individuals to ever gain a 'foothold' in the labour market (Bell and Blanchflower, 2009). Participation in education and training provides the opportunity to gain qualifications which make a difference to life chances; such that young people with few or no qualifications are three-to-four times more likely to be NEET than those with higher-level qualifications, and in the longer-term to hold less skilled jobs and earn a lower wage than their more highly skilled peers (Newton et al., 2005).

There are 'green shoots' in the downward trend in the numbers of young people recorded as NEET and the number has fallen particularly over the last year. The data shows that most 16 year olds participate in education or training following school; the rate of NEET for this group stabilised and has fallen below five per cent, possibly due to the advent of the first stage implementation of the policy to raise the participant age (RPA) (Department for Education, 2014).

However the rate of NEET increases considerably with age; the rate among 17 year olds is around three percentage points higher than for 16 year olds, and among 18 year olds it is about six percentage points higher than at 17. Arguably earlier intervention and an improving labour market have decreased the overall numbers who are NEET, but neither has done much to narrow the age differences.

In 2000, the policy landscape was one of incentivisation with the Educational Maintenance Allowance

(EMA) encouraging young people to stay in education rather than attempt to enter the workforce. In this environment, three pilots were introduced (Activity Agreements, Entry to Learning, and Learning Agreements) that aimed to help young people in vulnerable situations – specifically those who were NEET and those in jobs without training. These used financial incentives at a level equivalent to EMA to provide a something-for-something intervention, i.e. access to personalised support to re-engage in learning in return for financial support.

Targeted support

The Connexions Service was also implemented, with ambitions that it could offer universal careers guidance and targeted support for the most disadvantaged. Over time, it was viewed as unable to deliver both objectives which led to its re-engineering and eventual disbandment and replacement with the current system where schools, colleges and education/training providers along with local authorities would supply the careers guidance and support young people required.

In 2008, the *Education and Skills Act* heralded an extended age of participation in education and training. This would permit work with nationally accredited training (i.e. recognising apprenticeships and other work-based training as well as part-time learning alongside jobs without training). The first stage was implemented from September 2013 which requires all young people to participate throughout the school year of their 17th birthday. Stage 2 will be implemented from 2015 and will require participation up to the young person's 18th birthday.

Losing financial incentives

Following the 2010 election, the emphasis on financial incentives was lost. EMA was replaced by the 16-19 bursaries which provide more targeted financial support, in a form determined by education or training providers. The policy to replace Connexions came to fruition. Into this changed policy environment the Youth Contract was introduced

with aims to stem the crisis of youth unemployment. The Youth Contract has cross-government support: a Department for Work and Pensions element targets 18-24 year olds with increased support including access to the National Careers Service, sector-based work academies and work experience. On referral to the Work Programme, a wage subsidy could be paid to an employer willing to take on a young person. Another element, led by the Department for Education, focused on low-skilled and disadvantaged young people not in education or training and offered them intensive support to re-engage and participate in education or training.

This operated through 'black box' delivery, meaning that delivery was largely unspecified by policymakers. The national model commissioned private and voluntary/community providers to find, engage and offer personalised support to young people that would re-engage and sustain them in RPA-compliant learning. It operated through payment-by-results based on outcomes achieved with the weight of funding on sustained learning. The model operated tight eligibility such that it targeted young people not in education or training, without or with fewer than two GCSE A*-C qualifications, care leavers (whose particular needs had been highlighted in media report at the time of introduction) and young offenders at the time of the Green Paper (Ministry of Justice, 2010).

An impact evaluation and cost-benefit assessment (Newton et al., 2014) showed that participants had long histories of under-performance in pre-16 education. A 1.8 per cent reduction on the national rate of NEET was generated as was a 12 per cent increase on participation (Activity Agreements generated a 13 per cent increase on participation) with a third of those in learning engaged in studies that were RPA-compliant (there are some caveats in terms of whether some were working and learning). The net social benefit to the public purse generated was £12,900.

Looking inside the black box, despite the flexibilities granted to providers, a consistent picture

emerged of key worker support being delivered. There was a greater willingness to return to learning amongst the youngest age group, and at the older end when young people realised that their skills were not well matched to the demands of the labour market. In the middle were those who had become disaffected from education, whose key ambition was to work. However, finding quality employment with training given their low skill levels was challenging.

Results from this and other evaluations show that some key groups already have someone playing a key worker role, notably young offenders and care leavers, and some of these have access to financial resources to support their transitions. There are strong indications that it is the coordination of support around these specific 'barriers', combined with guidance and support to make effective transitions and maximise additional resources, that can be optimally effective. However, the studies also indicate that achieving this coordination even between local authority teams is challenging, because priorities and views of primary outcomes are not shared.

Lessons

Emphasising transitions that enable young people to increase their skill levels is undoubtedly important, since higher levels of qualification are linked to greater labour market returns, in terms of higher wage returns and sustained and quality employment, which provides a means out of poverty. However, continuing in full-time education is unattractive to many young people in the NEET cohort. Many want to work, but the routes to employment are unclear. They may struggle to access the high-quality work-based learning offered by apprenticeships since entry criteria are demanding, and competition for vacancies is fierce. Moreover, the minimum wage rate for apprenticeships excludes those young people who live independently or have children to support. Traineeships may provide a pathway to such programmes, though delivery is small in scale at this point and it is as yet unknown

how far these lead to employment and training positions.

These points highlight the need for guidance and support, and a flexible key worker model that can help young people to map their options, provide intensive support for those most in need, and ensure effective transitions remain a priority. This support should be personalised and holistic, and should be available to young people whenever they require it. Through this support, their confidence and self-esteem increases which can mean they develop greater agency to make effective choices for themselves and overcome the negative self-conceptions that they have developed. ■

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