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Centre for Innovation in Learning

# Changing the NEET mindset

Achieving more effective transitions  
between education and work





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# **Changing the NEET mindset**

**Achieving more effective transitions  
between education and work**

Sarah Gracey and Scott Kelly

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## Foreword

It is now clear that the recession has had a disproportionate impact on the prospects of young people. Under-25s constitute one in five of the adult population, but they account for two in five of the unemployed. Figures for March 2010 show that 937,000 16–24 year olds are unemployed (and the figure rises to one in two for young black people). Although the recession has put severe pressure on the system of post-compulsory education and training we also know that the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) remained stubbornly high over the whole of the last decade at around 9.6 % of the cohort and that youth unemployment had begun to grow even during the so-called boom years.

Given the existing legislation increasing the compulsory participation age to 18 there is an urgent need to redefine how we conceptualise NEET young people. If participation is compulsory we need to ensure that the education and training young people receive maximises their prospects, otherwise we risk creating an even greater problem of inactivity post-18. There is also a danger that compulsion to 18 may obscure a range of issues that result in disengagement from education and training at an early age or may cause NEET figures to rise through the reactions of 16 and 17 year olds who would otherwise choose jobs without training (JWT) as the best option for them at that particular time.

One clear message is that 16–18 disengagement cannot be isolated from problems further up or downstream. Research confirms that NEET disengagement is not something that just happens at 14–16 but often sets in far earlier. If young people are disengaged by the age of 16 re-engagement becomes progressively more difficult.

We believe that a critical part of the problem of high levels of non-participation can be traced to disengagement from schooling at an earlier age and to a curriculum which at 14 still doesn't offer enough options for varied courses and hands-on learning or sufficient flexibility for those who are disengaged or undecided about their options. These problems are exacerbated by careers education and guidance (CEG), which has not been seen as a priority until recently and which can be of unsystematic and uneven quality. Cumulative disengagement can be compounded by a lack of support at vital transition points in education – from primary to secondary, Key Stage 3 (KS3) to Key Stage 4 (KS4) and school to college. A wealth of opportunities to engage and motivate young students about the practical world of work through inspiring activities or varied, well-structured work experience, are missed.

It is clear that we need to improve the advice and guidance young people receive throughout the school system, as well as the support available at key transition points. At crucial points in a young learner's journey, there are vital improvements we can make that would help reduce non-participation. And yet, if anything, the split of funding responsibility between 14–19 and 19-plus raises the spectre of an increasingly fragmented approach in the future.

The report also examines the mechanisms used in other countries to engage young people. Britain lags behind in vocational provision. A clear route of progression for those on a vocational path and a close link between qualifications and occupational standards can act as powerful incentives for participation. Opening up progression routes to make it easier to change tack, reskill or pursue different qualifications is also a vital mechanism to ensure young people can re-engage as their social, emotional or financial contexts permit. Skills accounts can act as a vital personalising tool here and, if correctly designed, could really empower individuals to exercise choice – a key motivating factor.

Finally, the NEET group is far from homogenous. We know that for many the issue of disengagement cannot be disentangled from socio-economic deprivation. However, as this report shows, there are many ways that life chances could be improved through the provision of flexible and appropriate education and training.

With a new Coalition Government in place currently committed to compulsory participation to 18, now is the time to ensure that the required bold steps contained in this report are taken, to transform and improve the curriculum and reduce the potential risk of increased disengagement which could scar this policy.

This report is the work of our Centre for Innovation in Learning, an independent think tank that works with stakeholders, social entrepreneurs and key thinkers to improve policy and practice. It draws together research and investigation to identify what 'makes learning work', both in Britain and internationally, and seeks to develop new thinking. Provider interviews form an important part of the analysis and evidence for our recommendations. The interviewees include college principals, local authority professionals, Next Steps and Connexions advisers, third-sector charities (including Rathbone and the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation) and young people themselves. For the purposes of closely focusing on our prime age group of 16–18 year olds, our figures will refer to this cohort unless otherwise explicitly stated.

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# Executive summary

The number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) has remained persistently high over the last decade. Although differences in information collection make direct comparison difficult, data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) also suggests that the level of NEETs in Britain tends to be higher than in many other advanced economies. Drawing on interviews and comparative research, this report outlines a new approach to improving engagement and encouraging continued participation.

The term NEET is itself unhelpful, partly because it encourages policy-makers to focus on the symptoms rather than the causes of disengagement. By branding young people NEETs, official statistics identify them as a problem to be addressed by public policy but fail to focus on why they became disengaged in the first place. For many young people, dropping out may actually seem a rational response to their circumstances. We need to move beyond the idea of NEETs. Improving the way we manage the transition from education to work would be a key part of a strategy aimed at addressing the root causes of disengagement.

The need to address these issues is becoming ever more urgent as the Government prepares to raise the age of compulsory participation. While compulsion may result in a rise in the headline statistics for participation, the great danger is that if the underlining reasons for disengagement are not addressed the problem will simply be pushed further downstream, with even greater problems post-18.

This report examines the quality of the curriculum offer and careers guidance in place at key transition points from education into work, and looks at how it might be improved. It examines options around curriculum flexibility, improved information, advice and guidance (IAG) services and better support in helping to ensure that we maximise the likelihood of successful transitions to higher forms of education and skilled employment.

We briefly examine who NEETs are, the distinctions and typologies being established and why they come to be NEET. We compare research studies and systems in other European countries to analyse what works in terms of transitions from education to skilled employment.

We consider changes that can be made to careers guidance, work experience and information around courses, and make some recommendations that go far beyond the pledges in the strategy published in November 2009 by what is now the Department for Education.

## Key recommendations

1. NEET is a residual statistical category. It tells us who are NEET but it doesn't tell us why and how they became NEET. It doesn't tell us how many people are vulnerable to becoming NEET in the future. We need to develop a terminology that identifies distinct groups, facilitating a more targeted policy response. 'Disengaged', 'undecided' and 'unable to find work or training' would help provide a sharper policy focus.
2. The support available at vital transition points within education needs to be greatly improved. Careers information, advice and guidance should begin earlier, be more systematic and be led by an independent, impartial and professional service. Similarly, work experience should begin earlier and be better integrated into secondary education. The traditional interview in Year 11 should be the endpoint in a process and not the beginning or a one-off experience.
3. Funding structures and qualification systems should enable young people to study the most appropriate qualification at the most appropriate provider. Year 10 students should be able to study full time at an FE college. The implementation of Diplomas should not be designed to crowd out existing well-established and respected vocational qualifications. A distinct vocational route should be available at 14 with a clear route of progression to higher qualifications.
4. Research indicates that many young people vulnerable to becoming NEET become disengaged during Key Stage 3. Youngsters at risk of disengaging should have the option of a year out of the National Curriculum to experience long-term taster courses – a mix of vocational and other options – in order to explore and determine what they find rewarding for future study. Successful pilots in Wolverhampton suggest that there is scope for developing curriculum flexibility modelled on such a carousel of activities with impressive effects on retention and achievement for previously disengaged learners. The advent of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) makes such an option increasingly viable.
5. While other countries, such as Germany, manage transition to employment much better than England, increasingly flexible labour markets mean that it is becoming more difficult to plan entry to specific occupations. Employer engagement in Apprenticeships has declined. Changes in occupation after training are commonplace. Training provision needs to match labour market flexibility. Australian and Canadian experience suggests that the development of a new category of 'pre-Apprenticeship' training would help to smooth transition to skilled employment without devaluing the Apprenticeship brand.
6. Experience in other countries, particularly France, suggests that the possibility of progression to higher qualifications is a key part of making a vocational route attractive to learners. Progression should be built into the system, enabling smooth transition from Diplomas and pre-Apprenticeship training to Apprenticeships and Advanced Apprenticeships at higher levels. Current policy focus on increasing delivery of HE through FE institutions could aid clear progression routes from established FE courses, such as NVQs and BTECs, to degrees. However, it would need to be closely monitored for quality and impact on HE institutions.
7. Genuine learner accounts that give individuals real discretion over training provision would also help to facilitate re-engagement in a way that helps those who have been NEET navigate the challenges of a flexible labour market. A learning account that put money and control into the hands of an individual could provide a mechanism to access training at a time, and in a form, when it is of greatest benefit.

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# Section one

## NEETs: the crisis we face

### 1.1 The crisis we face: 900,000 and counting

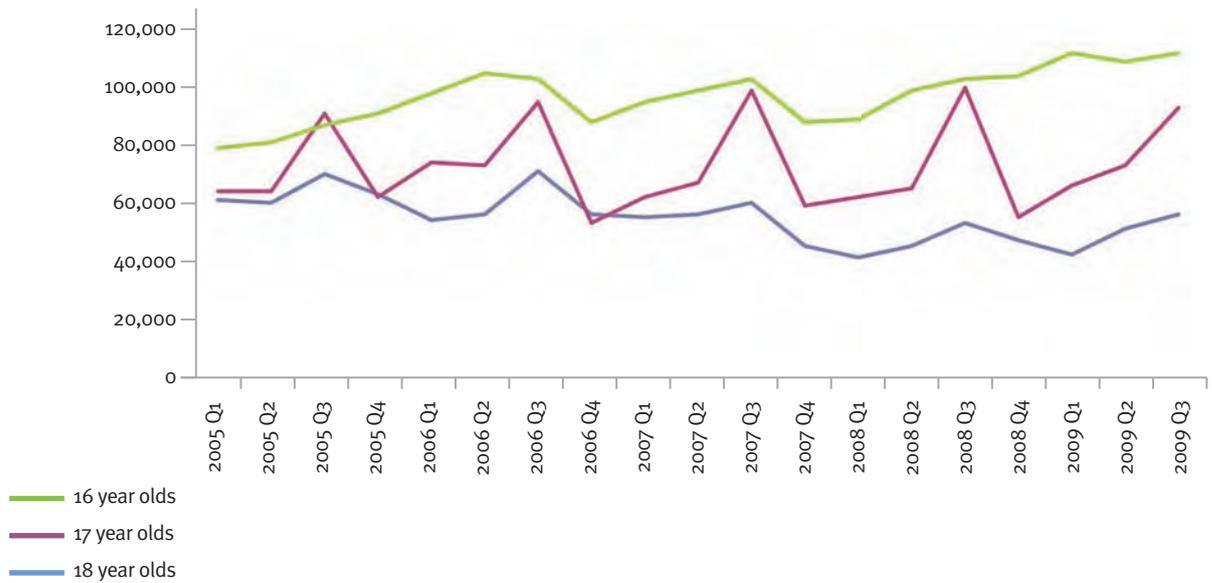
Not long ago, not in education, employment or training – ‘NEET’ – was a perplexing little word that required explanation for anyone not in education or local government policy. Now its widespread use across mainstream broadcast and print media shows just how much the NEET group has risen in the national consciousness and in a policy agenda exercised by social mobility, community cohesion and improving skills; one which has recently been dominated by the impact of the recession on the youth labour market.

NEET is an acronym for the Government classification of 16–24 year olds not in education, employment or training. The term was first coined in the UK but has since spread to other countries where other definitions and age brackets may apply. The ‘NEET group’ is not a uniform set of individuals – it covers both those who will be NEET for a short time while essentially testing out a variety of opportunities and those who have major and often multiple issues and are at long-term risk of remaining disengaged.

As the number of 16–24 year olds with NEET status reaches 1 million, policy rhetoric might sometimes lead us to think this is a new problem created by a contraction of the youth labour market during recession. But in fact the NEET figure remained stubbornly high at around 9–10% of all 16–24 year olds throughout the ‘boom years’ of the last decade, even though the NEET group simultaneously received a huge amount of targeted spending. Clearly there are problems beyond the recent shockwaves reverberating through the jobs market.

The overall percentage of NEETs in the 16–18 year-old age group rose from 10.3% at the end of 2008 to 13.4% in the third quarter of 2009. Overall, 261,000 16–18 year olds<sup>1</sup> stopped taking part in education, employment or training during this period. Among 18 year olds the figure was 113,560 or 16.6% – a rise of 2.4 percentage points from last year. With the exception of Japan, the UK has a much higher number of young people not in employment, education or training than its OECD partners. Our current 13.4% compares to 6–7% of the USA’s 16–19 year olds and only around 4.8% of Germany’s. There is also a wide variation by region across the UK. For example, in the North East, some 17% of 16–18 year olds are NEET, while in the East of England the figure is much lower at 7%.

<sup>1</sup> Garner, R (June 2009) Recession fuels rise in number of jobless teens. *The Independent*

**Figure 1 Volume of NEETs by age for 16, 17 and 18 year olds (2005–2009)**

The number of 18 year olds who are NEET is on the increase and showing a departure from seasonal trends observed before the recession.

The number of 16 year olds who are NEET appears to be decreasing, but as a proportion of all 16 year olds, the percentage that is NEET is similar to previous years, comparing similar quarters.

**This suggests that whilst the recession does** appear to be having some impact, high volumes of NEET are not (solely) a product of the recession.

Source: LSN Research Centre for Economic Performance analysis using Labour Force Survey data

Despite a considerable investment of public money and policy focus over the last decade, the proportion of young people classified as NEET has remained stubbornly high at around 10% of the age cohort. While it is now increasing in the wake of the recession and the youth employment market, traditionally fragile, has suffered disproportionately, there are clearly pre-existing problems on a much wider scale. There are deeper issues around disengagement, the curriculum offer and even how education is perceived, valued and ultimately accessed. Understanding such issues empowers us to develop more effective strategies to tackle NEET numbers.

**Figure 2** The average proportion of 16–18 year olds classified as NEET – November 2009 to January 2010



## 1.2 Raising the participation age and compulsion – pushing problems downstream?

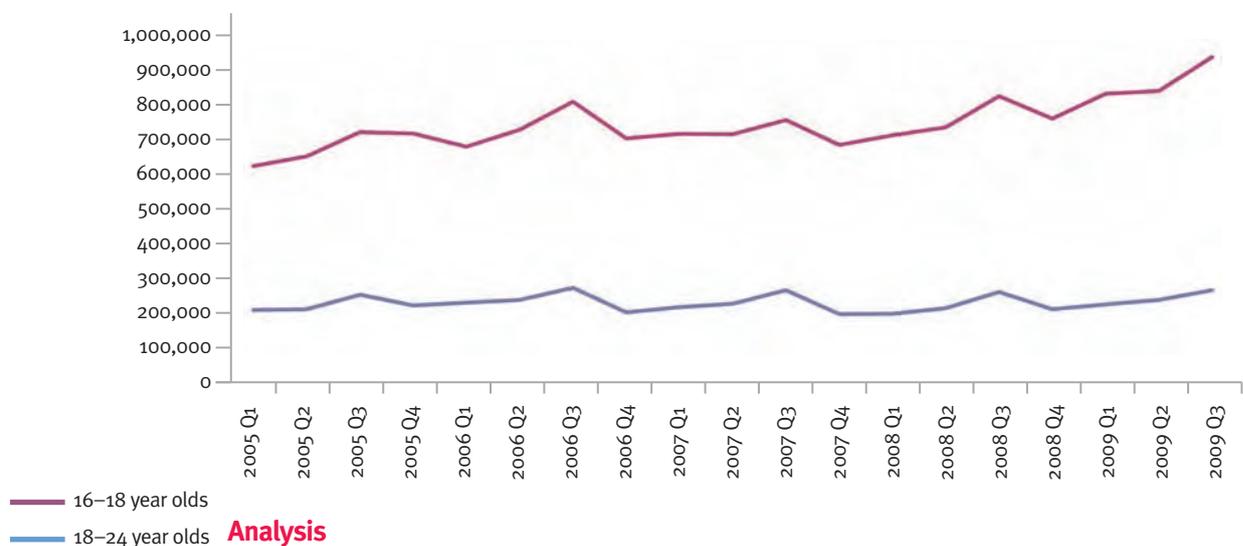
### NEETs and raising the compulsory participation age

The numbers for each age group – 16, 17 and 18 year olds – who want to stay on in education and training are actually going up, according to government figures at the beginning of 2010. Among 16 year olds, for example, the figure is 79.9%, the highest on record. However, cast another way, this means that preparations for the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) – which will affect those currently already in Year 8 – will have to engage up to 20% more of the current cohort who probably won't want to engage in education or training.

The RPA means that all young people will continue in education or training to 17 from 2013 and to 18 from 2015. This will be the first time in nearly 40 years that the education leaving age has been raised. Young people will be able to choose one of the following routes:

- full-time education, such as school, college or home education
- work-based learning, such as an Apprenticeship or
- part-time training, alongside working or volunteering for over 20 hours a week.

**Figure 3 Volume of NEET by age for 16–18 and 18–24 year olds (2005–2009)**



### Analysis

The NEET issue, in terms of the number of individuals within the category, centres on the 18–24 year-old cohort. In the second quarter of 2009 there were an estimated 835,000 NEET individuals between the ages of 18 and 24, compared with 233,000 16–18 years olds.

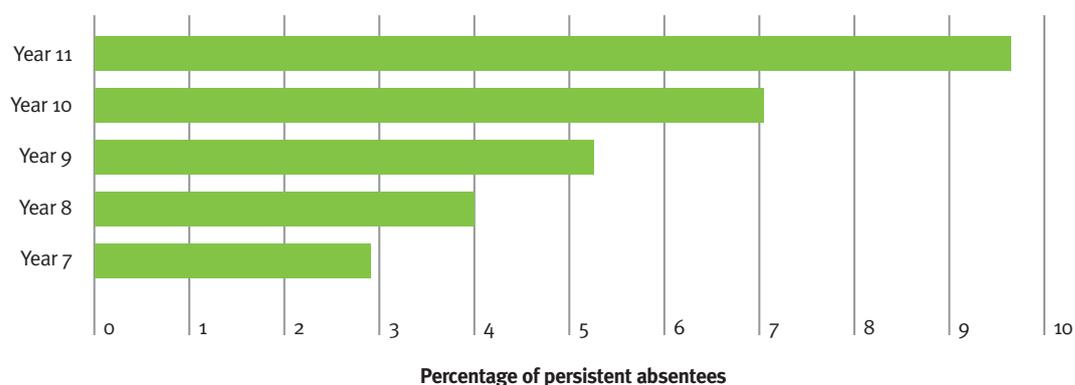
### Implications

This implies that focusing solely on the transition from compulsory schooling to further education (A-levels, NVQ Level 3, Advanced Apprenticeships, etc.), although necessary, will only address a minority.

A focus on the transition to higher education will be essential to reduce the number of NEETs.

The decision to raise the age of participation to 17 in 2013 and then to 18 by 2015 makes it a matter of urgency that we understand more about these young people – their hopes, ambitions and aspirations. Analysing the current truancy problem is relevant not only to RPA but also to understanding the germination and development of underlying problems that lead to young people becoming NEET – and therefore the appropriate support and solutions. Truancy rates increase systematically throughout secondary school, standing at about 2–3% in Year 7 and rising steadily year on year to over 9% in Year 11. Educational disaffection, one of the root causes of becoming NEET, usually manifests itself through truancy, exclusion, or leaving school with few or no qualifications at age 16. Recent research found that 25% of persistent truants in Year 11 were NEET the following year. Persistent absentees were seven times more likely to become NEET than their counterparts.

