

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NEET Speaks: Influences Shaping Young People's Choices of Education, Training and Employment

By:

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Introduction

The International Centre for Guidance Studies (iCeGS), University of Derby, produced a qualitative research report on behalf of South Yorkshire Learning and Skills Council, in association with Connexions Doncaster. It is based on findings from a research study designed to focus on the voices of young people in the Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC) area, who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). It is hoped that this will feed into discussions with the Learning & Skills Council who may be able to access new and additional European Social Funds to help support enhanced provision for young people in the Doncaster MBC area from late 2008 onwards.

The research approach adopted is based on the fundamental belief that young people gain benefits from their experience within their social and geographical communities i.e. neighbourhood, which are often not formally recognised. The project explored the extent to which hard to reach individuals' learning and career development needs are currently being met. It focused in particular on emerging themes based on young people's experiences of family, community, learning and work.

Aim

The research aimed to explore individuals' perceptions of the significance of community attachments, including issues such as neighbourhood, fraternities, and young people's access to learning and work opportunities.

Objectives

The four key objectives of the project were as follows:

- To gain a clearer understanding of some of the critical issues which shape young peoples' choices of lifestyle which impact on their choice of education, training and employment.
- To identify and profile the influences outside of school and guidance services affecting young people's decision-making and access to opportunity structures.
- To identify unmet needs and the ways in which the Learning & Skills Council and local youth support services could help address them.
- To build an evidence-base of young peoples' voices reflecting their view about their lives and what influences their personal and vocational choices.

Methodology

From mid-April to Mid-July 2008, iCeGS consulted with 25 young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), including individuals moving in and out of education, employment and training (EET). From this, the research team analysed around 35-40,000 words emerging from interviews with young people in the Doncaster MBC. Some of the interviewees were young people living in urban Doncaster, others

were from surrounding former coal mining villages such as Woodlands, Askern, Edlington and Rossington and towns on the edge of the MBC area such as Conisborough and Mexborough. In addition, a total of 6 Personal Advisers and 5 Training Providers from the Doncaster MBC area also took part in the research to talk about local issues and the perceived needs of young people 'at risk'.

Context

The UK has one of the lowest rates of participation in full-time education, especially at age 17, compared to its European counterparts. Connexions Doncaster, with its key local partners, has designed an effective NEET strategy which builds upon the 'Aligning Provision Toolkit' first published by DfES in 2006. Most notably, it has situated its development work within the context of the *National NEET Strategy*, *Doncaster's Children and Young Peoples Plan* and *Local Area Agreements*. Fundamental to its partnership working are five key strands designed to support a sustainable reduction in the NEET group delivered through an inclusive partnership approach. It is within this context that new opportunities exist for listening to the voices of young people and hearing them talk of real life 'lived experiences'. From this, new and dynamic approaches to enhanced local provision should emerge.

Literature Findings

A review of 39 NEET literature sources revealed a broad range of key themes and emerging issues. In physical terms, NEETS belong to social groups which are divided into classes, and they are spatially differentiated – whether this is (was) intended or not, (Castells 1977, p.110). They tend to be perceived as 'poor' in economic terms and to live in deprived areas where standards of living are relatively low. This residential space (the neighbourhood) expresses a specific social relation – an indirect domination of deprived, working class people by state-provided, bureaucratic systems and practices which provide state benefits, welfare, housing, education and powers over the environment.

NEET Young People

Young people reported mixed views on their neighbourhood and community. Some communicated *acceptance of their environment* and a sense of *hidden rules to be adhered to* in order to keep out of trouble with peers and/or local drug dealers.

"Its like what y've grown up wi' an' what y' used t', its like a religion i'n't it. You grow up and y' taught a religion an' y' stick by it. Like y' grow up in Conisborough, an' y' know who's there, what everyone does" (Female, 17).

Some young people indicated they had *moved around from 'area to area'* in response mainly to a family crisis or a critical incident(s). In some cases, young people reported a *fatalistic perception* of the 'here and now' within their neighbourhood. In essence life wasn't really going to get any better for them. Conversely, some young people voiced a sense of *optimism* and *hope* for a better future:

"There's better places d' ya know what I mean. Woodlands it is a shit 'ole t be livin cos half a time its full a crack 'eads, smack 'eads, drug dealers left, right and centre so really cant avoid it. Its either ya tek that life or ya tek no life so way I see it the sooner I get out the better [...] if I sort me self out then yeah" (Male, 17).

"I'd like it t' [my future] to look like workin in a mechanics workshop an that, doin good f'me sen an that, nice car, nice 'ouse, probably rentin one" (Male, 17).

