

***Not in employment or training but in  
community education:***

**Young people's transitions in  
South Wales**

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## **1. Background to the project**

This project emerges from work conducted with the New Learning Network (NLN), a partnership of organisations, which provide and support community education in Neath Port Talbot in South Wales. The NLN partnership is a cross-sector organisation of some 50 partner organisations. Courses are delivered at 14 Local Action Centres as well as 26 Satellite Centres, including schools and other outreach venues.

The NLN engages a broad cross-section of the population in learning activities. A sizeable number of young people aged between 16 and 24 are engaged in various forms of community education within the project. While these young people cannot accurately be described as NEETs ('not currently engaged in education, employment or training'), the question remains why these young people are not in full-time education, training programmes or in employment.

We would hypothesise that these young people may be uncertain of how to deal with the lengthened transition period between childhood dependence and adult independence, and are either not making informed choices in the post-16 education, training and employment market or are excluded from a preferred option (e.g. work) and are unsure how to reach their goal. We would, furthermore, hypothesise that, given the economically depressed area in which they live, these young people are at risk of becoming permanently marginalised and excluded from any real 'choices' in education and work.

## **2. Literature Review**

NEET is an acronym which refers to those young people between 16 and 19, who have left full-time education but have not moved on to further education, employment or work-related training. Politicians and policy-makers are sufficiently nervous about the phenomenon to have commissioned several studies to help them make sense of it and provide solutions (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999; DfES, 2000; York Consulting, 2005; Social Exclusion Unit, 2005; Ci Research, 2005; Sachdev et al, 2006; Scottish Executive, 2006, p. 334).<sup>1</sup> The sheer number of research reports and policy responses – and the discussion engendered in the media (e.g. Kingston, 2004) –

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<sup>1</sup> See also the DfES website "Every Child Matters" as well as Hughes' (2005) paper on the Connexions service, whose remit includes reducing the number of NEETs.

shows how much the NEET phenomenon has moved up the political agenda in the last decade.

What is the scale of the problem? *Bridging the Gap* (1999), a report by the now defunct Social Exclusion Unit, found that “at any one time, 9 per cent of 16-18 year olds are not in learning or work”. However, this percentage is a cautious estimate as “the total number who experience a significant spell of non-participation at some stage between 16 and 18 is large” and “quite long spells of non-participation are by no means uncommon. Six per cent of the age range are out of work and education for more than six months and 3 per cent for more than 12 months”. Furthermore, “rates of non-participation are considerably higher than the national average in some areas, among those who have attended particular schools, among members of some minority ethnic groups, and among a number of particularly vulnerable groups”. Finally, “non-participation in education, training or employment at age 16-18 is a major predictor of unemployment at age 21” (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, p. 21). Regional variations mean that, whereas the percentage of NEETs in England has remained at 9-10% since 1994 (Sachdev, 2006) it is approximately 13% in Scotland (York Consulting, 2005) and 11% in Wales (National Statistics, SB80/2006, 2006). These figures hide, of course, regional variation within the three nations (see Sachdev et al, 2006), and they also hide the fact that the NEETs category itself may be unclear. For example, Ci Research (2005) in a report on young male NEETs note that

the usefulness of NEET as a category is compromised through the ways in which disadvantaged people who occupy different positions to the labour market are combined with more privileged young people who are able to exercise a significant degree of choice about the ways in which they manage their lives. For example, Destinations’ survey results gave 12% of Powys young males leaving Year 13 in 2003 as NEET yet most of these were on a gap year. (p. 32)

Yates and Payne (2006) concur: “subsumed under the ‘NEET label are often very different young people, displaying very different characteristics, facing very different challenges, risks and transitions in their lives, and with very different potential needs for intervention” (p. 333-4; for a discussion of the different characteristics of young people in the NEET group with slightly dated data, see DfES, 2000, p. 5f.).

Attempts have been made to categorise NEETs according to the length of time this phase lasts. Sachdev et al (2005) identify two distinct groups of NEETs: the ‘core NEETs’, who might come from a troubled background where unemployment is the norm, and the ‘floating NEETs’ for whom this is a transitional period (p. 46; see also

Watts, 2001, p. 159 for a description of the 'volatility' of the NEET group). For those who are 'floating NEETs', the questions of whether it is a transitional stage between "pre-16 education and further education, or between education and employment, education and training or training and employment" is important, especially given the negative connotations of disaffection and exclusion the NEET discourse is characterised by (Yates & Payne, 2006). Yates and Payne also mention that some young people may make a conscious choice to be NEET for a short period. They argue that "it would be a mistake automatically to characterise those going through a transitional stage that includes a temporary period of being NEET under a label with negative connotations and perceived connections to social exclusion" (Yates & Payne, 2006, pp. 334-335) – although it must be pointed out that the difference between a conscious decision for a NEET period and a resigned acceptance of such a transition period because of a perceived or real lack of choice (e.g. for young parents) is blurred.