**Figure 4 Percentage of persistent absentees in secondary school (2005–08 aggregate)**

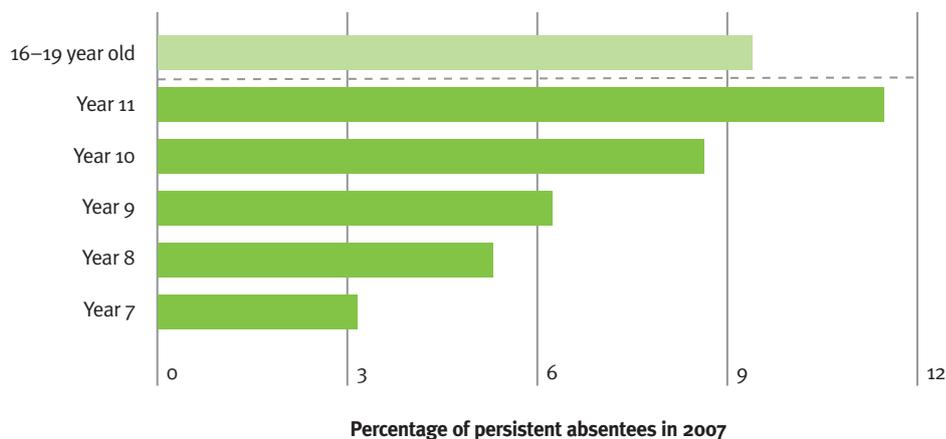


Source: *The Economist*, June 2009

### Analysis

The percentage of persistent absentees (defined as more than 63 sessions of absence) increases consistently as the end of compulsory schooling is reached, climbing to 9.3% by Year 11 as an aggregate over 2005–2008.

**Figure 5 Persistent absentees by school year and school-aged NEETs (2007)**



Critics claim that the RPA legislation will result simply in ‘warehousing’ truculent youth and point out that current participation rates have hardly changed since the early 1990s. Some critics, such as Professor Alison Wolf, argue that compulsion will not help improve the job prospects of those forced to stay in the education system, and indeed the wider context of low comparative wages and jobs without training (JWT) is a key part of the picture in terms of motivation for a young person to put in the hours or stay on benefits, and won’t be solved by RPA. These complex wider contextual issues may form a significant barrier to the success of RPA.

Nicola Sheldon points out that previous increases to the participation age (1947, 1972) did not lead to the huge leaps in truancy and surges in juvenile crime rates predicted by the opponents, but notes that the real issue is around *'improving the quality of the education and training offered to those retained in school longer, which has always been more difficult to prove'*. Over the past 20 years, our vocational curriculum has been revised several times both in an attempt to improve quality and as a response to more overtly political pressures. However, this has been to the frustration of teachers and students and the confusion of many employers. In the future, effectively coordinating mixed 'job and training' schemes could prove challenging. Fining young people who truant will not encourage them to value learning.

It is also useful to set ourselves in a historical context, recognising that only 40 years ago, the 80% of young people not in grammar schools took no public examination and left school at 15 with no qualifications, although a sizeable number moved into Apprenticeships with day release to study at a technical college. The rest moved largely into low and semi-skilled jobs primarily in manufacturing, and that world of manufacturing and industrial heartlands has largely gone. In terms of transmission of educational expectations, many parents might feel able to tell their children that leaving school at 15 with no qualifications had done them no harm, without realising that those semi-skilled jobs have now gone. Parental education and expectations have enormous impact on the education levels and career trajectories of their children, so giving them better information and changing their values is a vital part of the picture.

### **1.3 Labour market links and the transition to work**

Like so many education and skills policies, RPA was developed on the assumption of economic stability and growth. In turn, this led to the notion that participation by 16 and 17 year olds might reasonably reach 95% by 2013. Today, the economy is crawling out of a recession. Unemployment, as we know, is a lagging indicator and young people tend to bear the brunt of recessions: 40% of the current total unemployed are between 16 and 24. The challenge is to increase participation in education and training to around 95% against a backdrop of rising joblessness among 16 and 17 year olds.

RPA is inextricably involved in the responses – and potential solutions – to truancy, disengagement and youth labour market problems. NFER research (2009) for the DCSF found that the young people interviewed did not like the notion of being compelled to participate. In addition, some did not appreciate the value of education and training in terms of longer term financial and employment gains and considered that the opportunity to learn by experience would be lost.

Young people and professionals alike thought that the success of the policy would depend on various factors, including employers being encouraged to provide sufficient placement opportunities; schools, colleges and providers providing more practical and non-classroom based learning provision; and the offer of better financial support for those staying on in education or training (particularly if compulsory – and the outlook on Education Maintenance Allowances, EMAs, is still not clear).

Research by the Centre for Education and Industry at Warwick University from 2008 (Maguire *et al.*) with young people in jobs without training found, for example, that there was some uncertainty about the economic returns from participation in full-time, post-16 learning among young people, their parents and employers. This was enough to persuade some young people that it might be too great a risk to leave work and return to full-time learning. Building on this, if there are no 'better' local jobs requiring higher skill levels for higher pay, then it is an entirely rational option to stay in a low-level job without training.

In an increasingly flexible labour and learning market, distinctions between different groups of young people can be unclear and under-researched. In practice, many have a 'portfolio of activities', which (by choice or necessity) can include periods of inactivity, and/or a changing mix of paid employment, learning and other activities.

However, there are clearly specific groups of 16 and 17 year olds who will be at risk when the RPA takes effect. A third of the 79% of 16 year olds and half of the 67% of 17 year olds in full-time education also work on a part-time basis. If young people in full-time education from poorer families lose their part-time jobs they may face financial hardship and drop out. Furthermore, if their parents lose their jobs, entry rates into post-16 full-time education could fall and drop-out rates could rise because household income is too low to support staying on. Choosing to work is often economically necessary for many 16–18 year olds.

Youth unemployment among 16 and 17 year olds tripled between December 2007 (4%) and December 2009 (12%) – around an extra 100,000 places will be required in education, training and employment, to keep youth unemployment at 2007 levels. The 16–18 NEET cohort also includes increasing numbers of 17–18 year olds, some of whom have achieved Level 2 qualifications or above. These numbers are only likely to increase as firms slow down or freeze hiring new recruits.

Programmes such as the Future Jobs Fund are too blunt a tool to deal either with the complex different needs of the young unemployed or indeed the longer term underpinning problems. A segmented and targeted approach, focusing on the unemployed young people who are most 'work-ready' and closest to the labour market, could prove effective here, as the Centre for Cities has pointed out (*Surviving recession*, 2009). And such programmes still focus on one strand of NEETs – those who are ready and looking for work. Addressing longer term causes and not symptoms will be necessary to prevent disengagement with education at an earlier age.

Providers in our interviews agreed that the recession had had a noticeable impact on the young people in their areas, with many more 17 and 18 year olds in particular seeking to stay on in college, asking for more specific advice around jobs or looking for other training and even volunteer opportunities.

The issue of young people who enter JWT and how this will interact with raising the compulsory age of participation could be extremely significant, as there are currently about 85,000 (or 6%) 16 and 17 year olds who are in jobs that do not offer accredited training. RPA brings with it the responsibility of ensuring that education and training are available, accessible and relevant to the needs of all types of learners. However, as Maguire (October 2009) noted, young people who enter work which is classified as 'without training' at 16/17 have largely been ignored by NEET policy; there appears to be 'a dearth of understanding about early labour market entrants and a lack of policy intervention and infrastructure to support the needs of the JWT group throughout the UK'. She concludes that questionable assumptions have been made about the composition and the aspirations of young people in JWT, and their employers, on the basis of little or no evidence.

If this cohort were ‘forced’ to choose to stay in education and training, there is a risk that they could resist or become truant, thus adding greatly to the overall NEET figures. This is a section of the cohort that current NEET figures do not need to reflect, but *overall NEET numbers would leap* if the young people who choose JWT as their best option at 16 years old were unable to access something similar that balanced the RPA requirements of continuing part-time education.

Anecdotally, and from the provider interviews conducted for this think-piece, we know that lots of young people just want to go out and earn, not learn. A wage and a sense of independence are important for their identity and self-esteem, as well as often being the best practical response to their circumstances. In addition, as Maguire *et al.* point out (2008), their choices might be based on a very rational appraisal of local economic circumstances, opportunities or personal preferences. Taking a JWT could be the best option for them locally at that time. How can these young people be offered equally attractive, viable routes that meet their needs, whether through learning or earning at work? An offer of work-related learning could be most appropriate for those 16 and 17 year olds who want to choose JWT, but there is little to suggest that there is current capacity to develop a robust ‘work-related learning’ strand as a fifth mainstream curriculum offer.

Research by Anderson *et al.* (2006) sought to identify differences between NEETs and young people in jobs without training. They expected to find that they were very similar, ie ‘low academic achievers with poor school records in terms of attendance and school completion at the end of Year 11 together with negative attitudes towards learning’. Instead they found that within the JWT group, almost half were very content with their work and likely to remain in a JWT in the long-term. This has important implications for understanding motivation and how this might be affected by any structural changes in the youth labour market, caused by recession. However, we should also note that a third of this group were at risk of becoming NEET in the future, while 17% had taken a JWT as a stopgap solution before re-engaging with education or training.

#### 1.4 Structural problems in the labour market

Young people themselves note that it is difficult for them to gain relevant work experience. In geo-demographical areas with a lack of suitable and permanent jobs the result is often a ‘churn’ of young people moving in and out of NEET.

*Why can't young people get jobs? How do we get the experience to get a job when we can't get a job to get the experience?*

(Female, quoted in Hayward *et al.*, 2008)

*There's nowhere in my area you can get a job unless it's in a pub.*

(Female, quoted in Hayward *et al.*, 2008)

Professor Ewart Keep, who has focused on employers, argues that the problems are structurally located in the labour market (Keep, 2004). He therefore thinks that curriculum reform, such as the introduction of the new Diplomas, can only have a limited impact, and adds that Diplomas are an expensive way of trying to achieve this. In this context, qualifications or curriculum reform is only one part of the puzzle. According to Keep, what needs to change is the pay structure; for example 22% of all jobs in the UK are low paid (defined as less than two-thirds of median wages); 33% of those are held by females. This is compared with only 8% of Danish and 11% of French holding low-paid jobs, so defined.

This then leads to the rational justification for young learners to consider not bothering with education or training. ‘If I can’t progress out of low-paid work, what will my qualification buy me, so why bother?’ they ask. The interviewee quote above is indicative of the problem: if you don’t think there are good quality jobs available, you won’t be convinced of the need for training, and this demotivation can certainly compound the propensity to disengage from education. This might be an argument for starting to develop a much stronger demand-side policy. If, as the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) asserts in its *Ambition 2020* report, there are not enough high-end jobs, how do we stimulate employer demand for high-level skills?

Discussions around how to stimulate demand are being addressed in Government initiatives and skills strategy papers. The previous Government considered giving the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) a key role in coordinating local economic planning. Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) continue to plead for a sectoral rather than spatial approach to developing skills needs and filling skills gaps. There is also a need to consider how elements of the system could be redesigned to better motivate individuals and clarify the choices they make around labour market opportunities. In the next section we will look at what can be learned from alternative models in terms of supporting young people to make the transition from education into skilled employment.

## 1.5 Wider socio-cultural factors that affect NEETs and preparing for RPA

To some extent, even with perfectly tailored provision and intensive personalised support, wider economic and social factors will always limit what effect professionals can have. There is a well-documented range of wider factors which can cause disengagement from education including poor housing, health, drug and alcohol dependency, special educational needs, bullying, caring responsibilities, domestic violence, gang culture, peer pressure, or a cultural context which doesn’t value learning. Pemberton (2008) notes that NEET young people generally have lower levels of support from their families than other young people. This is a significant disadvantage because support from parents, along with parental knowledge about maximising potential opportunities, is an important source of help for young people entering or re-entering employment, education or training and reduces the likelihood of them becoming NEET. Parental support also creates the conditions for informal advice networks, work experience and exposure to opportunities.

*My parents didn’t discuss any options with me. They say they don’t care – I have to look for a job myself.*

(Young person NEET, quoted in Pemberton, 2008)

One interviewee noted:

*Everything can seem a million miles away from being achievable, especially if your family haven’t experienced those routes.*

(Business development manager, third sector organisation)

In addition to the importance of parents, Pemberton notes the importance of peers – but their influence can work both to encourage and discourage:

*Most of my friends are NEET so I think it’s OK. Why can’t I do it if my friends do?*

(Young person NEET, quoted in Pemberton, 2008)

*My friends are doing A-levels and I think that I am missing out.*

(Young person NEET, quoted in Pemberton, 2008)

Young people can be scared to do something different from peers and family; they fear raising their hopes and having them dashed. This is what Shane Blackman calls ‘the fear of the fall’, whereby if it doesn’t work out and you end up back where you started you will be stigmatised for trying and will have lost the little support you had back on your home turf.

Similarly, succeeding in a course or training makes real the different options that become possible; choice brings responsibility. One interviewee described the situation almost as a ‘fear of success’:

*We’re aware that there are young people who drop out at almost strategic points, just before successful course completion, as this would mean their lives will change. They change their minds, almost as an ‘avoidance of success’ strategy; it’s just too scary, they might actually get somewhere and be required to be ambitious and start reaching goals. This would make them different to their friends or family.*

(Manager, Skills Centre, FE college)

It is hard to see how the current schema of provision and engagement strategies can address this very personal dimension, rooted as it is in both socio-cultural contexts and the realities of local opportunity. Such issues are also beyond the scope of this report but we can focus on the key areas that can improved.

## **1.6 Identifying gaps in the current offer – what else can be improved?**

If the NEET proportion remained consistently high throughout boom years of high employment, and youth unemployment is now spiralling upwards, we need to focus urgently on the learning and training offer currently available for 14–19 year olds. There are competing pressures in the system: ‘success’ for Jobcentre Plus is a job but in the skills system it has been a qualification at Level 2 or 3 and not a JWT. It is arguable also that all these initiatives make the system more complex and access to funding streams more difficult. In any case, it is too soon for a convincing analysis of the efficacy of these responses to recession.

This report does not aim to address or attempt to solve labour market problems or focus on the many complex socio-cultural, emotional and behavioural issues that can damage a young person’s development. These issues have been dealt with at length in a range of excellent research. Instead, the following sections of this report will deal systematically with what we believe can be done to address the problems for significant strands of young people NEET – namely disengagement from the curriculum, a lack of preparedness for work and insufficient careers advice and guidance.

## Section two

# Why do young people become disengaged?

### 2.1 What is at the heart of the problem?

Ironically, as is so often the case when sectoral jargon finally muscles into the mainstream, the label 'NEET' is now outmoded. It has been broadly criticised in research over the last few years as a statistical dumping-ground defining what young people are not rather than what they are and disguising a wealth of different needs and experiences; it was also coined in a time of healthy employment. With the economic picture so radically altered, we need to focus more than ever on what these young people are rather than what they are not. The imminent raising of the RPA reframes the whole debate in terms of compulsion, with very pressing implications for the options on offer and the need to engage Years 7 and 8 now and keep them engaged.

NEET is a residual category, a statistical deficit model: it tells us who are NEET but doesn't tell us why and how they came to be NEET. It doesn't tell us how many young people are vulnerable to becoming NEET in the future. It doesn't examine the overlap with young people in employment but not in training. It doesn't tell us if being NEET translates into further problems downstream.

Not only does this lead to a model of these young people as a problem rather than a potential asset (Haywood *et al.*, 2008) but it also disguises their many different needs and experiences. As one of our interviewees noted, 'There is a vast difference between a teenager from Putney on a gap year in Peru and a teenager from Hackney who has been excluded from school and has no idea what to do next.'

NEETs are not a static group either; they are clearly affected by labour market fluctuations for this age group. As one of our interviewees remarked,

*Government took a labour market problem and translated it into young people being the source of the problem ... With 1.25m people under 25 looking for jobs, this is not a marginal group. It includes young people with A-levels looking for work. The NEET agenda should be redefined in terms of unemployment.*

(Chief executive, third sector organisation)

The Engaging youth enquiry (Hayward *et al.*, 2008), for example, divided NEETs into three categories: long-term NEET, those who move in and out of the NEET category (the 'churn' effect) and those who are NEET only for a brief period. Hayward *et al.* also consider another important category of NEET – 'prospective NEET', those young people currently at school, but at risk of becoming disengaged.

Other typologies, for example those using Connexions service information, delineate three groups of NEETs: vulnerable young people, long-term NEET (longer than six months) and frictional NEETs who move into the NEET population and then move out of it again quickly, but may return. These distinctions roughly correspond to other typologies that describe 'core NEET and floating NEET' (LSDA 2006).

**Core NEETs** are young people more likely to have social and behavioural problems. This group includes ‘generational NEETs’ – young people who come from families where the accepted norm is for adults to be unemployed.

**Floating NEETs** refers to young people who may find themselves lacking direction and motivation and who tend to move in and out of the NEET group, sometimes engaging in low paid and temporary work and short courses. This group contributes to ‘NEET churn’.

While such typologies can add texture, allowing us to think about the people behind the figures, it is also useful to think about the common elements uniting these different groups. As Hayward *et al.* point out, as well as being a disparate group many NEETs share some characteristics: ‘after 11 years of statutory education they are [often] united by their common experience of social and economic disadvantage, low educational attainment, relative underachievement and alienation from the education and training system’, all resulting in low levels of confidence and self-esteem.

## 2.2 The current curriculum offer

Can the curriculum offer be improved to better tackle the root problems for significant sections of the NEET cohort?

Current provision for 14–19 learners focuses on four main routes – Diplomas, general qualifications (GCSEs and A-levels), Apprenticeships and the new Foundation Learning (FL) programme. These can be supplemented by alternative provision such as Activity Agreements or enrichment activities for those at particular risk of exclusion or disengagement.

In 2009 the Government established Ofqual as its new ‘independent regulator of qualifications and tests’. A truly independent regulator would be free to approve qualifications that were not approved by Government and vice versa. However, central departments have moved quickly, as Alison Wolf pointed out, ‘to take control of their planned education economy’. Ofqual, it turns out, can regulate as it wishes, but whether or not something is actually funded, and so offered in public provision, will be decided instead by the Joint Advisory Committee for Qualifications Approval (JACQA), a non-statutory body, centrally controlled, whose membership consists almost entirely of Departmental or quangio staff.

JACQA itself announced in March 2010 that the qualifications landscape is too complex and that it will remove some of the qualifications from August 2010; the DCSF having previously cited figures of some 6500 or so qualifications of which 65% are taken by fewer than 100 students a year.

The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) aims to rationalise these progression routes and make them clearer for learners, teachers and employers. It is designed to encourage motivation through a more transparent line of progress and access to bite-size courses, training and parts of qualifications. Information, advice and guidance (IAG) is an important strand that will ensure that fully personalised programmes of the type envisaged by Government can and will emerge.

Some of our interviewees queried the potential of the QCF to simplify the landscape, arguing that employers understand the branded qualifications on offer but presenting them with a ‘pick ’n’ mix’ from different streams will only confuse and disenchant them. There may well also be queries about genuine equivalence across different units and qualifications that could lead to some devaluing of the enterprise altogether.

Some see the QCF as an integral part of a ‘restrictive and all-embracing’ central planning, funding allocation and qualification development system. Professor Alison Wolf, for example, promotes a system in which only awarding bodies need be accredited and providers/institutions licensed, thus freeing up these bodies to develop their own qualifications, which would be judged by employers and individuals in a free market. Many of the quangos and sector bodies that have mushroomed to implement qualification design and assessment, delivery programmes, central targets and inspections could then be abolished.