Self and cultural identity emerged as a key issue in terms of how young people perceive 'their place and that of others' in the local neighbourhood and community. We found examples of young people expressing *comfort* and *discomfort* in their peers, family and existing networks.

"Whilst going to college and everything like that, certain people refused to touch me because, well as you can see (touches her arm indicating her blackness). Its like in this building, everyone is shaking your hand, everyone is shakin' your hand. They'll like brush against you, making jokes, and that's quite good, that's really precious because you don't usually find that anywhere, you really don't find that anywhere for an ethnic person an' this place really do give you that refuge to say yeah I'm different, yes you are unique" (Female, 19).

Participants in focus group sessions raised issues regarding those who *belonged* and *did not belong* in their community. In most cases, there were strong and problematic views in regards to this.

"I don't mind Asians or Blacks a 'owt like that, that live 'ere, that were born 'ere. It's just them that come over like ...Polish. Like flat next t' me [...] windo's just gettin' bricked" (Male, 17).

Most young people said they were hanging around mainly with their mates and for the most part stayed in their known local areas unless going into Doncaster for a 'night out'. Heavy and regular alcohol use was common and the use of 'coke', amphetamines and anabolic steroids were all mentioned. The ways in which young people used such stimulants varied. Many reported that they would find moving away difficult, though there was evidence of the ambivalent relationship between the security of 'staying' and the possible independence of 'leaving'.

Male and female perspectives differed in relation to who has most access to learning and work opportunities. In some cases, Personal Advisers and Training Providers suggested that young males are viewed as a priority when it comes to designing local provision.

"There is nothing that is just for men. I mean you've got YMCA ... I think it's as equally important to have a male only service so you can build those relationships" (Connexions PA)

From the young women interviewed it became apparent that supportive, targeted, women-only provision, such as that delivered by YMCA, was providing a vital role.

Many of the young people articulated the importance of their family. Even though parent perspectives were crucially important to the young people, the researchers did not feel that they conveyed any sense of undue pressure to achieve, or make their parents proud.

Drawing on the narratives of these 25 young people's lives, *five key themes* emerged as outlined overleaf:-

1. *Freedom and flexibility*: young people expressed a real desire to move away from anything that seemed remotely like a classroom. PA's also noted the need for flexibility in working practices when it came to engaging young people who had numerous barriers to overcome.
2. *Snakes and Ladders*: young people indicated they felt they had made progress in learning a new skill only to be denied opportunities by qualification barriers, i.e. not having 5 GCSE's which prevented progression or led to them being placed on courses that didn't lead to relevant accreditation or activities that the young people saw as particularly worthwhile.
3. *Disenchantment*: young people reported a real sense of 'false promises' made by educators and service staff, whether intentional or not, which had serious negative effects in terms of their ability to trust and develop meaningful rapport.
4. *Personalisation*: young people highlighted their need for a more customised and individualised service that takes account of the complexity of their lives and the need for a reliable anchor point.
5. *Detachment and escapism*: young people stated that those who are on benefits and not in education, training or employment (NEET) are seen by some as 'getting everything for free'; they themselves, however, generally felt anger towards local immigrants, levelling the same criticism that 'they get everything for free'.

It was apparent that training provision generally does not seem to make good sense to most of the participants in the research. There are many additional quotes available not included in the main report. From the analysis, at least *three* very specific requirements stood out:

- *Top-up literacy support* required but this has to be offered in the context of this being something relevant and meaningful to the individuals' needs.
- *Access required to relevant vocational taster courses with brokerage* support provided from a Personal Adviser or support worker.
- *Tailored and flexible provision that helps NEET young people to build their confidence* and to gain access to taster courses including positive self-image, managing difficult situations, financial awareness and coping with stress.

Personal Advisers & Training Providers

We found evidence of Personal Advisers in Connexions, YWCA and the Prince's Trust working closely with young people on an outreach basis to help open their horizons to new possibilities beyond their immediate locality. Some reported that the systems, procedures and resources they are working with are to some extent restrictive and becoming increasingly bureaucratic.

Identifying a space for NEET young people's voices to be heard within and outside their local community offers some potential for individual's to *informally* and *formally* network with others and to extend their horizons beyond the confines of their neighbourhood and community.

The issue of PA and support workers' level of awareness of the changing labour market was raised. Emphasis is currently placed on building relationships with young people; this was perceived by some PAs and Training Providers to be at the expense of building relationships with employers and training providers.

Recommendations

There are *ten* key recommendations. These are not presented in a hierarchy of order given young people and local agencies are best placed to determine their priority needs. A guiding principle that lies behind our set of recommendations is that people from *all* walks of life learn from stories and from this new thinking and ideas often emerge.

