

## **Briefing: Young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs)**

### **Introduction**

The UK has a persistent problem for some years around the numbers of young people aged 16 to 19 who do not continue with learning once they have finished compulsory schooling. They also fail to find sustained employment. They are not in employment, education or training (NEETs). Although participation in education rates in the UK has improved, there still remains a stubborn number of young people who don't participate in education or training, and remain unemployed.

This group of young people have become the focus of concern from the Government and the opposition parties, and all are pledged to reduce the number of NEETs. This is at least in part for the wholly understandable reasons of not wanting these young people to have a poor transition to adult life. It is also because there is much evidence that 'dropping out' from meaningful activity at this point will have negative impacts throughout the young peoples' lives. These young people will experience lower wages throughout their working lives when working, be more likely to be unemployed, live in poorer housing and suffer worst health. As importantly all of this in its turn will impact on their children. The disadvantages of young people who are in the NEETs category are likely to be visited on the future generations.

There is also a fear that having all these young people not in contact with education or employment has become, or will become a social problem, with the fear that these young people will display anti-social and disruptive behaviour, liable to substance abuse and becoming involved with crime.

The Government has a PSA target to reduce the proportion of 16-18 year old NEETs by 2% points from 9.6% in 2004 to 7.6% by 2010. The percentage of NEETs at the end of 2008 is 10.3%. Even the government admit that it will take a significant reduction in the number of NEETs to reach its 2010 target.

### **Summary of relevant existing evidence**

In the UK, the percentage of NEETs in the youth cohort has remained at around 10% since the mid 1990s. The DCSF NEETs Statistical Quarterly Brief November 2009 shows that in both the Labour Force Review and the First Statistical Release the percentage of those classified as NEET has been between 8 and 10% from 1994 to 2008. There are peaks and

troughs both between years and within years. **In terms of the number of young people this represents between 150,000 to over 200,000 NEET.**

Over the last 4 years there has been an upward trend with the percentage of NEETs not falling below 9.7% or 195,000 young people. **At the end of 2008, the percentage of NEETs 16 – 18 year olds stood at 10.3%, 208,000 young people.**

**International comparisons** show that UK compares unfavourably for NEETs 15-19 age group and the 20- 24 age group.

**The OECD average** for the NEETs younger age group is **7.4% and 15.1%** and for the **EU19 group 5.9% for 15-19s, and 14.4% for the 20 -24s.**

**The UK's figures are 10.7% and 18.1%.**

Only Spain at 10.9% of the 15-19 age group and Turkey with a 36. 1% NEETs for 15-19s and 45.7% for 20 to 24s does worse than the UK.

All OECD countries above suffer some degree of unemployment among 15 to 19 year olds, and all have a larger proportion of the next age cohort unemployed, **the UK for both age groups is to the top of the range for unemployment rates for young people. Similarly all the counties in the table have a proportion of young people 15-24 in the NEET category; the UK again has a worst record than most other developed economies.**

There is a considerable body of evidence from government and other research sources into the question of which young people comprise the NEETs group. It is clear from this that the NEETs group is not homogenous but comprises a number of definable groups including some young people who are on 'gap' years before entering HE, and a number of NEETs young people who move in and out of low paid, unskilled and usually short term and temporary employment.

The evidence from the research on NEETs shows that typically they are predominately those from lower socio-economic classes, are alienated, de-motivated and disengaged from school and its curriculum sometimes from an early age, may face particular barriers to participating in learning and finding employment, leave compulsory education with few if any qualifications and perhaps come from families and geographic areas that have experienced generations of unemployment, those from certain black and minority ethnic groups, those coming out of care and some with learning difficulties/disabilities and predominantly working class young men and young women.