Clearly, making participation by young people compulsory to age 18 means it is essential to ensure that the learning offer is high quality and relevant to their needs. The development of the Diploma lines and of Foundation Learning are central to this, in the Government’s plans.

Foundation Learning is aimed at those aged 14 or over and working below Level 2; it comprises vocational learning, functional skills and personal and social development. It is often talked about as offering re-engagement opportunities and ‘support’ for those turned off by learning. Some interviewees, however, were worried that it might become a poor quality ‘fallback offer’ if not sufficiently well designed, and in any case of little real interest to employers. Others queried its place more generally alongside the other three main routes, asserting that it doesn’t come across as a progression route but rather as a base level below the other three, and that the name alone would put many young people off. They expressed concern that it could become a dumping ground for learners in the minds of some providers.

Independent training providers have also pointed out that the FL approach risks making problems worse for NEETs, by replacing what they regard as successful employment-focused provision such as Entry to Employment (E2E) with a more qualifications-based route. School or college-based study for qualifications is precisely what deterred many such young people in the first place.

*The wisdom of such a move – subsuming a successful delivery programme for disengaged young people into a qualifications (only) framework – is highly questionable.*

(Paul Warner, Director of Employment and Skills,  
Association of Learning Providers)

Independent training providers also noted that they have to absorb extra costs for certification and registration, alongside costs for new staff such as examinations officers. This could lead to a big reduction in the ‘roll-on, roll-off’ aspect of provision which helps both ‘disengaged’ and, to a lesser extent, ‘unsure’ parts of the NEET cohort, and mean working with two intakes a year instead. Many vulnerable and already disadvantaged young people would be forced to wait for months at a time for a place. It also gives a snapshot of the cost and energy required of providers at ground level with each systemic change and new policy initiative.

**Apprenticeships** play an increasingly central role in policy developed around 14–19 year olds and around the skills agenda. They are seen as a route that can offer practical, workplace skills and might engage those disaffected with traditional learning and ‘sitting in classrooms’. However, they are not a ‘silver bullet’. Some frameworks are too big and complex for disaffected young people, while others can be ‘scandalously devoid of content’, according to one academic we spoke to, or they can fail to progress the young person on to well-mapped career routes.

In recent years the standards and integrity of Apprenticeships have perhaps also become confused by the different frameworks and formats using the name. Parents and young people we interviewed complained that some required the young person to find their own employer while others didn't, and some again were almost entirely college-based rather than genuinely employer-based. They also noted that different Apprenticeship courses can lead to very different destinations – sometimes professional practice or higher education (HE) entry, at others a very basic level not much further on than where they started.

*Even at the college careers fair it was so confusing ... the apprenticeship programmes were all really different from each other and I didn't understand what I needed to do or where I'd get to. So it was hard to see whether it was a good option.*

(Young person, 16, choosing study options)

Anecdotally, employers and providers admit that many Apprenticeships are not workplace-based. There is a lack of information about the employment status of Apprentices, many of whom are placed with private training providers. All of this creates a lack of clarity in terms of the content, structure and possible progression opportunities, and this acts as a barrier to helping young people at risk of becoming NEET. A proper audit of Apprenticeship provision is needed to determine how many Apprentices are actually in work and receiving employer-based training.

In addition, there are already capacity problems finding enough employers to satisfy demand. A third sector training provider commented:

*It's a problem of capacity in the system, not lack of take-up from young people. Some employers feel they don't have the capacity maybe to provide on-the-job learning. Others don't even think the rhetoric applies – local authorities, for example, hardly lead by example.*

And many employers have an ambivalent attitude towards providing training and education.

*If employers have an employee gap they'll think 'where can I get them' not 'where can I grow them' and you can't blame them for that. Apprentices need developing, and if they haven't had formal experience before there can be a lot of pressure, which can lead to drop out. Employers might think they are more of a risky bet than they are.*

(Head, Guidance and Information Services, FE college)

This suggests the need to ensure that young people are ready to enter a full Apprenticeship in the workplace, possibly through the further development of pre-apprenticeship training. A greater awareness of the habits, rules and realities of the world of work would be of great benefit in driving transparency and clear expectations across the education and training sector, including providers.

### **2.3 Transition and progression: why do we lose young people at different stages?**

Gottfredson (2002) notes that the crucial age at which young people form relatively realistic ambitions for their future is between 11 and 14. It is at this age that the influence of peers and wider society increases and disengagement from learning is likely to occur. Some research suggests that measures aimed at preventing young people from disengaging in learning are therefore more effective in the long run than measures aimed at re-engaging particular groups (LSDA 2003).

Positive experiences, role models and good advice at this earlier stage are thus even more crucial. Prevention, as they say, is better than cure. It also indicates that better support throughout key transition points – from primary to secondary school, from Key Stage 3 to 4, at 16, moving into work or HE and so on – could have an active role in preventing disaffection or disengagement.

At the centre of any attempt to define NEET are the young people themselves; their approach to and understanding of the terminology needs to be part of the debate. A Rathbone workshop held in 2007 with 10 young people classified as NEET, for example, found that these young people did not know what the term meant. When asked, they responded:

*Tidy!* (M, 16)

*Never knew what it meant before today.* (F, 14)

*I don't like any labels.* (M, 16)

The young people at our own workshops were also unfamiliar with the term and didn't relate it to their experience of learning or their expectations (or not) of employment:

*It's just another adult word, doesn't mean nothing to me.* (S, 14)

The issues for them were around a lack of jobs they wanted and a more rudimentary disengagement from the idea of education or employment itself, which meant they lacked the focus, role models or ideas to develop a sense of what they could do next.

When disengagement is the root cause of NEET status, it is important to recognise how early it can start. Exclusion and dropping out are not a 16 year old's problem; these young people will often have started disengaging from the system long before they reach 16. *The longitudinal study of young people in England* (DCSF 2008b), for example, found that young people who had negative experiences of and feelings about school in Year 9 were more likely to become NEET two years later. Ask any secondary school teacher who they think is at risk of becoming NEET and they will identify young people in Years 8 and 9, even Year 7. Disengagement from learning is often a cumulative process that becomes more entrenched throughout secondary school, but for some pupils it begins at primary level.

Ravet (2007) explored the views of primary school children and found that some had already started to disengage from learning, for example stating they were bored and disrupting their classmates. This indicates that more deep-seated problems may have built up over time and suggests that raising the leaving age may merely move the problem of young people becoming NEET 'downstream'.

Clearly then, early and sustained intervention is critical to help prevent early disengagement and is a more effective use of money than mopping up problems of disengagement and exclusion later on. But how this money is spent and rigorous assessment of its impact are also crucial. The Government has spent an estimated £2 billion on improving literacy and numeracy since 1997, for example, but an estimated 115,000 children (one in five) left primary school in July 2009 two years behind their classmates, unable to read and write to the required standard. In London 39% of pupils – about 30,000 children – failed to pass English and maths at Level 4. If early performance is crucial in terms of achievement and retention, these are worrying statistics.

Although recent initiatives and pilot programmes focusing on intensive one-to-one support have helped bring nine and ten year olds up to their expected reading and numeracy age, it is unclear whether this one-shot intervention will be either sustainable financially or enough to keep young learners on the path to success through the secondary curriculum.

As young people make their way through the education system, it is vital to focus and develop appropriate support at transition points. Substantial anecdotal evidence from teachers, for example, describes the change in attitude and enthusiasm that can occur in the first two terms of secondary school in Year 7. It has been widely documented how the change in atmosphere from a small and familiar primary school environment with fixed classrooms and form teachers, to a potentially very large secondary school environment with bigger premises, year groups, staff cohorts and longer lessons, can prove daunting, tiring and overwhelming for pupils in Year 7 and Year 8. Previously engaged, eager students used to pleasing one form teacher can become intimidated by the larger, more complex environment of secondary schools and influenced by a different culture and approach towards learning among the older students, for example. Teachers may not know their names and the activities of older year groups can seem intimidating. Without strong pastoral support, it can be easy to feel 'lost in the system' and anonymous.

New ideas around 'urban village' schools seek to tackle these kinds of problems by placing attachment theory and personal connections at the heart of education. They argue for the school system to be based on small schools of only two or three hundred pupils, organised in confederations that share facilities and rotate timetables, rather than the 'super-sized secondaries' of over a thousand students (Wetz 2009).

## 2.4 Transition from Key Stage 3 to 4

Pupils can experience a lot of confusion and pressure at 14 as they are faced with their curriculum choices for Key Stage 4. These decisions will affect their options and direction not just in their education but also for their future careers and life. They may know what they want to do in life or what is possible, or they may wish to take certain options or try things but cannot because of timetabling issues or lack of facilities in school. Some young students feel the pressure to make the right choices but also don't want to close off certain avenues. A greater range of taster courses and experiences, combined with wider and earlier careers guidance would help here. Some students may already be disengaged from schooling and, for them, it is key to offer a wider alternative range of curriculum options and experiences at 14 rather than pushing them down a route that they are not sure about.

Choices at 16 can present yet greater challenges in that they often entail moving to a new institution such as an FE college, with new staff and new qualifications on offer. For those who are demotivated or unsure, it can be like stepping into the great unknown – potentially exciting bound up in uncertainties. Poor IAG before making the transition to a FE college compounds these tensions. Simm *et al.* (2007) reported that early leavers from FE and work-based learning (WBL) cited one of the main reasons for leaving as being that the course was not what they had expected. MacDonald and Marsh (2005) believe that a generic approach to careers guidance, and a failure to listen to and consider the needs of individuals, can explain why some young people fail to make sustained transitions (NFER for DCSF 2009).

## 2.5 Choice in the curriculum

Research indicates that being listened to and consulted are very important in motivating young people (Tunnard *et al.*, 2008). Similarly, exercising choices can be crucial in keeping some young people engaged, as Paul Grainger from the Institute of Education and others have noted. Timetabling issues in Years 10 and 11 can prevent individuals from getting their preferred options and this can be very demotivating. Although it is unrealistic to think that all institutions can lay on all subjects for all students, there are certainly issues around the options that face 14 year olds as they start their GCSEs or Diplomas. It is quite common for choices to be mutually exclusive, for students to be unable to take both art and music, for example. Some schools will set the top stream to do a modern language, which can seem arbitrary to those whose interests might lie very much elsewhere. Lack of consultation and lack of choice are equally demotivating. As one interviewee told us:

*Schools don't offer good choices of subjects at GCSE. I have a 15 year old and she can't choose some things she wants to do because of clashes, and it is really demotivating for her. The timetabling is bad – when you choose some options you automatically can't do others, and it seems pretty random. If people are good at something and motivated, they should be able to do it. It's a real demotivator not to be able to make those decisions and control what you do.*

(Parent of 15 year old, voluntary sector worker)

Schools should consider carefully how they allocate options to different sets and work with their FE partners to develop as much choice as possible. An increased emphasis on partnerships across 14–19 year olds and inter-school and college collaborations could make this more possible and particular attention should be paid to giving as much flexibility and scope around curriculum choices at 14 and 16 as possible, through capitalising on shared resources and the increased range of facilities.

For others, of course, choice and options can be part of the problem rather than the solution. One of our interviewees, the leader of a unit providing programmes specifically for low-achieving or 'at-risk' young people, noted that often her learners 'don't have a clue what they want to do' and that this lack of self-awareness and direction – a common feature at this age – is a key part of the problem, exacerbated by a lack of understanding of what pathways and options are available. It makes young people feel unconfident and vulnerable, and often leads directly to hopelessness and disengagement. Her organisation consequently does a lot of work around personal and social development:

*What can we do to enable this person to feel confident, and therefore want to engage or move on? It's not just straightforward careers guidance, it's about building up that person's resilience. It's ok to be unsure but we need to build positivity and a sense of the possible that is exciting to them.*

(Leader, Unit providing programmes for low-achieving and at-risk young people)

## 2.6 Problems in the system and limitations to current solutions

### Problems with careers advice: awareness and professionalisation

There are (widespread) concerns around the quality and consistency of careers guidance across the country. Careers guidance advisers we spoke to highlighted, firstly, the importance of the individual staff delivering careers guidance. In the past it often took two years to train a careers adviser whereas now it is an NVQ which can be done in about 3 months. Concerns were raised from within the sector itself about a deprofessionalisation of the industry.

*We should go back to a clearer, more rigorous framework of training for these advisers. They have practical skills, but not the theoretical understanding and background knowledge.*

(Careers adviser, FE college)

Others pointed to the need for a much sharper labour market intelligence (LMI) focus:

*I had to study about good sources of labour market intelligence (LMI), but now advisers won't bother, it's too time-consuming. How can they know everything for those 30 minutes? The key thing is getting good quality local info. You can give general SSC [Sector Skills Council] info on travel tourism for example, but can you also tell the young person what's available in Hillingdon in sports? There isn't a single source at the moment. LMI is too general, and needs to be specific.*

(Careers adviser, Focus group, House of Commons  
October 2009)

Clearly, staying up to date with the full and evolving range of qualification offers and wider programmes locally, plus gathering and distilling local and regional LMI, is a huge and complex task and it might be the 'nut that we never crack'. The introduction of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) throws the issue of training for careers guidance personnel and other practitioners dispensing advice into further relief, as the system may indeed be complex and options vary considerably between localities, while training in the QCF may not yet have filtered through all networks. As one third sector provider told us:

*Local Connexions staff, for example, are not expert because provision changes so quickly providers can't keep them up to date.*

(Pastoral support officer, FE college)

Possibly more local, simplified prospectuses could be a way forward here? The Common Application Process (CAP) signals an intention for local authorities to get together with delivery partners and produce a common 14–19 prospectus and CAP at 16 but research with stakeholders indicates that while many think it is a good way forward, the fact that it is not statutory means it is not bedding in as effectively and consistently as it should. Furthermore, while IAG professionals and others are happy to use the CAP, schools appear to be using it far less not just because of inoperability issues (around data systems compatibility, etc), but also because of competition, ie not wanting a school student to leave and go to a college offering the same course.

Certainly getting to a stage where educators speak a clear and simple universal language of progression – rather than of different levels, modules, qualifications, progression routes, standards and bodies – would receive warm welcome from many quarters, not least because it would indicate a clearer and less frenetic policy focus. As one FE interviewee noted:

*We've gone from basic skills, to key skills to functional skills in three years; from literacy, numeracy and communication, to English and Maths; from online assessments to portfolio work to paper-based exams ... all in three years.*

All of these changes relate to only one area of one qualification. The constant language changes belie the real assessment, pedagogical and organisational changes that lie behind the glossy policy-document phrases that frontline providers are running to keep up with.

**Connexions** has been a key government mechanism in delivering support, IAG and careers education and guidance (CEG) to 13–19 year olds, but its conception as a 'one stop shop' has – many critics argue – led to it being over-stretched in terms of remit and reach. Even the DCSF strategy *Quality, choice and aspiration* (October 2009) commented, 'there is evidence to suggest that the quality of IAG delivered through Connexions varies quite considerably', although they have held off any kind of redesign or serious assessment until 2011.

It has often drawn criticism (reflected in our provider interviews and in former minister Alan Milburn's report on *Fair access to the professions*) for a lack of up-to-date, quality, local information and too much focus on the neediest young people at the expense of quality guidance and advice for the majority of more motivated young people who have different needs. Although this might seem to benefit NEETs disproportionately, that would be to equate NEETs solely with disengaged young people whereas many simply need more help, advice and practical experience to make the best of their existing enthusiasm; some have good qualifications and need focused help to get started on their careers. As one interviewee told us:

*Some of those kids walk in there to find serious advice and inspiration about careers, but all the staff are dressed casually so as not to be a 'threatening environment' to the disengaged and it's all very informal. Maybe they need to see a few business suits round there, get a more professional and ambitious tone.*

(Business manager, FE college)

It was also noted that Connexions advisers had become '9–5' rather than on-call Intensive Personal Advisers (IPAs), available when needed. One interviewee added that many voluntary groups feel that they have more effective outreach with target groups and are not hampered by the many target, performance and funding restrictions faced by Connexions.

### **Impartiality and independence**

The need to deliver high-quality and impartial IAG throws into relief some of the inherent and unresolved tensions around the 14–19 collaboration agenda, as there is still some competition necessary and established within the system. We are probably all familiar with the criticism levelled by the Association of Learning Providers (ALP) among others, that vocational qualifications (VQs) and Apprenticeships are often neglected by school teachers when the latter are dispensing careers advice to 15 and 16 year olds either because they are not personally familiar with them or, more controversially, because they have a vested interest in keeping the pupil at the school sixth form if there is one.

Without the specifics of how true impartiality will be resourced and in-school staff trained, it is hard to see how pupil and parent guarantees and pledges of one-to-one mentoring will roll out successfully.

Interestingly, the DCSF strategy document *Quality, choice and aspiration*, (November, 2009) made no mention of the realities of league table pressures and how this will affect teachers' behaviour and performance. A recent report found that: '70% of Teach First participants believe that their schools encourage pupils to pick qualifications that will benefit the school's ranking over the child's long-term future.'

## 2.7 Other problems in the system

The learning and skills system does not operate in a sunny, neutral space. There are inbuilt patterns of expectation and prejudice brought to bear by different stakeholder organisations, and pressures exerted through funding mechanisms and targets. For example, there is some pressure on training providers and partnerships for learners to achieve particular outcomes and progression routes, with some outcomes – *particularly* entry into JWT – being seen as less 'positive' than accredited learning, even though JWT may be the right step for that individual at that point. This can lead to distorted pressure being exerted and provision that is not really tailored to the needs of the individual young person.

We should also be aware of the growing problem of a gulf in language that can exist between professionals working in the sector – Connexions, local authority, third sector or college-based – and the young people themselves. The former, being aware of all the structures, systems and strategies underpinning work in this area, have a tendency to describe and discuss 'progression pathways' and 'personalised packages of support' where a young person might describe 'subjects I like' or 'people I trust'. Young people would barely recognise the world many formal partners describe and inhabit. This can not only act as a barrier to communication, but also as a barrier to genuine progress, as the tendency to describe neat, well-thought-out, 'multi-agency' and resourced 'provision' allows professionals to focus on the efforts of their services rather than the outcomes and experiences of the young people themselves.

Such a language divide can have pervasive and powerful effects in walling-off professionals from the very people they are trying to reach. The Nuffield Review has already incisively documented the fact that education has been permeated by an 'Orwellian language', where teachers 'deliver' a curriculum rather than teaching subjects they love. For young people who are NEET, the gulf between 'service design' and the context and motivations with which they experience these services can be immense. The detailed, bureaucratic language of the local authority strategic coordinator we interviewed would have sounded excellent in a review or performance document but bore almost no relation to what the young people described in our subsequent workshop discussions. It gave the impression of a self-referential world that had not captured the wider realities and experiences of those young people. The boys in our workshop, for example, seemed hardly involved in or aware of their 'learner journeys' so beautifully detailed by the 'designers of their service provision'. Most didn't know what qualification or level they were studying for and had no ideas about their 'next steps' or 'progression pathways'.