Recommendation 1:

There is scope to increase the level of involvement of young people themselves within the processes and systems which define and handle NEETS. At a practical level, NEET stories and experiences can be used to illustrate powerfully the barriers and enablers to young people's engagement in learning and work. These young people had hopes, dreams and ambitions to achieve more for themselves but they needed greater understanding and support.

Recommendation 2:

There is demand for confidence-building and self-awareness courses involving young people who are peer motivators and positive role models. This could be linked to new coaching and mentoring taster programmes, extended over time to offer individuals sustained reflection and the setting of realistic goals. This could also be linked to accreditation, where appropriate.

Recommendation 3:

Local training providers should consider how best to give parity of esteem between NEET young people's oral and written skills. Techniques for diagnosing and assessing young people's capabilities should be revisited to establish whether or not opportunities are being missed to involve young people in meaningful training and personal development opportunities. Linked to this, is the demand for more vocational taster courses, with back up support from Personal Advisers and/or learning mentors.

Recommendation 4:

The initial and ongoing training of Personal Advisers, Trainers and allied youth support workers should explore more fully tactics and strategies for helping young people to cope and adjust successfully to *unplanned changes* in their learning programmes. Also, there exists at a national and local level, limited training for youth support workers on labour market information and ways of handling this effectively within their communities. In this regard, recent work carried out by Professor Jenny Bimrose at the Institute for Employment Research (IER) Warwick University, could lend itself well to local developments¹.

Recommendation 5:

The role of family, peers and neighbourhood could be further developed into family learning projects designed by young people with Personal Advisers and Training Providers. This should aim to achieve increased exposure to changes and new developments in the labour market, skills and techniques for managing setbacks and seizing opportunities, as well as confidence building. A key learning outcome would be to address perceptions of learning and work and to inform individuals on knowing *why*, knowing *how* and knowing *where* to look for suitable learning and work opportunities.

Recommendation 6:

Place-specific factors, such as geographical location, community norms, historical and current patterns of employment are central to understanding how and whether interventions work, alongside who is involved in delivery. This calls for *local flexibility* for PAs and learning mentors with the option of them having more control of *small-scale budgets* designed to support young people's immediate personal development needs.

Recommendation 7:

An exploration with NEET young people, Personal Advisers and Training Providers revealed a growing need to develop suitable and sustainable 'second chance' opportunities, almost on a *mature student 'access' model* geared towards helping adolescents build their confidence, experience life outside their immediate neighbourhood and sample new learning and work opportunities.

Recommendation 8:

There is scope for closer working links to be established between PAs, College and Training Providers so that shared assessments of NEET young people's hidden talents and skills can take place. The current use of applied formal assessment tools could be acting as a major barrier to young people's progression.

Recommendation 9:

The importance of appropriately trained staff who are empathetic to the views of young people at risk underpins high quality youth support services. Connexions Doncaster is commended for their work in this regard. In order to further enhance training and delivery arrangements, the Doncaster MBC and Learning & Skills Council may wish to assess more fully the Leading Empowered Organisations (LEO) initiative.

¹ The National Guidance Research Forum (NGRF) Labour Market Information currently being tested in Connexions Kent and Medway. Contact: j.bimrose@warwick.ac.uk.

Recommendation 10:

Lessons learned from the Learning Agreement Pilots in eight areas of England² should feed into developments in the Doncaster area in relation to Connexions service work with employers. From this a stronger evidence-base for capturing NEET young people's experiences of learning and work could emerge.

At the conclusion of this Executive Summary report, let us listen once again to the voices of NEET young people. Indeed it is their experiences, dreams, and aspirations that lie at the heart of developing high quality youth support services within neighbourhoods and local communities.

"I think its been good for us as young women, listening to other people's stories and know that people are from different backgrounds, sometimes you get so wrapped up in your own y' don't realise what else is going on around you, then sometimes you appreciate what you have got because other people are in different situations" (Female, 17).

"You've got all this inside, you didn't know that you got all a this information inside o' you an' the chance to let it all out" (Female, 19).

The poignant words of a young man from Doncaster reflecting the reality of his life and experience,

*"I done a lot, a lot a stupid things, like tattoo on me neck, why did I av t' go an get that, ye know I look like a ... someone sees it and they judge it straight away, an I don't care what people say but people are, what d ya say, what d ya call it when people judge ya by your looks, stereotypin ... An I can understand that but like I said before, **people do change**"* (Male,17).

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² Blythe, J., Elo, J., Gratton, G. & Hughes, D. (2008). *The Learning Agreement Pilot in Lancashire, England: supporting young people in jobs without training*. Derby: International Centre for Guidance Studies (iCeGS) Occasional Paper, June 2008.