## Issues

- **Long and persistent tail of underachievement:** the UK has a long and persistent long tail of underachievement. There is a persistent percentage of around 20% of

young people leaving compulsory schooling without any qualifications. In 2008 the percentage of 16 and 17 year olds without a Level 2 attainment was 22%. UCU research in 'Location, location, location' shows the worst 6 parliamentary constituencies have between 25% to 37% of young people without any qualifications. This long tail can also be seen in the fact that 40% of adults in the workforce do not possess a level 2 qualification and the comparatively high rates of adult illiteracy and adult without numeracy skills.

- Participation rates in 16-18 education and training has improved since the 1990s, has tended to be poor when compared with other OECD and EU countries. In 2005 average rate of participation rate for 15 to 19 year olds in OECD countries was 81%. In the UK it was 79%, placing the UK 24<sup>th</sup> out of 30 countries. The 2007 UK figures for participation show that 90% of 16 year olds were in education and training, this figure had dropped to 76% of 17 year olds and 26% of 18 year olds. Participation in the work-based learning route, including apprenticeships, has also declined sharply in the 1990s with 30% of 16 year olds opting for this route in 1985 to less than 10% in 2008/9. The rise in participation rate in the late 1980s and 1990s, and plateauing in the early 2000s was driven by an expansion of full time education.
- Youth employment and labour market: the other major factor in analysing the NEETs issue is the state of the youth labour market, and more particularly youth unemployment. If some young people for a variety of reasons are not continuing in education and training, then many of them will have been hoping to obtain a job. However for at least 30 years many of the unskilled jobs that young people would have been able to move to if they left compulsory schooling without qualifications and skills, no longer exist. There has been a long-term rising trend in youth unemployment, going from 11.6% in 2001 to 15.1% in August 2009. This suggests that the rise is structural, evidence of a longer term 'skills mismatch' between young peoples' skills and the demands of the emergent 'knowledge economy'. This can be seen not only in the figures for youth unemployment, but also in the decline in the percentage of those young people not in education and training, that is working. The DCSF NEETs Statistical Quarterly Brief. November 2009 shows a steady fall in this figure from a high of 25% between 2001 and 2002 to a position in 2008 of around 21%, the largest fall in this rate since 1993. Just how youth unemployment impacts are shown in the fact that 56% of this group were employed at the end of 2007. A year later this percentage of employed young people but not in education and training had dropped to 49%. This is due to the recession impacting hard on young people and employment prospects
- The Recession: is hitting young people very hard. Youth unemployment in August jumped to a 16-year high of 946,000 (Office for National Statistics, 14 October 2009) with over 1 in 3 (39%) 16-24 year-olds unemployed for over six months, the highest figure since October 1994 (TUC survey, 14 October 2009). The ONS figures show that there had been a fall in the employment rate of 16-17 year olds of 6.9% between 2007-2008; and a fall of 5.1% in the same period for 18 to 24 year olds. The official statistics show that unemployment among 18 to 24 year olds stood at 17% in the 3 months to April 2009, with 695,000 people in this age group now out of work. This is a rise of 185,000 since the beginning of 2008.

The number of NEETs has risen and will continue to rise as young people leave compulsory education with little hope of employment, and are joined by those with low and no skill young people being made redundant

■ Government strategies:

- **Schools:** changes to the Key Stage 3 curriculum, slimming down the National Curriculum. Various strategies around behaviour and behaviour management curriculum
- **Reform of qualifications and structures:** mostly at Key Stage 4 and post 16: New programmes such as, Entry to Employment, Foundation Learning Tier, Diplomas Young Apprenticeships, Some aimed at trying to bring coherence to lower level programmes, and introduce more applied practical programmes.
- **Apprenticeships and Advanced Apprenticeships:** Government has made improvements to Apprenticeship programmes including a statutory framework and expanding the numbers of Apprenticeships. Latest Skills White Paper 'Skills for Growth' intrudes new target for 75% of under 30s entering Advanced Apprenticeships or HE. Creation of National Apprenticeship Service post April 2010 A new subsidy for employers taking on 16–17-year-old apprentices is being introduced
- **Financial support:** Education Maintenance Grants – means tested grant up to £30 a week. Activity Agreements for NEETs have supplemented EMAs since 2006, and have operated in eight areas. They are aimed at longer term NEETs who have been in this category of 20 weeks. The young people obtain small financial incentives - £20-30 per week to participate in activities to encourage them to take up learning or employment. Around 11,000 young people were involved in the 1<sup>st</sup> 2 years of the scheme. It has now been extended until April 2010.
- **Information, advice and guidance (IAG):** strategic leadership of IAG for young people is now back with local authorities who are to produce an overall plan. Recent legislation ensures that IAG should be impartial. A local prospectus for every local area showing all programmes is now produced each September.
- **Guarantees:**
  - September Guarantee offers every 16 and 17 year old a suitable place in learning.
  - January guarantee for 16–17-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) of an offer of an Entry to Employment place, and Education Maintenance Allowance to go with it;
  - Young Person's Guarantee for 18–24-year-olds unemployed after six months, the offer of a job, work-focused training, work experience or internship, and required to take it up before they complete 10 months on JSA;
  - In addition

- **Machinery of Government changes:** following the abolition of the LSC, all 16-18 education and training is now under the strategic leadership of local authorities who have to plan and commission provision
- **Raising the age of participation in learning:** legislation now in place for all 17 year olds to have to participate in learning until 18 by 2013, and all 18 year olds by 2015. This need not be full-time, and apply to those in work.

## Analysis and critique

UCU argues the NEETs problem lies with the UK education and training system:

- The system of providers and routes to qualification and achievement fragmented and incoherent, with a jungle of competing qualifications,
- English education system is essentially elitist, class based and hierarchical. It is a system that whiles some pass and succeed, some must also fail.
- This system is maintained and driven by amongst other things the importance given to league tables of providers based on achievement and the fear of a poor OFSTED report and being placed in special measures. These distort the curriculum in schools and teaching and learning.
- Clear indications that many schools teach to the tests, and concentrate on those on the border of acceptable achievement (5A\* to C GCSEs), with those below this benchmark being left all too often to fend for themselves.
- For many young people the curriculum and much teaching and learning becomes an alienating and de-motivating set of experiences which often manifest themselves in truancy and behaviour problems leading to exclusion.
- This disengagement is also accompanied by an inability to cope with the necessary authority structures of schooling. Some young people then often labelled as 'failures', and often see themselves in those terms, fall out of learning at the earliest opportunity.

## Critique of Government strategies

- **Reform of qualifications and structures:** whilst the reforms to Level 1 and below programmes represented by the introduction of the Foundation Learning Tier and Entry to Employment, these are not without problems. There has been very widespread criticism of the Diplomas as not being as attractive to young people looking for more practical/applied/occupational alternatives to GCSEs and A levels than existing qualifications. The need to pass all elements in the Diploma including functional skills, is leaving many young people with no qualification. The Raising Expectations White Paper 2008 states that by 2013 there will only be 4 routes for young people: general education programmes – A levels and GCSE, Diplomas, Apprenticeships and Foundation

Learning. The qualifications and curriculum for 16-18s remains still fragmented and incoherent with little opportunity to mix and match qualifications and curriculum.