Creating learning opportunities outside official institutions can give disaffected young people opportunities to succeed; it is often a crucial first step in engaging interest and progressing towards more full-time learning or onto a trade or course. Third sector organisations create vital opportunities, but they often exist on hand-to-mouth funding. Those working with young people remark on complex and numerous restrictions on distribution of funding and a lack of consistency:

*There will be short-term funding for initiatives and then a new trend comes along and another small pot is allocated to the problem in a particular area ... We need sustainable services. Young people can be quite dependent; they don't like switching and need security.*

(Business manager, third sector organisation)

How can funding be sustained in the long term and pooled with the other services involved such as housing, social services and health? This vital issue needs to be understood and addressed in the context of governance: the key question is always 'who owns the problem?' Local government will need to identify how to deliver broader outcomes in public value and what systems are needed to support this. More genuinely collective targets might be a start: many people are increasingly suggesting that targets should come from the community and not just from senior management services fighting over which of the 50 Local Area Agreement targets to prioritise. This is reflected in the Total Place work supported by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), the Local Government Association (LGA) and IDeA.

There are some good examples already. In the Police and Communities Together (PACT) initiative the community selects the three priorities they want to emphasise for the next two months. The current Association of Colleges (AoC) Total Place pilots should yield important information on how place, community and learning can all interact and be freed to set the agenda from the bottom up.

## 2.8 Vocational learning and the 'disengaged'

The success of practical and vocational learning in re-engaging many young people has perhaps meant we assume this is the only option. Programmes and alternative provision designed to help and support those at risk of disengaging overwhelmingly steer young people towards vocational programmes. There is perhaps a danger of conflating several factors and assuming such young people are always turned off by formal, academic learning. It would be a mistake to automatically design curriculum options around these assumptions. Although a vocational route and practical skills or trade undoubtedly engage many young people and can inspire those who have become disaffected in traditional classrooms, it should not become accepted wisdom that disengaged young people are best, if not only, served by vocational qualifications. As the analysis in the first chapter outlined, there are many different reasons why young people become NEET by the ages of 14, 15 and 16, ranging from caring responsibilities at home to a lack of positive role models and chaotic home life. These other wider barriers may keep young people from engaging with a history course or studying literature or physics, but will not mean that their innate talents might not include this or that they cannot be engaged through, for example, an intensive literacy or drama course. As one interviewee from an FE college observed:

*Why should we assume a young hoodie necessarily wants to be a bricklayer? We need to identify properly what their skills are. They may be excellent at communication or persuasion – so we should be able to draw down qualification options and opportunities like sales or business, to that age group ... [We should also] give them long-term projects, for example on entrepreneurship. They have new trainers and phones all the time, and can do all sorts of trades, but they don't even know what the word entrepreneur means or what it can mean for them.*

(Curriculum and careers adviser, FE college)

We need to think more creatively about innate skills and talents and ways to engage young people, and ensure that there are flexible options that can be accessed easily to match interests and aptitudes.

Policy-makers must remain clear about the purpose of vocational qualifications: their 'engagement potential' shouldn't be conflated with their purpose in progressing young people to a skilled occupation. Automatically signposting disaffected or excluded young people onto vocational courses runs the risk of blurring the aims of the qualifications and further dividing the calibre of the two routes further down the line. As Edge has repeatedly emphasised, vocational qualifications need to be delivered in excellent specialist facilities by highly trained staff with rich practical experience of work in that sector.

Some academics and practitioners have alluded to a 'tyranny of inclusivity' (Nuffield Review workshop, October 2009) that suffuses vocational qualifications while other curriculum routes, such as A-levels, are allowed to focus on 'higher entry standards'.

This, it could be argued, perpetuates different values attached to the respective routes, which in turn sustains a bi-partite system of academic versus vocational qualifications. They posit that entry standards for vocational qualifications should be raised to make them more rigorous and ensure ultimately that employers really value them. These issues need to be addressed within any wider policy response around curriculum changes designed to address disengagement or lead to higher practical and vocational skills.

While we would not argue that the 'brand' of vocational qualifications is being diluted, it does seem there needs to be greater clarity at all levels and between all stakeholders around the progression routes, distinguishing between high-value, high-status vocational qualifications and the more personal and social development work necessary for engaging NEETs disaffected with learning.

There also needs to be a focus on vocational pedagogy. This is still an under-developed and rather neglected area, but it is essential for developing an FE workforce able to deliver new curriculum requirements and the range of outcomes – from the skills agenda to inclusion and widening participation – required of it. It is also necessary if we are to build the constructive relationships between school and FE staff so vital to ensuring good transitions for students, particularly those who are disengaged, unsure or dissatisfied with options. As Jenny Shackleton, Head of Skills Development at UK Skills, points out, vocational teachers need to be seen as equal to school teachers and, until that happens, there will always be young people who assume that there are two tiers of learning and of occupation – self-defeating if our goal is a respected vocational system. Teachers should be trained in a way that properly engages with industry and commerce. The teacher training programmes that are offered are diluted, because:

*...vocational education is also presented as a means of curing certain social ills, as opposed to serving industry and business in a direct and efficient manner. There are a number of very good reasons to use education to cure social issues, but this should not be to the detriment of vocational training.*

(Jenny Shackleton, UK Skills, quoted in E-politix)

## 2.9 In conclusion – changing the terms of reference

The term ‘NEET’ disguises the different groups within the cohort it purports to describe and is inimical to developing robust policy responses addressing the differing sets of needs within that cohort. Policy-makers should abandon the term and reframe their definitions to include:

- **‘disengaged’** (those who are turned off schooling and education)
- **‘unsure’** (those who lack focus and direction which is damaging their education) and
- **‘unable to find work’** (those who have gained qualifications but need support in accessing training or work).

This would allow stakeholders to develop a clear focus for the different groups instead of lumping everyone together. For example, a different curriculum offer or intensive individual mentoring could help the ‘disengaged’ and the ‘unsure’ get back on track; while support into training or work – whether through tax breaks to employers, subsidised training schemes, etc – would benefit those looking for but unable to find work. Clearer definitions and more focused policy responses are vital for developing a workable strategy as we approach 2013 and the RPA.



## Section three

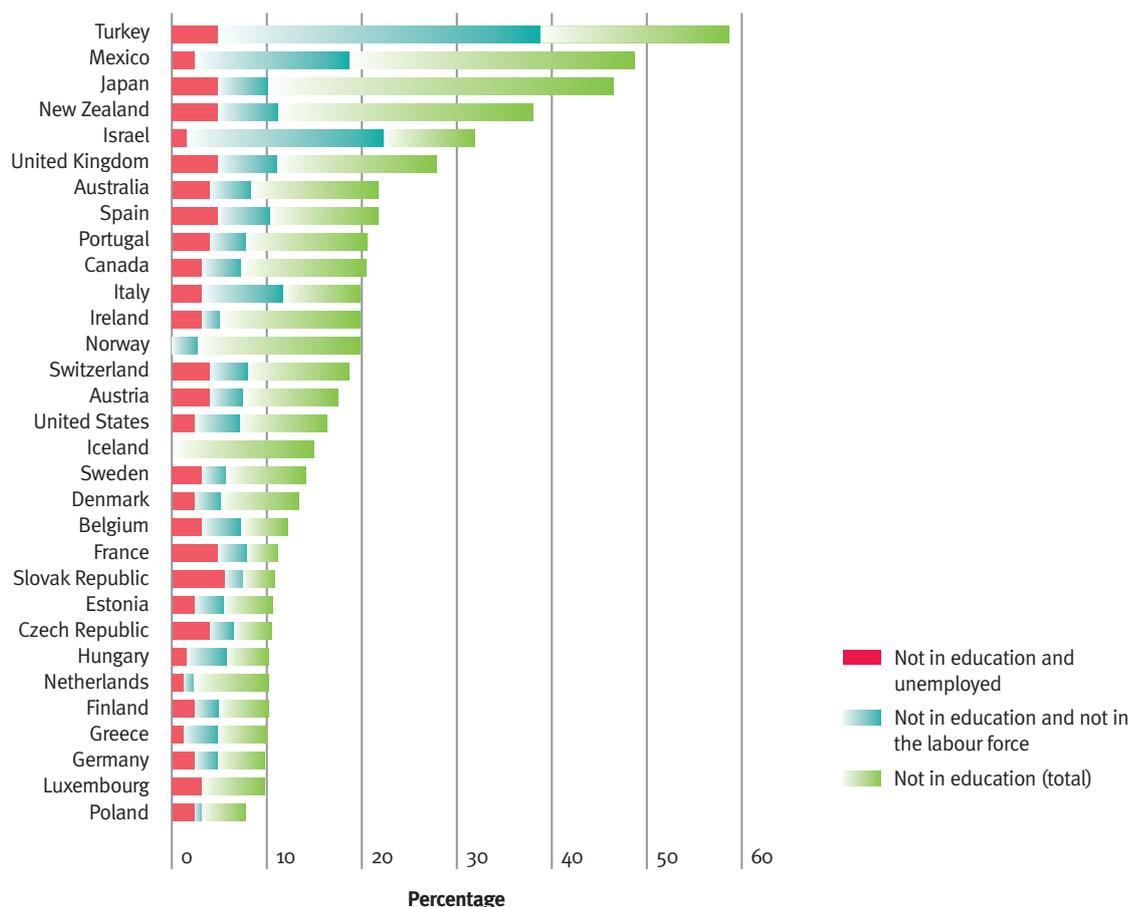
# International comparisons

### 3.1 What works? International examples of transitions

The transition period between education and work is an important time for young people, when they are vulnerable to becoming NEET (Tunnard *et al.*, 2008).

OECD data suggests that the number of teenage NEETs in the UK tends to be higher than in other comparable countries.

**Figure 6** Percentage of 15–19 year olds not in education and unemployed or not in education and not in the labour force (2006)



There is evidence to suggest that education in the UK is particularly separate from the labour market. It offers young people few options for acquiring skills related directly to their career aspirations and therefore prolongs the transition period between education and employment, making it more difficult for some young people to enter employment.

The transition period for many young people is often characterised by short-term jobs that could be categorised as ‘jobs without training’. As pointed out by Quintini *et al.* (2007) these jobs can serve either as traps for young people or as stepping stones to good careers. It is evident that as young people enter the labour market for the first time, many employers are reluctant to hire them on a permanent or full-time basis. In addition, as many young people are unable to demonstrate their productivity and skills through previous work, they are often hired on jobs that require less than their qualifications. There is therefore often a trade-off between accepting an unsatisfactory job or remaining unemployed for longer.

Short-term jobs with low pay may serve as ‘stepping stones’ to permanent jobs with higher pay and better status, but there is also evidence that many young people are unable to move to more stable employment or better paid jobs (Lawton 2009) because temporary, low-paid jobs tend to offer few training opportunities and progression routes.

### 3.2 Earlier careers advice and specialisation in school

Many continental European countries prepare young people for entry into the Labour market at a younger age than the UK. Research by the National Institute for Economic and Social Research (NIESR) in the early 1990s compared the transition from school to work in Britain with the experience in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands. Although the findings of this project were published 15 years ago they remain relevant to understanding the differences between experience in Britain and in other European countries. Researchers found that careers guidance in the three other countries began earlier, was taught by specialist careers advisers and was geared to providing young people with specific information on the content and requirements of particular occupations.

The study showed that in Germany and Switzerland careers guidance began a year earlier than in the UK, at around the age of 13. By the age of 14 most learners in German Hauptschule and Swiss Realschule (general secondary schools) have decided that they want to advance to an Apprenticeship in a narrow range of occupations; the next stage is to narrow this choice down to one or two specific occupations corresponding to both individual aptitudes and interests and local availability. Specialist careers officers:

*provide youngsters with information and contacts (names and addresses of local employers who have notified them of training vacancies) and may arrange to meet imminent leavers several times a term until the youngster finds a place. Parents are invited to all such meetings as their advice, agreement and encouragement is seen as vital to the successful completion of the rigorous (usually three year Apprenticeship courses).*

(Jarvis 1994)

Another significant difference between Britain and the other countries studied was the content and timing of work experience. Work experience in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands often began a year or more earlier than in the UK, 13 or 14 rather than 15, and would last as long as three weeks. The study concluded:

*the longer duration experienced by Continental youngsters helps to develop a clearer picture of the content and variety of work involved in a particular occupation; that they are encouraged to choose their work-experience placements with different employers helps further in deciding on the environment in which they would like to train.*

(Jarvis 1994)

### 3.3 Transition from school to work

#### Apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships

OECD research also suggests that countries with ‘dual systems’, where class-based learning and work-based learning operate in parallel through Apprenticeships, are among the most successful in managing the transition to work. For example, in Germany, the typical Apprenticeship ties together a young person and an employer for around three years, discouraging turnover and giving each extensive knowledge of the other. A recent OECD study concluded:

*Dual systems have proven quite successful in giving young people a good start in the labour market. Indeed Denmark, Germany and Switzerland are among the OECD countries with the lowest unemployment rates for youth ... In addition, Austria, Denmark and Germany are among the countries with the lowest share of youth experiencing multiple unemployment spells. Avoiding early labour market difficulties is particularly important for youth as a rich literature shows that long unemployment experiences at labour force entry have persistent negative effects on employment probabilities and wages later in life.’*

(Quintini et al. 2007)

However, the comparatively smooth education to work transitions achieved in Germany and other countries come at a price. Dual systems typically require a choice of training occupation before starting upper secondary education. Although changes in occupation after training are commonplace they are also costly. German students are streamed into academic and the vocational routes early in their secondary studies. Students on the vocational route are given extensive careers advice to assist occupational matching, but around half of Apprentices are unable to enter their preferred training occupation, and a similar proportion of ex-Apprentices subsequently work outside their training occupation (Ryan 2000).

Moreover, changes in the labour market have made it more difficult for countries to maintain a dual system in recent years. Increased competition and market specialisation mean that companies have become less willing to take on Apprentices. Increased flexibility and incentives have been introduced to make Apprentices more attractive to employers. A common feature of countries with dual systems is a long history of social dialogue through corporatist arrangements involving the state, employers and trade unions. Such arrangements have had a difficult history in the UK and were largely dismantled in the 1980s (Quintini 2009).

Programmes called ‘Pre-apprenticeships’ have been developed in several countries including Australia, Canada and Germany to aid progression to full Apprenticeships. In Germany Pre-apprenticeship; training tends to consist of full-time courses in vocational schools. The German Vocational Training Act (April 2005) aims to improve the transferability of these vocational education and training (VET) qualifications to Apprenticeships (Dumbell and Smith 2007).

A study of Pre-apprenticeship training in Australia found that it tended to:

- lead into an existing Apprenticeship framework
- lead to credit towards the off-the-job component of a full Apprenticeship
- involve actual as well as simulated work experience
- typically last 12–26 weeks although some courses last as long as a year [Ibid].

In 2006 the Industrial Training Authority in Canada began to implement a new framework governing Pre-apprenticeship training across the Provinces. The Canadian system is based on sector-based industry training organisations (ITOs) that are similar to SSCs, so this framework provides a model for how Pre-apprenticeship training could be established in England:

- **Industry initiated and led:** In Canada ITOs are responsible for developing and maintaining Pre-apprenticeship programmes. They are approved by the overarching Industrial Training Authority. We could propose that SSCs should be responsible for the development of Pre-apprenticeship frameworks, with funding dependent on approval by a body similar to the FEFC. In Canada approval criteria include ‘clear evidence of industry demand for the relevant skills, and intent to hire program graduates and facilitate their progression onward towards apprenticeships’.
- **Links to Apprenticeships:** In Canada it is intended that all Pre-apprenticeship programmes will link to one or more Apprenticeship frameworks. A Pre-apprenticeship Certificate of Completion provides defined credit towards the completion of the relevant full Apprenticeship. There must always be a clear pathway of progression to a full Apprenticeship.
- **Proportionate and non-duplicative:** As in Australia, the length of Pre-apprenticeship training in Canada varies between frameworks according to industry needs. The emphasis is on the technical off-the-job element of training. In England this would typically involve studying towards a BTEC or comparable qualification. Credit is awarded so that Apprentices do not have to cover the same material twice. The study of Pre-apprenticeship training in Australia found that:
  - *Employers are in favour of pre-apprenticeships; they see them as weeding out unsuitable candidates. Hence, pre-apprenticeships are likely to improve retention.*
  - *Prospective apprentices like them. They see them as a useful way into an apprenticeship and are positive about the experience.*
  - *Those who undertake pre-apprenticeships are more engaged with the occupation and are more likely to have plans for higher-level training after they complete their apprenticeships.*

*Pre-apprenticeships should not be seen as getting students ‘work ready’; they are more about engagement with the trade.*

(Dumbell and Smith 2007)

However, recent experience also suggests that it is possible for countries lacking well-established dual systems to significantly expand Apprenticeship provision. In France, a small, specialised Apprenticeship scheme has been transformed into a route to all public vocational qualifications. Collective funding by employers through a levy-exemption system has been reformed, and public subsidies to sponsoring employers increased. As a result there are now almost 500,000 Apprenticeship starts a year (Steedman 2005).

More generally, comparative evidence suggests that the benefits of well-established vocational options in smoothing the transition from education to work are mixed. Research in the 1990s found that in both Britain and France vocational study at secondary school level was associated with a reduction of roughly one-third in the incidence of unemployment. However, in a literature review Paul Ryan notes that vocational study at this level is also associated with a reduction of 10% in subsequent earnings. At post-secondary level in France the situation is reversed; graduates of two-year vocational programmes earned 21% more than those who completed comparable academic courses.

Ryan concludes that the differences between the earning potential of vocational qualifications at different levels help to explain why vocational options have become less attractive to students even in countries such as Germany and Japan, where well-established systems of vocational education are associated with high levels of subsequent employment.

*The answer is that labour market rewards, including employment probabilities as well as pay, depend on the level as well as the content of qualification, and the former influence is stronger than the latter. As vocational studies rarely offer progression ladders to higher qualifications, they promote earlier exits from schooling and diminish labour market prospects. The superior option value of general courses ... suggests the desirability of developing qualification ladders in vocational education.*

(Ryan 2000)

### 3.4 The role of occupational standards in facilitating transitions to employment

Although the evidence suggests that other countries have traditionally managed the transition from education to employment better than the UK, there are other wider economic and societal factors that influence the behaviour of young people.

Professor Ewart Keep has argued that the incentives at work in influencing participation in training can be categorised in two general types. Type 1 incentives are generated within the education and training system itself by the intrinsic rewards of learning. Examples of such Type 1 incentives are pedagogy and curriculum design, forms of assessment and opportunities for progression. Type 2 incentives are those generated by wider societal and economic factors and include societal expectations and parental pressure, wage premiums and career progression related to particular qualifications and labour market regulation where attainment of certain qualifications is a prerequisite of entering an occupation through licence to practise arrangements. He notes that

*In the highly de-regulated UK labour market, the PULL of Type 2 Incentives is often very weak for those entering lower end occupations. There is very little Licence to Practise regulation, wage returns to vocational qualifications are low/nil/negative and they often play a limited role in recruitment and selection.*

In many OECD countries, such as Germany, Austria and Australia, the degree of regulation and the need for a licence to practise is higher than in the UK so the incentive to acquire a wider range of qualifications is also greater. The need for a licence to practise may act as a 'pull' factor that generates an incentive for young people to engage in learning.

Professor Keep argues that UK policy has not paid enough attention to the role of Type 2 incentives in young people's motivation, participation and achievement. Young people may actually be making what they see as a rational choice in becoming NEET:

*A reading of the world that took greater account of wider parts of the incentives spectrum – ie combined the economic with the social and cultural – might garner insights that could aid the formation of more realistic policies. There is also a deep-seated unwillingness to even contemplate the possibility that many young people are acting rationally (at least within the terms of a bounded view of rationality) in the face of the kinds of Type 2 incentives with which they are confronted.*

It is a failure to address the importance of Type 2 incentives, Keep concludes, that has led to an over-reliance in the UK on Type 1 incentives to 'pull' more young people into training; in particular, on attempting to redesign education and training provision to create more powerful Type 1 incentives. The last 25 years have seen many attempts at qualification reform that have failed to deliver expected improvements in participation and achievement – Keep cites the Certificate of Extended Education (CEE), the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE), National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) and Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education (AVCEs) and argues that the new 14–19 Diplomas are likely to be equally disappointing.

Yet in countries with powerful Type 2 incentives much less attention is given to ways to improve engagement through qualification and curriculum design.

*Their curricula and teaching methods often remain traditional, relatively regimented, unpersonalised, and demanding of high levels of commitment from the student.*

(Keep 2005)

Several commentators and organisations, notably LLUK and City and Guilds, have suggested that it would therefore be beneficial to reform the UK qualifications system and increase the need for a licence to practise.

The UK economy is also highly polarised in terms of low versus high skills needed for employment. This means that there are a large number of jobs that require no or very few qualifications, which young people can access without having gained a specific qualification. This availability of jobs without the need for specific training may be one of the reasons for the relatively low post-compulsory education participation in the UK compared with other OECD countries.

## Section four

# Ways to improve our system: bringing down the numbers of NEETs

### 4.1 Identifying gaps in the current offer – what else can be improved?

Any strategies devised for tackling NEETs must take account of the wider context in which young people operate; of the influence of families and neighbourhoods on individual choice and the distinct needs of particular localities in the wider context of economic and social development. Underlying causes, and therefore solutions, are many and varied.

*The NEET agenda tends to categorise people according to whether they need to be in education or a job. However, other issues such as housing, advice, parenting and so forth are pressing issues and need to be factored in.*

(Head of Skills and Foundation Learning, FE college)

In the context of longer compulsory participation in education or training, these wider, inter-related factors will continue to exert negative pressures on some young people and any systemic response will still need to address them. However, there are key areas within the education system itself that could be improved to help support young people who might otherwise become NEET.

With youth unemployment now spiralling upwards, we need to focus urgently on the learning and training offer currently available for 14–19 year olds. This section will focus instead on the general direction of policy; on the curriculum, learning and training offers available, assessing what works well and identifying weaknesses that can be addressed.

### 4.2 Taking a year out at 14

#### **A carousel of options – helping young people who are disengaged or unsure of what Key Stage 4 or Level 2 routes to pursue**

As discussed in Section 2, choices at age 14 can be a source of pressure for students, a situation greatly worsened by the feeling of ‘not knowing what the full options are’ and a curriculum that may not stimulate those with more complex educational or behavioural needs. While we believe both these situations would be greatly helped by earlier and more specialised careers advice, more work experience and a greater awareness of work built into course materials (discussed later in this section), there is scope for a more dramatic restructuring of curriculum choices at 14.

Learners need genuine choice in the curriculum and control over their options at this transition stage. At the same time we know that some young people are already deeply disengaged from education at age 14 and two more years of classroom-based learning will exacerbate this problem and possibly be wasted time. Many schools, colleges and local authorities recognise this and have started to try to address the situation. In terms of curriculum, there are many innovative models mixing school-based provision for 14–16 year olds with practical one-day-a-week taster options such as BTEC Entry level at colleges or other providers. This allows ‘at-risk’ young people to learn in different environments and with more courses and facilities than perhaps is possible at their school. Some colleges have developed innovative models of ‘long-term tasters’ in different vocational areas to give 14–15 year olds the opportunity to refine and define what they want to do so that when they reach 16 they have arrived at a firm choice of course. In addition, they are integrated into the ethos and values of the college, have started to develop the necessary study skills, understand the timetables and are used to the environment.

This seems to be a good model for effective practice but we believe that more radical and whole-scale transformation of the system is required and it is time to formally incorporate more flexibility into the system at 14.

Research demonstrates that many of the young people disengaged from learning became disaffected in Key Stage 3 or the early years of secondary school. Clearly then, there is scope to focus on identifying what engages 13 and 14 year olds or what they want to do, and to give them real choices. In conjunction with the kind of earlier careers and work exposure mentioned, a curriculum flexibility that models itself on a carousel of activities and options could become a serious option. Rather than designing a fifth mainstream offer in an already cluttered curriculum landscape, youngsters at risk of disengaging should have the option of being taken out of the National Curriculum at 14 for a year to experience long-term tasters, a mix of vocational, practical, key skills and personal enrichment activities. This could be through whatever mix of provision is deemed appropriate and available locally – BTEC Entry-level courses, NOCN credits, third sector programmes or personal tuition to name but a few examples – with increased personal support through a tutor and mentor.

Depending on the choices made by the young person at the end of that year out of the National Curriculum, the system should allow them the option of re-entry back into Year 10 to start Key Stage 4 courses either at school or with some study at college if this is where the best facilities and staff for that course are. Or, the student could have the option of continuing with the qualifications that they have already sampled, selecting a full-time vocational or practical learning course, with key requirements in core skills.

With the onset of the QCF, and increased strategic and operational collaboration between school, college and local authority-commissioned providers, this kind of flexible ‘offstream’ option can become increasingly viable. Successful pilots in Wolverhampton, for example, which took one group of highly motivated students and a group of young people ‘at risk of disengagement’, demonstrated that the control group of more highly motivated students who continued with a traditional Key Stage 4 curriculum were actually less likely to remain in education and training after 16 than those who were defined as an ‘at-risk’ group at the start of the project, and taken offline to be given this alternative curriculum experience.

Giving the young people that year enables them to experience choice, ask questions, take some time doing something different, try practical learning, have hands-on tasters, get demonstrations from and work alongside employers, whilst getting input from trusted people. It expands their horizons at a very crucial developmental and transitional stage, while giving practical experience of wider careers and options, and allows for the flexibility of re-entry full-time into school.

### Case study

To combat disengagement and lack of attainment at KS4, the schools decided we needed to do something fundamentally different. There were serious issues around both ‘teaching and learning’ and lack of progression for that ‘bottom-end’ of KS4 students. Qualifications are too long and thin at this crucial stage of 14. These kids need a lot of support, they don’t like the classrooms and we needed to find ‘the switch’ that would get them engaged again; not wait another two years whilst delivering the existing qualifications.

The REAch project was born –the Raising Enjoyment and Achievement Programme. We looked at teaching and learning that takes kids out of the classroom. We wanted them to have diversity and choice, to experience different sectors of work and learning, and then to make positive choices. We split the school week into 3 days on core work and 2 days doing ‘option days’ to include vocational learning, work-based learning, Pre-apprenticeships, Diploma elements and so on. We worked with Edexcel to create a BTEC Level 1 in Vocational Studies, which is now on-line on the QCF. The courses are modular, locking students in 1 day a week for 12 weeks into completely different sectors which could range from retail to horticulture to engineering, so they are taken out of their comfort zone and exposed to completely new environments. Each student is tracked by a personal tutor, and one day a week focuses on personal and social skills – again, not in the classroom but using ASDAN\* and giving teachers the opportunity also to take kids out and teach in new ways. We worked with Sainsbury’s for example, to enable groups of students to track the entire supply chain from the warehouse through to the business office making orders.

The key elements to the programme are: diverse teaching environments, a range of industry sectors and learning experiences, practical and employer-based input, personalised support, modular outcomes and a focus on personal and social skills. We are now in our 4th cohort, with about 190 kids from 13 schools each year. The really significant findings are around the REAch students’ attitude towards learning which really improved significantly and ends up higher than the control group in school. Their levels of progression into further learning are also vastly improved and higher than the control group. Core skills are also improved.

John Price, Team leader 14–19 Executive,  
Wolverhampton City Council

It is also not as radical as it might sound: hardcore ‘disengaged’ young people are already often off the mainstream curriculum or away from traditional schools in PRUs. Some of the most successful programmes working with these young people have created skills centres offering a wider range of learning and focusing on building confidence, self-esteem and personal skills and interests. The recent Vox centres from training company A4E (Action for Employment) which have reported excellent retention and progression rates both for post-16 and adults, are an example of the kind of facilities that are already in place and could be brought more into the mainstream. Far better that young people, at 14, 16, 18 or older,

have the flexibility to try out these learning experiences rather than have a sequence of social workers and support services trying to address their options and interests in a more externalised and bureaucratic way after they have already disengaged from education.

This ‘year out’ comprising a carousel of options should be designed into the National Curriculum at the age of 14/end of Year 9, allowing individual learners to access a broader range of courses, qualifications and facilities than is possible at many schools. Typically, a young person could try 4–6 short courses lasting from a half to a full-term, in wider practical, vocational and skilled subjects. These would be complemented by enrichment activities in creative arts or community work, and by a strong focus on possible careers with employer-based workshops, hands-on learning, practical tasters and visits to places of work. Core lessons in numeracy and literacy could be built up towards the end of the ‘year out’ in whichever subjects and courses the young person is most enthused by. Once they are motivated by a subject or skill they enjoy, they feel confident that they can achieve in that subject, and this will be the most effective point at which to contextualise core literacy, numeracy and ICT skills. One FE principal we interviewed felt that learning pathways are insufficiently flexible to meet the needs of disengaged young people:

*We offer young people the curriculum the wrong way round. We talk about a broad-based curriculum with the core key stuff, but for ‘at risk’ groups we should offer a more narrow option which we know engages that individual, to hook them in, and then broaden it out later. We should focus on bits they enjoy first and then fold in the literacy – a broad curriculum may not appeal because you can fail at lots of things straight off. We should give them the chance to succeed at something narrower first.*

(Principal, FE college)

The cost implications of a ‘year out’ need not be as high as people might automatically assume. Much of this provision takes place already, albeit in quite a fractured way, with pockets of excellent practice and support. Third and voluntary sector organisations, FE colleges and local authorities have all built up portfolios of activities, outreach programmes and facilities to engage young people who have dropped out of school or are disaffected with learning and curriculum choices. These could be in the form of skills centres, workshops or activities provided by voluntary organisations and charities taking place in youth centres and their own premises. Collectively, these provide an impressive resource which needs to be formalised as part of the national offer and given the security of long-term funding streams. With sufficient quality assurance procedures in place, many of these existing programmes could come on-stream as providers of the ‘year off’ before KS4. The year off would provide a viable for young people to gain a wider, richer range of experiences and learning and to decide for themselves whether they would like to follow a practical or vocational route at 14, or whether – having gained experience, confidence and new skills – they would like to re-engage with GCSE qualifications through a combination of school or college teaching as appropriate.

To facilitate flexibility at this stage, staff across the full range of learning providers need to coordinate really effectively, not just through shared data arrangements, but also through shared assessment and workforce development and training for schools and college staff. This won’t happen automatically with the movement towards collaborative 14–19 partnerships because in practice many providers still operate as largely separate – even competing – institutions; our provider interviews indicated huge scope for genuine shared workforce development.

In terms of building up capacity in the system for young people to experience a wider range of courses at 14 and even before without necessarily being taken offline for a year, we should revisit the existing structure of the school day and yearly timetable. The last Labour Government's policy of extended schools has already set the wheels in motion for the school capital estate to become a hub of the community, open from breakfast until late in the evening and even weekends, available to host community activities, parenting classes and other extra-curricular activities. Schools could become the hosts for vocational and practical learning taster courses and workshops between 3 and 5 pm after the end of the school day. They could also offer more sports/drama/music/arts-based activities during this time, again not necessarily through resourcing it themselves but by acting as hosts for voluntary and third sector programmes. The school day has not been changed for three decades when there were more stay-at-home mothers and many young people also went to paid work in the afternoons. Long hours of free time after school – when up to 6 or 7 hours of daylight remain in the summer term – can provide fertile ground for peer groups to develop group behaviours which can ultimately lead to disengagement further down the line. A recent report by charity Action for Children (As Long as it Takes series, 2010) concluded that 'despite the advent of extended schools, many children (particularly older children) spend between 3pm and 7pm with no parent in the home and nothing to do. Lengthening the statutory school day has the potential to benefit, in particular those from deprived backgrounds or at risk of delinquency.'

Encouraging or even requiring schools to host these wider curricular options and extra-curricular activities would be a practical way to fold in the kind of taster courses for vocational qualifications and practical learning that could prepare the way for better choices at 14 and 16. It would benefit particularly either those who are disengaging from learning by this age, or those who are unsure of what choices they want to take and would like to get a feel for more options.

### **4.3 Increased work experience, placements and integrated course materials: bringing work to life**

Although DCSF guidance calls for awareness of and interaction with the world of work to start early on in secondary school, it also accepts that the consistency and quality of this exposure are varied (*14–19 Work-related learning: building on the best 2007*).

#### **Embedding careers awareness in the school curriculum and work experience**

Most young school children are highly engaged and have ambitions for the future. A recent online survey by the British Youth Council (BYC), National Children's Bureau (NCB) and Young NCB<sup>10</sup> found that only just under 20% of respondents rated the formal career advice they received as 'very helpful'. This is despite research into Year 7 pupils published alongside the 2009 DCSF strategy "*Quality, Choice and Aspiration*", which shows that 85% feel they know what job they want to do in the future, whilst 75% want to go to university, regardless of their socio-economic background. This year group is therefore beginning to develop clear ideas about the relationship between education, employment and 'success', even though many appear to consider the formal help they receive inadequate.

Overseas experience suggests that a key way to improve the system would be to integrate the world of work into education more systematically. Information about possible careers and opportunities should be threaded through the curriculum from an early age. We can do this both by embedding information and inspiring case studies in course materials and by practical exposure and work experience.

Much more could be done to bring the world of work to life for pupils in primary and secondary schools, throughout Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. Hands-on and taster days, more regular visits to the workplace in small groups, activities structured by employers, schools inviting local employers in to address young people – these activities are undertaken by the best schools but good practice is far from uniform. Visits to school by professionals provide dynamic, direct contact for young children. Work awareness and experience should form part of any whole-school assessment system. As NFER research (2009) on the area of choices at 14 clearly noted: ‘CEG seemed most influential where it involved a range of activities – such as assemblies, taster sessions and external visitors.’

Events aimed at broadening horizons for young students and exposing them to HE and FE options and experiences are delivering excellent support for NEET young people, reaching children when they are most receptive and have a sense that many things are possible. There are successful and ambitious projects that connect primary school children with the ideas and possibilities of qualifications and careers.

At Uxbridge College they start with local Year 6s and involve them through their **Aspire project** (which just won a London education partnership award). Every July for the last three years, in partnership with the borough authority and local universities, Uxbridge has invited local primary school children and parents to a range of vocational workshops.

Hundreds attend and the aim is to introduce the young pupils to the world of education and remind them that education can be fun, for example building rockets and making goo for science, inviting positive and inspirational rappers to make music and song come alive, while connecting this up with doing it for a living and making visible the idea that these are attainable and constructive professions.

It is important to note that the whole project involves about 100 staff – a lot of buy-in and commitment of resource – and so it was critical that their principal took a long-term view.

Targeting young school children from Year 6 upwards and designing events that involve all age groups in creative interaction with employers should be extended and supported to become standard practice across the country. It has the added benefit of helping to build practical links and working relationships across the wide range of partners who need to work together to bring a more flexible post-14 offer to life.

### Course materials

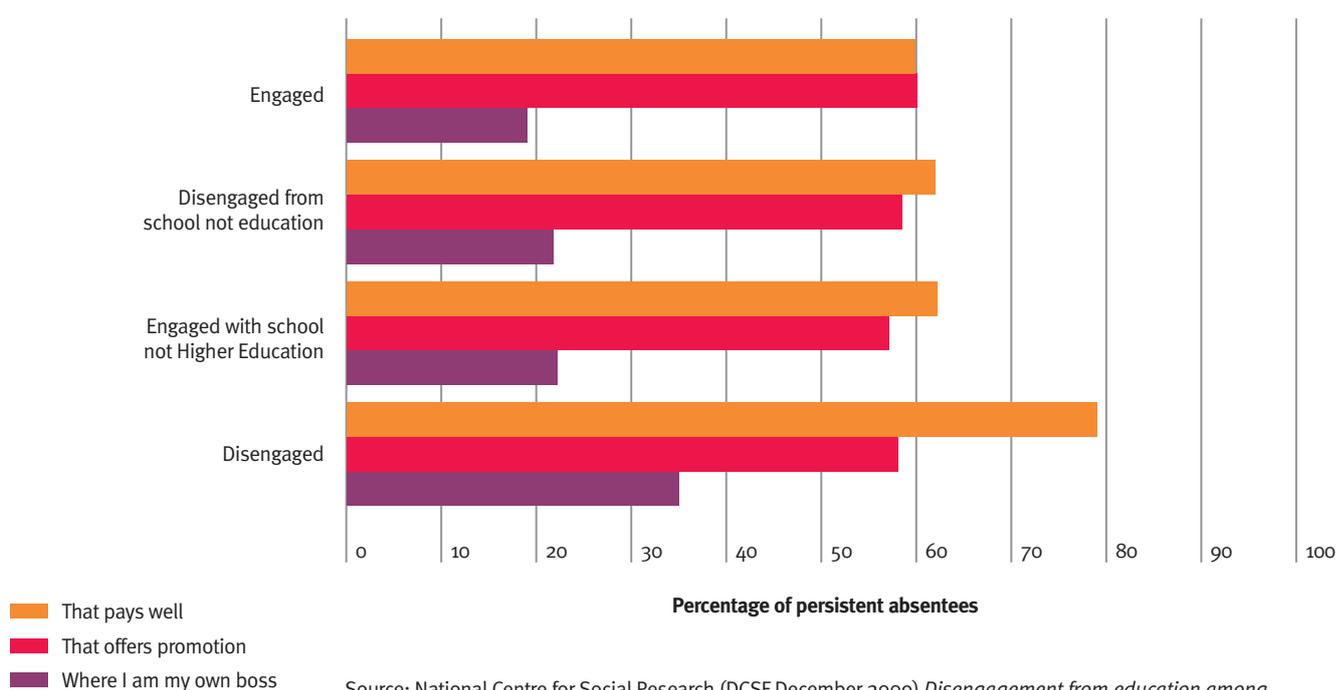
Explicitly integrating a sense of the world of work and of future learning and career pathways into subject teaching materials is a good way to ensure pupils’ continued awareness and focus on choices and possibilities in later life. It encourages them to continuously make links between what they are doing now and what they might do as adults. Textbooks could include more ‘spotlight sections’ on careers, and employment contexts should be woven into learning tasks, class activities and learning materials.

Although knowledge and learning should be valued for their own sake, there is a lot of room to incorporate more practical motivations into the course materials for 11–14 year olds at least. Linking learning to improved job prospects can be a very powerful motivator to engage young people in education as pointed out by several authors (eg LSDA 2003).

Motivation related to employment seems to be especially important between the ages of 15 and 19 (LSDA 2003), so encouraging learning providers to include workplace learning in the courses offered to young people can be an especially important mechanism in maintaining motivation among teenage students.

We could do more to ensure that the value of learning in terms of earning opportunities and transformed life chances is made more explicit, earlier in formal learning, as a way of addressing the wider socio-cultural context of disengagement and the low value placed on learning by many of the more hardcore ‘disengaged’. Recent Natcen research (December 2009) showed that disengaged young people were more likely than any other group to say that a high-earning job was important for them. Money thus seems to be a particular motivator for those at risk of being NEET, so it becomes a powerful tool to drive engagement.