- **Apprenticeships and Advanced Apprenticeships:** although the focus on expanding Apprenticeships, and investing with high status is laudable, there must be grave concerns that employers will be able to provide the employment that apprenticeships require, especially in the Recession.
- **Information, advice and guidance (IAG):** the policies to strengthen IAG, and legislation to ensure its impartiality are welcome, many IAG services remain demoralised after years of structural change and instability
- **Guarantees:** are trying to deal with the problem of rising youth unemployment, but there must be real doubts as to whether enough sustainable jobs will be available. The alternative is likely to be training programmes, which may be of questionable quality and use. The requirement to take up the Youth Guarantee seems to imply benefit sanctions on those that refuse the offer. We may well face the situation where many young people, especially in areas with persistent high unemployment, may face have to take and retake training programmes to keep their benefits. The Pre Budget Report December 2009 states that the Youth Guarantee may only last a year.
- **Machinery of Government changes:** local government is the level at which 14 to 19/16 to 19 education and training should be planned and delivered, however the changes that will be implemented in April 2010, may turn out to be unduly bureaucratic, costly, and certainly leave FE colleges strung out between two very different systems, one for 16-19 and one for adults.
- **Raising the age of participation in learning:** brings compulsion into 16-19 education and training. This may face resentment and resistance from some young people, and drive some deeper 'underground' to escape the forced choice. It may increase alienation from any learning. The implementation of the raising the age of participation may also threaten EMAs. There are some arguing that when all are required to continue in learning until 18, there will not be the need to provide a financial incentive to learn.

## UCU position

There are no specific NATFHE or UCU resolutions on NEETs. There are a number of both post-16 education and training, and on 14 to 16 year olds in college. These support the creation of a more integrated and coherent 14 to 19 education and training phase. They call for a curriculum and qualifications system based on credit accumulation and transfer system. The curriculum offer should be broad and comprehensive, offering a more personalised route to a broad overarching diploma that would include general education, and also practical and applied learning as well as vocational/occupational skills. This would be delivered at a number of inter-locking levels that would support motivation and progression. Such a system would be inclusive of all young people, and recognise and value both all attainment and achievement.

Specifically on NEETs, UCU believes:



- Schools, colleges and independent providers to have a primary responsibility for identifying those young people who are at risk of becoming NEET. IAG, Social and Youth Services as well as community and voluntary organisation also have key primary roles in this identification.
- This identification is a multi-agency task across an area or authority, so that all the information is collected and shared across agencies and institutions.
- There needs to be clear and effective IAG and progression routes with clear and meaningful destinations at local level. So that young people know what opportunities they face to reach their goals and make the most of their talents and skills. These services need a sustained period of structural and funding stability.
- Strategies to meet the needs of NEETs young people should focus on tailored, case-specific responses that can attempt to meet the varying needs of these young people. This is not an area where 'one-size-fits-all' policies and initiatives will succeed. Such strategies should start with the young people and where they are. NEETs young people need to be listened to and solutions to their problems placed with their experiences rather than being imposed from outside.
- Funding for providers and other services should be such as to take account of the resource needs for working with NEETs young people, and
- Provision and intervention needs to be relevant, high quality and challenging for the young people. It will be important to avoid 'ghettos of provision' which can be stigmatising and increase feelings of inadequacy and failure on the part of the young people themselves.
- Work with NEETs must start with attempting to keep such young people in some form of positive contact with learning. This may lie outside formalised learning and require strong partnership and collaboration between the various providers and other agencies working with the young people.
- It will also be necessary to have much stronger vocational alternatives in the curriculum that combine knowledge and skills in vocational/occupational areas with general education and functional/key skills. For too long the work based learning route, vocational/applied/practical education and learning have been viewed as second best and remedial.
- NEETs work is best undertaken through partnership arrangements between education providers, IAG services, youth and social services, employers and where possible representatives of the young people themselves. There also needs to be a proper balance between strategic and operational levels.
- NEETs work requires effective management and organisation so that NEETs provision is integral to the whole curriculum. There also needs to be resources for professional development for those staff working in this area.
- Outreach is an essential component of NEETs work, particularly in respect to both the long-term NEETs, and some of the groups that have already been referred to such as young mothers, outreach work is essential to contact these young people. Detached youth workers operating on the streets is one of the most successful ways of identifying, contacting and working with many NEETs young people.
- The compulsory element of raising the age of participation should be dropped.

- EMAs and other financial support for young people should be maintained, index linked, and where possible expanded.
- The various Guarantees for the young unemployed should be sustained throughout the Recession. Benefits sanctions must not be part of these.