**Figure 7 Extrinsic qualities young people want in a job**



Source: National Centre for Social Research (DCSF December 2009) *Disengagement from education among 14–16 year olds*, Andy Ross

As money can be a motivator, perhaps average wages could be explicitly stated when referencing some of the careers. Approximate salary brackets and a lively job description for an airline pilot, sitting within a page in a standard science book or web-based content material on aerodynamics or materials for a Leisure and Tourism Diploma, could grab a lot of young people’s attention.

As course materials become more web-based, the potential for links to podcasts showcasing real-life jobs and places of work, interviews and interactive materials becomes extensive and rich. If this were combined with visits to workplaces and interaction with young people in work, young students could project themselves in that role as a tangible possibility. This is active learning rather than passive absorption and allows young people to project themselves into positions of authority and responsibility – particularly effective in reaching out to those who are disengaged from school.

If we are serious about tackling disengagement in new and proactive ways it will be crucial to take a systematic approach to help teachers actively embed information about careers and learning opportunities within subject teaching. Teaching and learning assistants could also be charged with developing this dimension within schemes of work and wider school activities. Developing cross-curricular ‘career’ links is another area with untapped potential: for example, recent radio adverts highlight that speaking French could help you get ahead in the fashion industry, thus making the links for pupils between languages and creative media industries.

### More work visits and better work experience

Learning by doing, seeing and hearing from a trained professional undoubtedly can have a huge impact. One teacher we interviewed described a visit with Year 10 students to the science lab of a fashion college in which chemists explained their work and then engaged groups of students to create their own make-up and glitter eye gels. The students were disruptive girls, disengaged from science and having trouble completing the compulsory GCSE course. The afternoon visit transformed their attitudes and understanding; they were clamouring to sign up for the unpaid summer placements in the lab. Many said they had ‘never realised science could be so fun’, nor had they related it to possibilities around cosmetics and fashion. It made the subject relevant, engaging and real. And while hands-on learning of course takes place in school labs, this professional, adult environment impressed them with a different set of expectations and attitudes.

One of the government frameworks and guidance, *14–19 work-related learning: building on the best* (DCSF 2007), noted that:

*14–19 year olds participate in a wide range of work-related learning activities including enterprise projects; case studies; simulations; taster workshops; mentoring; mock interviews; days in industry; and visits linked to the curriculum*

and that ‘14–16 year olds participate in around 550,000 work experience placements with employers every year’. Ofsted emphasised that fresh guidance for schools and other practitioners was needed and there is a lot to do in terms of building capacity and capability (Ofsted 2010). Anecdotally, many young people say that most work experience is crammed into one or two weeks at the end of Year 10 or 11. It might not be creatively or constructively structured, and many pupils are left to get on with it on their own, with the bare minimum of feedback afterwards.

### Key findings

- Employers are committed to their relationships with education, with nearly two thirds (64%) having links with secondary schools.
- Over half of employers (56%) believe the biggest single contribution they can make to preparing young people for entry to a challenging labour market is to give them opportunities to gain work experience.
- Work experience could be improved and the number of openings increased by making the duration of placements more flexible – 48% of employers want to be able to deliver opportunities outside the traditional two-week block.
- While over a third of employers (37%) believe their current work experience programmes are of very high quality, most employers consider that they could do better.

Of course, it is unlikely that employers would be able to visit all their local secondary and primary schools, so education and business partnerships should look both at what can be federated into 'open day' experiences and what technology can do. Live video link-ups to places of work with real-time question and answer sessions by both pupils and employers would be a powerful and immediate way of helping make these environments a reality, encouraging dialogue between education and local business, being time-efficient for the employer and employees, and producing an exciting activity within the learning environment.

The principles driving innovation in the use of mobile learning and technology for assessment and off-site or work-related learning could be adapted and applied to incorporate links and activities with places of work. Aylesbury College, for example, is using high-quality video-conferencing equipment with software that enables WBL students to be involved using their Blackberries – paid for by the college through MoLeNET funding. It means the college is able to deliver tutorials to whole groups of learners who may be in different locations. This model could allow an employer to interact with many different schools and year groups simultaneously, demonstrating skills and activities at their workplace and fielding questions on entry requirements, interests, job prospects and progression.

Some MoLeNET projects have also used video-recording equipment (usually headcams, Flip cameras or Sony PSPs) to record activities in the workplace where it would be very difficult for a group of learners to crowd round and watch (eg working underneath a car or doing construction tasks). The idea is that the tutor/expert is recorded doing the task and the learners can then watch it back on their own devices if the recording is uploaded to the VLE for example or a big screen. This could be used to show classroom-based students the skills and tasks involved in a wide variety of jobs from car mechanics to TV studio camera operators to anaesthetists.

One college used devices with an inbuilt camera to record learners with literacy and communication development needs carrying out specific tasks. The college then helped the learners to incorporate these recordings into their CV to provide a visual record of their abilities to take to interviews with prospective employers. This kind of innovative work could help broaden the appeal and scope of any careers guidance tasks set within the curriculum.

Young people should get a feel for different courses and careers through taster sessions and high-quality experiences in workplaces, industry, FE and HE, but they need more attention and resourcing. Will the learning experience be integrated into the curriculum, through homework, formal presentations, group work or assemblies? Most work experience takes place over a week or two at the end of Years 10 or 11 but its impact could be optimised in a variety of ways. There should be formal class preparation, investigation and activities. Learners should write work diaries documenting their experience and teachers should assist in setting additional tasks to enrich the placement experience. Interview questions should be explored and established, which each young person must then ask their employer. Agreed learning outcomes should be identified and fed back to the class or used as the basis for a project. There is immense potential in terms of diverse enrichment activities and tasks – recording experiences, interviewing each other, mapping industry sectors, individual investigations of local or national places of work, and interviews around career paths with members of the community and local employers.

Work-placement periods should also be staggered throughout the year, rather than being bunched up at the end of the summer term, as this leads to huge competition for places particularly in smaller towns and villages.

Some Year 10s and Year 11s have, through a class or work experience project, produced work for publication with employers which is then used by the public. GCSE students in Tower Hamlets and London Bridge, for example, produced local history booklets for a local regeneration partnership – an inspiring model of how young people’s ambitions and experiences can be taken beyond the classroom.

## Case study

### Producing a local history booklet for tourists

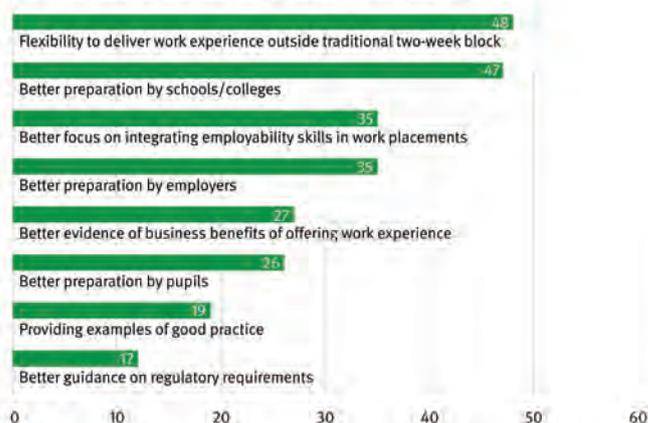
A local regeneration partnership commissioned a school to produce a tourist guide booklet covering the area from London Bridge to Tower Bridge along the north and south banks of the River Thames. The task was undertaken by GCSE History students for their local history coursework. The designated area was rich in history and had been recently renovated as a tourist location. The students carried out extensive research of the area and collected a large amount of data.

They began to understand the role of heritage and regeneration in the local economy, and developed their knowledge and understanding of local history. As the amount of information that could be published was restricted by the size of the guide, students spent considerable time selecting what they wanted to include. They verified the historical data, wrote the text and then decided how to present it in an interesting way. To design the guide, the students met a very tight deadline set by the partnership. Throughout the project, they were very aware that they were producing a real product that would be used by tourists.

Initiatives such as the Big Conversation, spearheaded by Sir Stuart Rose and launched in September 2009, aim to ‘turn work experience into work inspiration’ by encouraging businesses themselves to lead on making the work experience they offer more insightful, innovative and inspiring. Such campaigns represent a positive and increasing recognition by business that they can get more involved with shaping an active contribution with school-age young people. The work of the Employer and Education Taskforce in continuing to galvanise such initiatives is very welcome.

Businesses clearly have their own views about how work experience can be improved and this energy and goodwill must be harnessed and developed.

### Exhibit 26 Action required to improve work experience for school/college pupils (%)



**Exhibit 28 Benefits to business of offering work experience (%)**

Number of employees	1-49	50-199	200-499	500-4,999	5,000+	All respondents
Future recruitment	42	68	71	79	90	72
A better community and public image	27	55	73	66	70	61
Helping the learning and skills development of existing staff	41	23	28	31	34	30
A higher profile for the organisation	20	21	25	33	24	27
Brings in fresh ideas	41	22	30	21	30	26
Increases staff morale	9	12	4	6	5	7
Don't feel there are any benefits to the organisation	12	12	6	4	2	7

Source: CBI and EDI (2010) *Ready to grow: business priorities for education and skills*, Education and skills survey 2010

#### 4.4 Improved IAG and CEG

Among the greatest challenges in supporting a young person's development and learning choices is the provision of individual, impartial and comprehensive IAG and support. Improved IAG really helps cohorts of NEETs, particularly those who are 'undecided' and those who want to find work or training. In an era of social networking there are important implications for IAG models; peer-to-peer networks such as Horse's Mouth have introduced a new dimension and way for young people to empower themselves. It is vital to improve the quality of advice for young people at 14, as the Skills Commission's 2008 inquiry into IAG revealed. The commission's report concluded that present IAG for young people is 'inadequate' and recommended restoring funding levels to pre-2001 levels, since when there has been a 16% drop in government funding.

*Research shows that, worryingly, few 16-year-olds have received one-to-one careers advice sessions in recent years. Only two in five young people are now seen individually by a personal adviser, who is not always a trained careers adviser.*

(Margaret Christopoulos, University of Derby, Careers teachers could do better The Times 13 September 2009)

We need to remember, throughout any discourse, that excellent careers advice does exist but even then can only do so much. Young people are still greatly influenced by peers, parents, local contexts and opportunities – research by Edge reminds us that the two biggest factors in influencing choices and careers are parents and teachers.

Nonetheless, huge improvements can be made and it is incumbent upon all those involved in the learning and skills system to make them. Indeed, methods for addressing such an IAG deficit were outlined in a report by Blenkinsop *et al.* (2006). The research found that schools do have the capacity to make a real difference in terms of the ways in which young people make decisions. Schools with good curriculum management, good student support and strong leadership seemed to produce the young people who made the most rational decisions and who remained happy with their choices six months later. Where students were well supported (as above), they were more likely to be influenced by CEG providers and teachers than by parents and friends.

Good IAG and CEG is particularly effective for those ‘unsure’ young people who either are or are at risk of becoming NEET. As the recent NFER and LGA research *Collaborative good practice between local authorities and the further education sector* (2009) showed, even where there are good partnership working and joined-up, co-resourced strategies, impartial IAG can sometimes take a back seat:

*Effective collaboration between LAs and FE colleges was perceived to have contributed towards improved progression and engagement of young people in education and training. This was supported by a reduction in the ‘not in employment, education or training’ (NEET) figures in all nine case-study areas over the past few years ... While our findings indicate successful collaboration has contributed to planning and enhancing the range and quality of provision and support for transition, there appeared to be **less current emphasis on IAG** at a time when comprehensive, independent, impartial guidance for young people might be viewed as essential due to the changes in 14–19 education and training provision. (our emphasis)*

Furthermore, there seems to be no accepted model or framework for giving careers advice and guidance: ‘There is no theoretical or cognitive basis’ for the IAG processes to which young people are subjected at 13–14, and which assign them to a pathway: ‘It’s to do with assumptions about cultural capital and the nature of broad intelligence...diffusely described by the professionals who have to make the decisions, and not very precise’ (William Richardson, quoted in *Mind the Gap*, Edge Foundation 2010).

As the Edge Learner Forum has argued, IAG should focus on unlocking a young person’s potential and recognise the range of information channels, including informal advice from peers and social networking sites, which shape decisions. A significant cohort of current ‘NEET’ are simply those **unsure** of what they want to do and what the options are. They can feel overwhelmed, or make wrong choices which can then lead to further and possibly more entrenched disengagement.

IAG is particularly important during transitional periods, such as between Key Stages 3 and 4, and between compulsory and post-compulsory education when it is important to ensure that young people are aware of their options, and are given more guidance and support if they fail to apply in time or are unable to secure their preferred option.

The importance of choices made at 14 should be underlined throughout Years 8 and 9 – not in a didactic, fear-inducing way, but as a process of explicitly sharing possibilities and options leading to specific careers with learners. There should be far more careers education and guidance throughout Years 8 and 9 to elicit young people’s views on their interests and talents and ensure they have a broad understanding of possibilities available.

There are many ways to improve the IAG offer. At the end of October 2009 the DCSF's strategy paper on IAG for young people, *Quality, choice and aspiration*, signalled a recognition that stronger frameworks and better resources are needed but despite pledging 'better careers guidance' and 'guarantees' of impartial high-quality advice, it is difficult to see how real changes will be brought about. It does not discuss how exactly the personal tutors/mentors drawn from existing school staff would have the time, training and resource to get skilled and motivated to deliver this careers guidance agenda – beyond a mention of resources forthcoming from the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA). Rather than requiring existing staff members to take on these duties, and learn new skills and knowledge, an independent, professional careers service is the only way to deliver real change within this agenda. There is mention of 'state of the art' online IAG resources but it is not fleshed out. Despite the fine words in the DCSF strategy document, very little may have changed at the delivery end in two years' time, even if the full strategy is implemented and the Coalition Government should look at bringing in far more specific and targeted measures.

Of course, there are many good models of collaborative and 'joined-up' practice: NFER and LGA research (2009) cite examples of local authorities, Connexions and FE colleges collaborating on IAG forums, joint 'employment road shows', employer engagement events and Connexions' choices events. They note that schools increasingly liaise with colleges at parents' evenings and colleges may support Connexions to hold events at local secondary schools, broadening young people's horizons and helping to make them aware of their choices and different progression pathways.

Staff visits between colleges and Connexions services also improve Connexions staff understanding of the courses and opportunities available for young people. One Connexions service manager noted:

*If staff here are going to provide accurate information, advice and guidance in relation to the college, they need to be fully aware of what the college offers so that when they are talking to the young people, they have that knowledge to hand.*

Sharing information is thus vital, and key agencies across a local authority should agree to provide information via a re-engagement form that identifies individual learners' needs.

IAG, in tandem with an awareness of work and increased interaction with employers, needs to be a cumulative, active process developed throughout a school and college career rather than the passive, single event that is often the case in schools now. It needs to start much lower down at Year 6, to make young people gradually and systematically aware of the world of work through a regular, open-minded and exploratory process. It should also be built up in a progression framework, so that self-development and awareness become more embedded throughout the young person's education and the classic 'careers interview' would be the final step in the journey, and not the first thing. As one interviewee told us:

*The careers interview should not just be the one-off, only event or the beginning of considering these things, it should be the culmination, the end point in a long and rich journey of experiences.*

(Careers guidance tutor, London college)

Whilst it is important to provide IAG to young people who are not in formal education Foskett, (2004) and Hayward *et al.* (2008) suggest that providing IAG outside the formal educational context could allow young people to access it in a context that they do not associate with failure.

#### 4.4.1 Course labelling

It is crucially important to enable individuals themselves to understand what they can gain from a course and where it might lead. Even the best careers guidance operates within a context where young people are influenced by their friends and family and have access to a lot of information. ‘Course labelling’ as espoused by UKCES and BIS, would be a step in the right direction, allowing people to see retention and destination data as well as ‘customer satisfaction’ ratings. This could help not only to make past learners’ experiences more transparent, but also to drive up quality and weed out poorly performing courses.

Course labelling should make clear what the course qualifies you to do and, we would argue, what the *national job picture* for that occupation looks like. Sector Skills Councils and universities tell us there has been a huge upsurge in applications and courses around forensic psychology – often driven by popular TV crime shows such as *Silent Witness* or *CSI* – and for computer game design; but not all apparently relevant courses really equip people to progress within a sector. Some may lack the rigorous components required, for example advanced maths for software programming in gaming; in other cases, such as forensic psychology, there are very few actual jobs available. Time and money may have been spent on a course that may not get you to the required standard, or in an area in which there are many applicants for few jobs. The endorsement of any relevant professional association could be crucial here to indicate clarity, information dissemination and regulation.

An important question is how skills development can be integrated more closely with local and regional **labour market information**, and whether this is ever possible. Many would argue that since we cannot adequately predict future jobs and growth sectors, generic cognitive and employability skills such as goal orientation, problem-solving, information-processing, organising and decision-making should be recognised as central. Learners in the future will need to be more ‘adaptable’.

There are wider issues around matching up good IAG and the personal interests and aptitudes of young people with a grounded, realistic awareness of the labour market opportunities in a locality or region. The mismatch between large volumes of young people being encouraged onto certain courses and the availability of jobs in that sector has been under increasing spotlight with the recession and a stark increase in youth unemployment. For instance, the BBC reported there are more students on courses in performing arts and media than there are jobs in the entire entertainment industry – including cinema usherettes and lap dancers. Similarly, there are around 150,000 students on hair and beauty courses, which is similar to the total number of hairdressers in the UK (quoted in *Courses for jobs* Incentive plan, BBC Online, October 2009).

As one provider interviewee noted, really good careers education guidance means you have to do more than just elicit a young person’s interests and aptitudes:

*You have to be honest and upfront with them about the opportunities and possibilities and what’s good for them. You must discuss whether there are and will be vacancies in that sector and discuss alternatives.*

If FE and HE courses do start to include satisfaction ratings, drop-out rates, learners' destinations and even earnings potential, a clearer picture of sector potential will emerge. Redesigning the system in this way may also help to break down the 'academic–vocational' divide more effectively than curriculum and qualification re-designs. For example, a recent analysis showed that although only about 60% of English graduates from a redbrick university had moved into paid employment within six months, 95% of those on the new golf management and design course at Aberdeen University had been snapped up by employers before they had even graduated. A key conclusion of this research (quoted in 'Mickey Mouse degrees?' *Sunday Times*, 13 September 2009) is that the quality of these new, often more vocational degree courses, is paramount, and the support and involvement of industry bodies are crucial to ensure quality, relevance and linkage into employment. Equally, many arts graduates will end up with excellent career paths in a diverse range of sectors, but they may take longer to 'settle' into their chosen trajectory and this will not be clearly reflected in 'destination data', which could give a misrepresentative picture.

Given that paying for courses is now a fact of life for many people, they will increasingly feel entitled to exercise this kind of analytical customer choice, but one must beware of unintended consequences. A potential drawback to giving retention and destination data attached to course descriptions could be that skewed pressures emerge through the development of some kind of informal league table. If institutions felt that they were directly in competition on the basis of this sort of information, they might very well start to select primarily on the basis of whether a candidate would successfully complete the course or seemed likely to progress quickly to employment or higher studies, rather than whether the course would help the individual get back into education or training, which could have many but harder to measure benefits. Such a league-table mentality would have a negative impact on vulnerable or low-achieving students who are more at risk of falling into a NEET category. A course-labelling system should therefore be designed and implemented with due consultation and care.

## 4.5 Transition support specific to each stage

The individual learner journey can often be lost in policy solutions, but specific targeting of focus and resources at transition points in school, training and employment can yield substantial benefits.

### Primary to secondary

It was noted in section 1 that a sizeable proportion of primary school children move into secondary school already up to two years behind in literacy and numeracy. Given the change in school system that a Year 7 pupil will typically encounter – from one form teacher to many subject teachers and from a small community to a much larger one – it is easy for young pupils to feel overwhelmed, intimidated and perhaps lost in the system. Strong pastoral support is essential, while limiting the new people and cross-school movement that Year 7s are exposed to may help to ensure they find their place and have trusted others present in their daily school lives. Tutor group systems have been shown to be effective in providing pastoral support, good informal monitoring of progress and the all-important friendly faces that 11 year olds fresh from primary school need. Cross-generational tutor groups and peer support across year groups work well in fostering links outside peer groups and can help reduce bullying, improve socialising and allow pupils to gain perspectives outside their own year group and experience.

In Wales, *Aiming for Excellence and Moving On...Effective Transition from Key Stage 2 to 3* provides more targeted support around Key Stage 3. As a strategy it is part of the wider Welsh Assembly's vision of a Learning Country and consists of a programme of resources and practical advice, as well as extra funding to devise transition plans supporting pupils as they move from primary to secondary school. This agenda has been supported with the Cymorth Fund, targeting resources into specific services and projects, including those that support the education transition.

Transition between primary and secondary school has already been flagged as an area that requires more support. The Government, spurred by professional bodies and pressure from grassroots, has recently pledged money for intensive personal tuition and support for those struggling at the start of secondary school. Current one-to-one tuition has been protected by the Coalition Government for another year, but thereafter is open to question, and whether it will be of uniform high quality remains to be seen. Perhaps the teaching structures within secondary schools could do more to focus on those already behind at Year 7 in the way setting, streaming and curriculum are arranged, for example considering timetabling intensive support in a separate catch-up curriculum.

The head teacher of George Green's secondary school in east London believes that working closely with her feeder primaries is key.

'We are having pupils arriving in Year 7 with severe emotional and behavioural problems,' she says. Many incoming pupils will also be taking Ritalin, the drug frequently used to control Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

George Green has set up nurture groups (smaller classes that focus on emotional and social development) for its most vulnerable Year 7 pupils, and is embedding 'SEAL' (social and emotional aspects of learning) skills across its curriculum. It also holds training workshops for teachers on conflict resolution techniques.

### Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4

NfER research on choices made at 14 reminds us that there can be a gulf between pupils' and teachers' attitudes towards key choices. As NfER Local Government Association (LGA) research showed (2008): 'The students interviewed generally felt that it was an important matter, whereas some staff placed relatively little emphasis on the choices to be made at age 14.'

These kinds of experiences need to be tackled with greatly improved in-school staff training alongside wider input from an independent, impartial, professional careers adviser from outside the school. NfER noted that young people wanted reassurance that the choices they made were not critical, hoping that the curriculum would be broad enough to enable them to change direction later if they wished, but they also seemed to want teachers to acknowledge that option decisions were important. As one interviewee suggested, the decision was one that she could 'not afford to get ... wrong'.

NFER conclude that schools may need to consider ways in which staff balance the emphasis they give and the support they provide to young people, so that they see the decisions as important (and understand that their teachers see them as important) but are not overwhelmed by them. These sorts of decision-making skills should be part of young people's ongoing development. For example, building decision-making into personalised learning programmes rather than focusing on it during a one-off discussion would be a constructive way forward.

### **From school to college**

The atmosphere of an FE college is very different from school and an inability to cope with the necessary authority structures within school is often cited as a major cause of disengagement for many young people. This has led to a rise in programmes bringing learning 'to the street corner' or into youth clubs, to provide a mix of activities in a setting that NEET young people can find engaging, accessible and unthreatening. Solo youth workers, detached from teams, are increasingly being used in local government teams to make contact with young people in parks, shopping centres and on street corners.

Adopting such approaches raises issues around managing transition from education into employment and how to prepare young people for the move from informal settings to more formal or work-based environments. If we constantly reach out to engage NEETs in learning on their own terms, are we doing them a disservice in not realistically preparing them for their next steps in work? One interviewee asked:

*Is 'alternative provision' in an informal style and environment going to reinforce everything being on their own terms, and how will that sit in a professional context where you have to obey the boss and work in quite rigid and hierarchical environments?*

(Business manager, third sector organisation)

### **Pupil Referral Units to mainstream**

The transition from Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) to mainstream FE settings is particularly relevant to potential/NEET young people and the general preparations for RPA because the difference in environment, personal support and class sizes, for example, can be very destabilising. Connexions staff and other advisers could work with the PRUs to support learners for the transition. This could include taster sessions at the college so that young people become more comfortable in such surroundings and strategies to ensure that information about learners, including any specific behavioural problems, is passed onto the college prior to transition. The local authority can then monitor the success of the procedures through analysis of retention data.

In some areas LA and FE providers are developing protocols to support early leavers, with a particular focus on young people who drop out of education in the first autumn term of transition from pre- to post-16 education. This involves mapping current practices and support, including the way in which interviews are carried out with young people, to inform development of further support programmes.

An important area that would merit further development is around understanding and minimising the differences in teaching methodologies pre- and post-16, to ensure that young people are helped to adjust and supported if they find the pedagogical changes or different study skills required too big a change. Simple steps could include joint school and FE staff training days to build awareness of respective teaching styles and environments, or ensuring that everyone knows a common procedure for flagging concerns with individual students. These steps could be implemented fairly cheaply and provide a crucial role in ensuring there are support and monitoring mechanisms for students at this sensitive transition stage.

### **Vocational learning as part of transition support specific to 13–16**

Experience, research with young people and lessons learned from support programmes all suggest that practical, hands-on or work-related learning can help engage the interest of young people at risk of becoming disengaged and then NEET.

In 2008, West Nottinghamshire College opened a dedicated NEET centre. Located in the former coal-mining community of Sutton-in-Ashfield, it provides tailored vocational programmes to meet the social and educational needs of teenagers who have been failed by the system, or lack the confidence to access the college's mainstream provision. Classes consist of no more than 13 students, who all have access to a free bus service and a free breakfast.

In its first year, 49 of the teenagers enrolled at the centre successfully completed their programme. The majority progressed to the next level, and three entered employment. In the second year, 116 out of 120 students completed their programme and 104 progressed into work or further training at the main college sites.

The college is keen to build on this success by opening a NEET centre in Mansfield, a town struggling to recover from the demise of the mining and textile industries. A site has been earmarked and the centre will cost around £750,000 to get up and running. Frustratingly, says Asha Khemka, the Principal, they've struggled to persuade government departments even to consider this sort of support.

University technical colleges (UTCs), as currently promoted by the Baker Dearing Educational Trust and supported by the new Government, could provide an integrated way to deliver broader learner experiences and qualifications in specialist technical facilities and delineate more clearly the progression routes possible at 14, 16 and 18 years old. Current political support for UTCs echoes the desire to stretch vocational qualification pathways and suggests perhaps a tacit convergence on the idea that combined on-site facilities are a means to better support academic and vocational pathways.

Edge noted in its 2009 paper *Six steps to change – manifesto 2009* that the billions spent on the Building Schools for the Future programme could have been better spent if braver curriculum decisions had already been taken allowing the development of technical and vocational specialist facilities on-site at schools or colleges, to enable a coherent 14–19 offer. UTCs could go some way to providing a distinct vocational route at 14 based on established technical qualifications, thus broadening the curriculum at an early age and encouraging more seamless progression to higher levels of training through FE, HE and Apprenticeships.

### Transition into college

Well-managed transitions with focused support, particularly for the most vulnerable, can reduce the risk of learners becoming disengaged, dropping out and potentially becoming more long-term NEET. *Collaborative good practice between local authorities and the further education sector report*, (NFER and LGA 2009), outlines good practice models between the partners that need to collaborate to tackle NEETs. For example, in some colleges the FE 14–19 manager holds case conferences with local schools' Year 11 heads to discuss individual pupils before they start college. This helped, for example, where some young people were self-harming but the college hadn't realised they were vulnerable and needed support:

*Previously it might have taken staff up to six weeks to realise there was an issue by which time the student might have already dropped out.*

(FE college, pastoral support officer)

Part of the current transition work is establishing information about applicants when they apply. Several FE professionals interviewed noted that it can be difficult to get information on vulnerable young people at the 16-year-old transition, but it is generally agreed to be getting better.

Young people most at risk of disengagement also need more time to settle into college life and are, for example, invited to the college in the summer for a pre-induction, receive an enhanced induction package and meet their learning mentors personally.

As has been cited above, much innovative practice involves providers:

- sharing data
- identifying vulnerable young people together
- doing joint work which bridges transition points.

For example, colleges might start to work with the potential NEET group before they enrol at college. In terms of cross-team partnership working and data-sharing, staff and curriculum teams might refer withdrawals to support teams so that low attendance can be monitored as a warning. Providers and partners increasingly use systems such as the JANET text (joint academic network texting system) to keep in touch with learners.

Some local authorities and colleges employ dedicated personal advisers (PAs) who are placed strategically with organisations that work intensively with vulnerable young people, for example YMCA teenage mums, looked-after children, youth offenders. Intensive PAs are critical in creating face-to-face, personal, consistent and a trusted other.

The PA might bring the young people in to college to support them through the enrolment process, or make contact with their team in college to fast track any vulnerable students. Once young people are enrolled – often the biggest hurdle – they also introduce them to the student services team, to ensure they have a named person and personal contact. The relationship is thus in place before there is any problem with the course.

There was consensus in our interviews that a lot depends on the skills of the staff – ‘Individuals matter!’ – and some queried whether enough time and resources have been allocated to training frontline staff rather than staying at the level of strategic objectives and the language of ‘progression pathways’ and ‘supported learning routes’, which young people would have trouble recognising. Have lecturers, for example, been given adequate opportunity to develop their skills in engaging young people at risk?

### Peer support

Peer support can be useful in the transition process and vulnerable young people are particularly in need of advice and guidance from trusted others with whom they can build relationships. Colley (2003, 2006), for example, provides examples of how young people who had disengaged from learning were encouraged to re-engage with learning based on mentoring. Many providers are looking to develop IAG-specific peer mentoring, which means training the peer to know where to refer a young person struggling to make decisions. This can act as a really useful extra network although it is vital that, given the many complex needs some ‘disengaged’ and ‘unsure’ young people have, that the mentor is exceptionally well supported. It shows that local authorities and other organising bodies are trying to prepare for RPA in a variety of innovative ways, and can act as a useful stepping stone for young people who need help but don’t want to talk to outside people and would rather talk to another young person. It provides extra capacity in the system, at a time when it will be ever more stretched, although the usual provisos about the need for training and quality assurance apply.

Peers can be a remarkably powerful and direct way to publicise different qualifications among young people. The ability of peers and recent school leavers to act as a means for effective communication about the possibilities of various courses and careers should be harnessed. Their experiences are compelling because they are so close to the subject/year groups listening, and they can become powerful ‘careers ambassadors’. Successful Apprentices could be sent back into local schools, for example, to address a school assembly or CEG class to talk about their experience of the qualification, what they have learned and what it equips them for in the future. According to some of the young people we spoke to this sort of peer-to-peer learning is more ‘real’, less remote and less intimidating

Vulnerable young people particularly need advice and guidance from trusted others with whom they can build relationships over time. A successful programme, praised by several practitioners on the ground in our interviews, was the mentoring element of Aim Higher, which, delivered as a community project, organises professionals to mentor young people in the community. Again, it encourages exposure to different environments, aiming to broaden young people’s horizons at key ages:

*It makes the young person realise the dedication and focus they have to put in to reaching their goals, and has a massive positive effect on their confidence.*

(Development manager, large FE college)

Once more the importance of personal contact and a trusted individual was underlined:

*(Mandatory) exposure in a curriculum at school is very different to the kind of exposure gained from a stranger giving of their time. It can take up to six sessions before the young person will open up.*

(Business and outreach manager, third sector provider)

Our interviewees also noted that sustained intervention is important:

*Careers guidance is for direction and support; it's not just about helping with jobs and CV. You have to follow up, check if they got the job or course, if they are liking it, and so on. You have to let them know unequivocally 'we are here for you'. It helps to be local and to have longevity. Many kids are very disappointed that there are constant changes in teachers for example.*

(Business and outreach manager, third sector provider)

Creative ideas around placing unemployed graduates in a school to help and mentor young people about transitions, training and qualification options and paying them a wage above that of Jobseeker's Allowance have recently been suggested by David Blanchflower, respected labour economist and former member of the Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee (Blanchflower 2009) among others. It would help address youth unemployment during this difficult period, plug an existing gap in some mentoring/IAG areas and also skill up a tranche of young graduates. That said, there are of course implications around who would train these young people and how quality would be assured and maintained.

## 4.6 Alternative systems: age not stage

Another option that deserves serious consideration is 'age not stage' – an approach gradually being rolled out in more innovative schools which recognise that pupils mature at different times and have different needs.

Stourport School has, for example, Year 9 students studying alongside Year 10 and Year 11 students if the course is right for them. Head teacher Liz Quinn explains, 'Having this flexibility gives young people the freedom to pursue their individual interests and talents, which can be very motivating.' By expanding Key Stage 4 provision, pupils can start GCSEs earlier where appropriate or broaden their education experience with vocational courses, and the number of pupils has risen dramatically as a result.

At the other end of the scale is the perhaps more politically sensitive model of 'holding back' students until they have successfully 'passed' the year. This is the model used in France and Germany, for example, with the rationale that schools will function better if most of the class is at a comparable standard, and the pupil-citizen has to earn their progression; it is not an unqualified right. Supporters argue that the normative pressure of being the tallest kid in the class and dropping behind friends is enough to make students knuckle down, and point out that it would relieve a lot of pressure on secondary schools to provide intensive tuition and support for Year 7s who are behind required standards for reading, writing and numeracy. Primary schools would no longer be able to 'pass the problem up' and it could counter a common source of disengagement when, being behind the class at the start of Year 7, the secondary curriculum speeds away from the pupil who has trouble reading, often leading to further failure and disengagement.

Critics of this system point out that this 'normative pressure' could just as easily backfire and cause resentful, humiliated and disengaged young pupils from an even earlier age. The central questions are whether keeping pupils back at primary level has the desired effect on their eventual achievement and, if so, whether 'pushing' pupils who are behind into secondary school is more or less cruel?

Research in America by RAND found that:

*... students who were kept in the fifth grade [10/11 yr olds] for an additional year showed significant improvement in standardized tests over the next three years compared with low-performing students before the policy went into effect in 2004.*

(September 2009)

It is certainly significant that this is a policy practised in the Netherlands, a country generally lauded for its emphasis on and positive outcomes for child welfare. If it is deemed to be too drastic a measure for widespread implementation, perhaps pilots should be commissioned in some local authorities and setting and streaming policies should be more rigorously assessed and standardised.

### **Work-related learning**

It is clear from a review of literature, research, governmental studies and interviews with practitioners and sector experts that work-related learning has a key role to play in providing practical support for young people as they progress from education to full employment and in stimulating and engaging those at risk from dropping out of conventional schooling. We know that for many young people, WRL imparts practical experience and skills, familiarises them with a more adult and employment-based environment, and opens up new contacts and networks that can lead to further possibilities. A wage and a job give independence, security and self-esteem and can engage young people more than the traditional classroom environment.

However, the perennial problem of employer capacity remains. In addition, we would have to ask why an employer would be motivated to take on an 'at-risk' young person to give them accredited work-based training as part of a core offer. Most employers want to choose the brightest and the best, those that have the best work-ready, positive attitude and are willing to 'go the extra mile', rather than the most disaffected of the year group. Employer bodies have already suggested that it is not up to employers to remedy what they see as failures in education and there is a risk that their goodwill will be compromised if they are expected to provide placements to young people who have failed at conventional education routes.

## **4.7 Learning accounts**

The need to introduce greater flexibility into navigating employment and education systems could be addressed through learning accounts. The current strategy will not apply these to 16–18 funding but would help to target 19–24 year-old NEETs who find the current system too inflexible and wish to re-engage with education and training. Further, if the RPA does not survive the Coalition Government's autumn education legislation, the model might be extended back to these earlier age groups.

Learning accounts allocate the individual a set amount of money, allowing them to deposit cash in varying amounts and hold it in their account. They can spend the money on their own choice of provision in their own desired timeframe. They could receive corresponding matched payments from the Government and make direct cash payments to approved suppliers for whatever they want to learn, in whatever form they want to learn.

Learning accounts have great potential to deliver more genuinely personalised provision and introduce vital flexibility between the ages of 16 and 25, particularly important for those who make transitions across education or employment later than the current model prescribes. People have different circumstances and are motivated at different times, particularly across the 16–25 age group when employment, earnings, housing and support needs can be complex and vary considerably. Indeed the action group Catch22 go as far as to say that the state demonstrates a confused and arbitrary approach to the transition to adulthood, with rules about entitlement to benefits such as income support, housing benefit and Jobseeker’s Allowance variously changing at ages 16, 18, 22 or 25. ‘Structuring services around artificial cut-off points based on age is unhelpful’ (*Ready or not*, 2010). A move away from silo funding focused solely on targets such as NEETs, homelessness and drug treatment would be a huge step in the right direction, and pooled budgets across local authority departments are central to this.

However, we could go further by introducing robust learning accounts that give NEETs the opportunity to re-knit back into education or training, providing a mechanism to give access to training after traditional cut-off points. For example, a young mother we spoke to who had dropped out of school aged 16 to have a baby wanted to re-engage and get some qualifications at 20 with her child now in nursery. Under the current system, however, she believed her benefits could be compromised if she returned to education. Whether this was accurate or not, it shows how complex the system is, with different parts of the economic and employment system not being integrated and inflexibility around age cut-off points. A learning account that put money and control into the hands of the individual could provide the mechanism for both clarity and flexibility – and higher levels of re-engagement – in this scenario. Government could quality control those providing the education or training through a robust system of accreditation, something noticeably missing from the fraud-ridden fiasco of Individual Learning Accounts last time round.

As noted in the Centre for Innovation in Learning’s last report *Beyond Leitch: skills policy for the upturn*, skills or learner accounts would need to give individuals real discretion to purchase provision, based on better labour market information, guidance and transparent pricing information. Skills accounts should not simply be a portal through which individuals access existing entitlements but must be money *deposited with the learner* who can choose when and where to spend it, and can top up with their own investment.

Alison Wolf’s recent paper, published by this think tank, entitled *How to shift power to learners*, forensically analyses the different methods of design and delivery that would be needed to ensure a successful learning accounts scheme, as part of a wider structural overhaul to make learning and skills more genuinely responsive. She emphasises the importance of allowing learners to pay providers directly with no complex intermediary or bureaucratic/institutionalised steps.

Learning accounts, in the context of NEETs and ‘at-risk’ young people, have the enormous benefit of conferring genuine choice and empowerment on the individual. Young people can store up or save money in their accounts, for example, enabling them to take a longer term view of learning, rather than feeling they are jumping through a bureaucratic hoop in the form of a short course required to continue receiving their benefit. In social psychological terms, a feeling of choice and control is hugely important in engaging and motivating many young people who feel disenchanting with or bewildered by the education and training system.

It allows them to move from being passive ‘consumers’ of provision to active agents within it, able to investigate and choose their own progression, supported, of course, by appropriate advice and guidance and tasters to experience the options on offer. This psychological dimension of choice and empowerment would, we feel, have enormous benefit and positive impact for many within the NEET cohort.

### Case study

#### Integrating systems for employment and education

Jersey has independent financial structures for learning, skills and unemployment support but it does provide an interesting example of a response to increasing unemployment. Before the recession there was quite a full employment economy but that changed with recession and youth unemployment started to grow.

Ed Sallis, Principal of Highlands College, explains:

*The social security system was exaggerating the problem because of the pull of getting Jobseeker’s Allowance in place of coming into the college. The less well off and low achievers were particularly vulnerable.*

So, working in partnership with the college, the body responsible for Jobseeker’s Allowance changed their rules. The college and social security system share the database of student applications, so they designed an alternative route whereby young people go to college first, with options to do a work-based learning course, for example. In conjunction with this, benefits cease if students drop out (an interesting precursor of the RPA?).

The college principal consulted head teachers early in the planning and together they were able to foresee the recession problem – for example, head teachers reported that young people were already asking them in the late summer term for proof of citizenship in order to collect benefit, etc. Through this predictive, collaborative work between head teachers and social security, through data-sharing and innovative course design, they were able to develop a collective response that maintained a focus on training and education rather than an increasing social security bill. The result has been a collaboration between college, social security and WBL that has helped to prevent a NEET situation developing in the Island. Ed Sallis again:

*The partnership approach to the problem has been successful and young people have been found places. The college has worked particularly closely with WBL and provides part-time learning, in literacy, numeracy and personal effectiveness for all young people on the WBL scheme.*

One of the sub-groups who appear to be particularly challenging to re-engage fully in education or training for example, are those who are ‘undecided NEET’. Such young people lack a clear direction and tend to be dissatisfied with available opportunities. The evidence suggests that, to some extent, this indecision is related to their maturity and, over time, many of them choose to engage. In addition, they may not always be open, pre-16, to hearing advice and guidance, which means that even with a ‘year out’ option at 14, their problems and lack of clarity may persist.

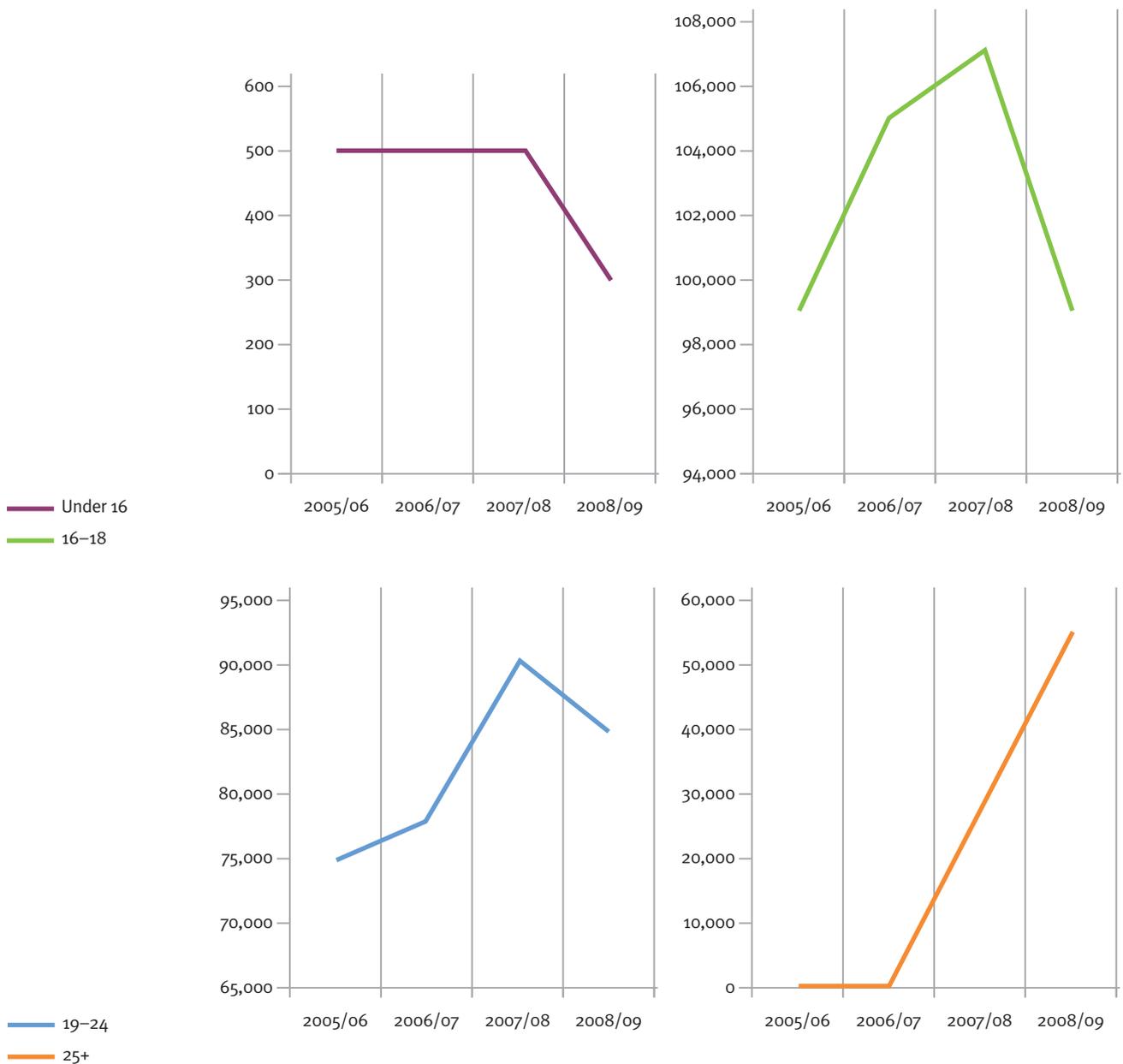
The evidence suggests that a period of time in a JWT can be the catalyst to encouraging such young people to participate in education or training. Consequently, there may be value in strategies that reflect the indecisive nature of this sub-group

such as taster courses and opportunities to sample a range of *employment* opportunities. In addition, promoting the opportunity to ‘bank’ any elements of a qualification they achieve through the QCF might help to ensuring that they can build up their achievements even if they change options.

### 4.8 Apprenticeship training

Apprenticeship have been seen as a way to increase participation in training, particularly for young people. However, in recent years success in raising Apprenticeship numbers seems to be largely the result of an increase in Adult Apprenticeships given that the number of starts for 16–18 year olds in Apprenticeships has actually declined slightly over the last decade.

**Figure 10 All Apprenticeships starts from 2005/06 to 2008/09**



The numbers on the axis are actual figures. In the year between 2007/08 and 2008/09 all starters age groups saw a fall except for the 25+ which had a large increase.

Source: LSN Centre for Economic Analysis and Performance based on Data Service information (SFR: DS/SFR6)

This is a worrying trend because it would create big problems in a key area around the RPA and also suggests that firms are freezing the recruitment of younger Apprentices. Smith (2004) considered Australian apprenticeship and traineeship policies and found that a contract of training helps young people regard the workplace as a learning environment. The increase in the learning leaving age makes this finding especially important because it ensures that young people continue their learning even if they are engaged in employment. The new Apprenticeships may be a step in this direction since they aim to provide ‘on the job’ training that creates a vocational ladder (CBI, 2008). However, not all learners are motivated by the desire to gain employment (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 1999), so policy initiatives linking learning to employment prospects may encourage some young people to engage in learning, but not all.

#### 4.9 Licence to practise

It has been argued that public policy is too dependent on ‘carrots’ such as subsidies to engage employers in training rather than sticks such as national occupational standards and a licence to practise. In Europe, for example, as noted in Section 3, many young people are motivated to get on the college-based Apprenticeship course because it leads to a proper Apprenticeship place – this acts as the carrot, and the fact that you can’t practise the trade without the qualification acts as an effective ‘stick’. Clear standards and licensing would benefit those parts of the NEET cohort who are ‘unsure’ and those who can’t find work; they would have less effect on the hardcore disengaged.

Instituting a licence to practise could clarify destinations from particular courses, and the level of professional skills and capacity that will be acquired, albeit only for certain skilled occupations. It currently takes sophistication and perseverance to navigate what can be a very crowded, competitive marketplace. It is not often clear, in the absence of robust CEG, which courses equip you to practise a trade at which levels and what sort of earning power or further costs for training might be generated down the line. A clear line demarcating what gives you a licence to practise some professions or trades and what doesn’t could bring clarity and simplicity to the system. We need only think of the success of the Corgi system (now Gas Safe) to know that a sector can develop and enforce its own standards and that these can be marketed effectively to the wider public. Such standards would act as a lever of quality for the industry more widely and a motivation for individuals who would need that licence to practise.

We also know that many NEET young people in particular are specifically vulnerable to being unsure or unaware of options and next steps, so clearer progression and benchmarks would be of particular benefit.

We should note that the licence would only work in trades or crafts with their own community spirit and culture, and clear technical specifics – essentially, trades where Apprenticeships and Diplomas work well. The Engineering Diploma, for example, has been a relative success because the skills sets are well defined, the technical experts and employers have involved themselves in developing and designing it and there are clear frames of reference.

But the modern economy is going to develop differently and thus need different skill sets – it will be about self-employment and entrepreneurship, networking and fluid groups, for example in the media sector. In areas where frames and terms are more fluid and ill-defined (where, for example, does the concept of ‘design’ stop within a Media Diploma?), a licence to practise will be more difficult to enforce and could stifle creativity rather than maintain standards.

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## Section five

# Recommendations

This report has examined the impact the quality of the offer made to young people may have on preventing disengagement. It does so looking ahead to the legislation on raising the compulsory participation age, which the Coalition Government is currently supporting. It has looked at options around curriculum flexibility, improved IAG services and better support in helping students make transitions between institutions and into work. However, it also recognises that structural characteristics in the UK labour market such as large proportions of low-paid jobs can militate against people moving successfully from education into work, for example.

The economic downturn has accentuated the contraction in the youth labour market, leading to concerns about the long-term scarring effects that unemployment and inactivity may have on the almost million young people out of work and out of education and training. It is essential that the introduction of compulsion to 18 does not simply push the problem of NEETs further downstream. There is already evidence that the growth in inactivity has been concentrated among 19–24 year olds, perhaps partly as a result of an excessive focus on a 14–19 agenda.

It is clear that, examining the core reasons for disengagement, we can to a certain extent correlate types of NEET with specific age groups and transition points. This could provide a clear and constructive way to view the problems and come up with solutions. We also need to recognise that the needs and wants of learners are diverse. When, where and how they wish to learn and join in is changing but our system appears to be slow in catching up.

Too much support and provision for NEET young people is still subject to short-term funding streams, meaning that many essentials are treated as add-ons rather than core elements of a coherent programme. To enable flexibility in a rapidly changing market we need to put power and choice in the hands of the learner.

For transition to be a success, high-quality work experience and IAG are essential; but so too are the broadening of experience and networks and wider raising of confidence that happen through enrichment activities. For disengaged young learners whose experience of education has been one of underachievement or failure it is especially important that they come to believe that they are being taken seriously as people who have a future. Progression is too easily viewed purely in terms of the mechanics of career choices. Involving the young person in being aware of the choices they're making, and the implications of these choices, is essential.

The evidence presented in this report points to a number of policy recommendations (outlined below) that would help to ensure that the offer made to young people maximises the likelihood of successful transitions to higher forms of education and skilled employment.

1. The term NEET doesn't capture the differing needs and groups within the cohort, and its inappropriateness will be a barrier to preparing for the RPA. Redefining the young people as '**disengaged**', '**unsure**' and '**unable to find work**' would allow stakeholders to develop a clear focus and targeted policy for each group.
2. The raising of the participation age fundamentally changes the context of the curriculum offer to young people. With this in mind we need to move beyond the idea of NEETs. At the most obvious level, this cohort will be re-classed as truants or non-participants. At a deeper policy level, if public policy-makers are prepared to use the 'stick' of compulsion then the curriculum offer should present the greatest opportunities for progression and employment.
3. Funding and qualification systems must not prevent students in Year 10 from being able to choose the best mix of qualifications for them delivered by the best mix of providers. Funding systems should not prevent a combination of school and FE college provision or stop Year 10 students from studying in FE full time.
4. The number of school-age students studying vocational options is already increasing. The evidence suggests that technical qualifications, such as BTECs, have greater value than competence-based qualifications such as NVQs, particularly when the latter are studied outside the workplace. Diplomas should not be allowed to crowd out existing, well-established and respected vocational qualifications. A distinct vocational route should be available at 14 based on established technical qualifications. This would facilitate progression to Apprenticeships, where students who already have the requisite technical qualifications would only have to complete a competence qualification. This can be integrated well within the Government's plans to fund and expand higher-level skilled Apprenticeships at Level 3 and Level 4.
5. Pre-apprenticeship training would help to ensure smooth transitions between school and Apprenticeships or other vocational qualifications. International evidence suggests that pre-apprenticeship training works best when it is tailored around specific occupations rather than generic 'work-ready' skills, and progression routes from these skilled technical qualifications into HE or trades must be made clear and be supported.
6. Evidence from other countries suggests that clear progression ladders to higher qualifications and the use of qualifications as a licence to practise act as powerful incentives for participation. Diplomas should ensure that they provide for smooth progression to Apprenticeships at higher levels, and Government should prioritise its objective of ensuring there is a clear route of progression from Apprenticeships to university .
7. The Skills for Growth White Paper of November 2009 signalled support for industry-led occupational licensing arrangements. Sector Skills Councils should be commissioned to determine if there is majority support within their sector for stricter standards requirements. We recognise, however, that licence to practise is not suitable for all sectors and occupations.
8. Support and provision at vital **transition points** within the education system could be greatly improved. Intensive support at Year 7 could help young people navigate the very different secondary environment. Early assessment for those already behind should separate some pupils for part of the time into intensive catch-up and tuition groups. National roll-out of personal tuition would help, although it is limited to a fixed number of hours per week over a fairly short span for the individual pupil. Schools must focus on their pastoral support and study support systems within the school, and where possible encourage innovative peer schemes such as 'vertical buddy systems'. Transition support should also be focused on transition from Year 9 to Year 10, with staff receiving training on how to give appropriate support and advice to young people as they choose their learning options.

9. Professional advice and guidance should be at the heart of the strategy to engage young people. Advice and guidance to Years 7 and 8 needs to factor this in now, as they will be the first cohorts to be staying on to 17 and 18.

Young people need to be given clear, impartial and constructive advice to help ensure they feel in control of their learning and training choices. If a young person is unsuited to a particular area, has unrealistic expectations of progression from a course or if there are few jobs in a particular field, they need to know.

The recent DCSF IAG strategy will not deliver the necessary fundamental reform needed in careers guidance. There remains a question mark over impartiality and conflict of interest regarding advising pupils to stay on in a school sixth form. Teachers may not be sure of the opportunities presented by qualifications such as Apprenticeships if they have no direct experience. A fully independent careers guidance workforce trained to a consistent professional standard is required. Peer mentoring also has huge potential and should be supported and developed wherever possible.

10. The quality of CEG is not consistent, but dependent on the experience of individuals. An independent careers service is needed, governed by a reinvigorated professional qualification – a licence to practise in effect. Independent advisers should be responsible for most CEG activities within clusters of schools. Much clearer labour market information should also be linked in to both professional external advisers and school staff, so that they can keep up with changes and developments and all the options available.

In order for students to make informed decisions about options in Year 10, careers guidance should begin much earlier and in a more vigorous and systematic way.

The traditional interview in Year 11 should be the end point in a rich process and not the beginning or a one-off experience.

11. There should be earlier, more structured and systematic chances for school children early in Key Stage 3 to **visit places of work, learn about real jobs and be exposed to different work environments**. Particular focus should be placed on 'at-risk' groups (low literacy white and Afro-Caribbean working-class boys, etc) starting in Years 8 and 9. Small group visits to industry days, places of work and exposure to unusual careers should all be structured into the curriculum.

Details of career paths and of the lived experience and responsibilities of certain jobs should be factored explicitly into some course materials. Where possible, course materials could also include approximate expected salaries as we know that money earned can be a key motivator for at-risk groups. Digital technology should be used far more widely and effectively in showcasing the world of work in relation to course content.

On a wider, more strategic level, local authorities, HE and FE colleges should work together to produce showcase events and fairs for primary school leavers and Years 7 and 8 to expose them in a practical, hands-on and imaginative way to the options that are available in these institutions.

12. Flexibility and choice are vital in ensuring that drop-out at Year 10 is as minimal as possible. Being forced to study unwanted options because of, for example, timetable inflexibility, is demotivating. Offering a carousel of options at 14 with exposure to many different courses and long-term tasters and projects throughout the year can really improve retention and progression for at-risk groups. Taking a year out of the National Curriculum to enjoy this more flexible offer should be a viable option for students (resources permitting), particularly those at risk of disengaging, with the option to then re-knit into Year 10 at the most suitable institution.
13. Practitioners and policy-makers should not always assume that at-risk youngsters dropping out of education between, for example 12 and 16 years old, do so purely because they are disaffected with academic study. The assumption that 'NEETs need vocational' not only masks other socio-cultural problems but damages the 'brand' of vocational study.

The purposes of different vocational routes should be clearly outlined – some are more basic steps back in to learning and progression for those who are disengaged, while some lead to skilled trades with good career progression and earning power; these should be more clearly separated out and defined.

14. In terms of workforce training, vocational pedagogy requires much greater and more sustained research and policy focus if we are to reinvigorate the curriculum with more fluid transitions between schools and colleges and across vocational and academic parts of the curriculum. This will aid learner journeys and provide practical steps towards parity of esteem between different qualifications and teaching professions. Joint teacher/lecturer training and programmes such as 'Lecturers Into Industry' should be invigorated.
15. There should be much clearer information attached to courses so that learners can make informed decisions at key transition points. A label system for courses would include percentage ratings on learner success, customer satisfaction and those who achieve a positive destination in terms of work or further learning. The inspection rating might also be displayed along with whether the potential wage gain is good or poor. Although this kind of information would help to clarify progression routes and could be a useful driver of quality in the system, it could lead to 'league table pressure' type responses from admissions staff, and the tracking of earning potential or employment destinations can be notoriously hard. Notwithstanding these areas of caution, increase in information and clear outcomes around courses is something we strongly welcome.
16. People mature at different times and have different individual circumstances which can sometimes preclude the ability to focus on school when young. To ensure talent and opportunities are not lost the system must be flexible. **Learning accounts** would be a good way to introduce this flexibility by allowing the individual a fixed amount of money or time to 'spend' (after the age of compulsory participation) on the training and at the institution of their choice. As the real value of the learning or training would be apparent, this could be used as a way of equalising the funding that different people receive from different institutions, thus bringing a much-longed-for degree of parity in the funding of difference courses in different settings.

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This report examines how we can improve support for young people in their transitions into further education and employment, within the context of the increased participation age. It proposes increased flexibility within the curriculum, and important changes for qualifications, careers advice and transition support.

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