That the NEETs category emerged during the 1990s is revealing in more ways than one: firstly, it is a result of lengthening transition periods between childhood dependence and adult independence that became noticeable after mass unemployment (especially youth unemployment) became endemic in the UK from the late 1970s onwards. For the majority of young people, childhood dependency now stretches until at least 18-19, if not beyond. Policy and public discourses are framed in terms of 'engaging' young people in prolonged education and training options to enable them to progress to meaningful work. Work for unskilled workers and/or young people with few or no qualifications has dwindled and remains insecure. Young people can avail themselves of an array of opportunities in education, training and employment. However, they need to be active, rational and responsible agents in order to cope well with the insecurity and fluidity of their transition period – or receive support from family, school/college and peers – in other words, 'good' social capital which enables young people to move forward, not 'constraining' social capital, which keeps young people locked in a cycle of low aspiration, low achievement and little (social as well as geographical) mobility. In the studies of disengaged young people Catan refers to the fact that

little evidence was found of a normative progression from formal education through to secure, stable employment, or, consequently, of an accumulation of skills and qualifications. The years after leaving school were spent in repeated moves between several of the available options – youth training and FE, short periods of employment both full- and part-time, generally on an insecure, short-term basis, voluntary work, periods spent in the grey economy or 'fiddly work'

and occasional disappearance from official records. . . The largest category of activity noted were youth training, temporary work and unemployment, suggesting frustrated attempts to comply with official pressure to seek training and work, rather than large-scale 'dropping out'. (Catan, 2004, p. 12-13)

Many young people classed as NEETs appear to move in and out of the NEETs group in a way which mirrors the uncertainty of a life punctuated by periods of unemployment and/or work in the grey economy which is a stark reality for many adults (Sennett, 1998).

Where does the 'NEETs' category originate from? In many ways, the phenomenon itself as well as the moral panic caused are not new but are reminiscent of prevailing fears of 'disaffected' young people who form a defiant and resistant underclass which go at least as far back as Callaghan's 'Great Debate' speech in 1976 (Mizen, 2004). As soon as youth unemployment became a real problem in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s, the unemployed young person was identified as a likely cause for trouble. Youth training and employment initiatives were chasing one another and – almost always – failing to reach their targets before being replaced by another project or strategy (see Wolf, 2002; Keep, 2002; see also Roberts (2004) on the relative failure of the Connexions service to lower the number of NEETs in England). Piper and Piper (2000) comment how the characteristics of these initiatives remained essentially unchanged even after the new Labour came into power: "All these schemes adopt an essentially individualistic and unidimensional approach to a problem which is collective, structural and complex" (Piper & Piper, 2000, p. 79). In other words, solutions for the group of young people with highly complex and inter-related problems, whose only shared characteristics are that they are not in education, employment or training, were sought solely in the realm of education/training and employment, displaying a rather touching belief in the power of education and the labour market to solve deep-seated social and structural problems and inequalities.

It seems clear even from our brief description that the young people subsumed under the NEETs category have very different, though often interlinked, problems which are related to EET but which are not necessarily caused by a lack of EET or solved by EET. Instead, what the public and policy discourse around NEETs reveals is the narrow focus on economy-related solutions to social, structural and economic problems. It, furthermore, shows the mechanisms of "individualisation of social risk" (Beck, 1992). As Watts points out, central to the policy response to the NEETs phenomenon is the relationship between individual agent and the social structure in

which the individual agent moves, makes choices and receives support (2001, p. 160). The tendency for recent UK governments from the Thatcher government through to the Blair government – and, indeed, the policies of the Welsh Assembly Government – has been to shift agency to the individual. Thus, the young person, too, is viewed “as the author or agent responsible for their own life situation, suggesting that remedies need to be found in sanctions or incentives aimed at changing their attitudes and behaviours” (Watts, 2001, p. 160). Piper and Piper phrase it thus:

The problem [of disaffection] is located with the young person and only limited reference is made to their family situation, the local labour market, surrounding professional systems or the framework of relevant policy. The application of a pathological term such as disaffection is disingenuously judgmental, implicitly blames young people for their situation, and masks the structural context of their experience. (Piper & Piper, 2000, pp. 81-82)

Thus, it seems that NEETs have multiple and inter-related problems that are often social, structural as well as educational and employment-related in nature. Any solution involving EET can be successful but often fails to address the complex cluster of problems NEETs face.

### **3. Methodology**

This is a pilot study of a potentially much larger investigation. In it we examine data collected by the NLN, which includes their current database of students and the data collected in Appendix 6 of their Community Learning Plan (2006). We also sent out questionnaires to all current 16-19 year old learners and received 8 questionnaires back. This is a response rate of nearly 16%. We also conducted 6 short interviews with past and present learners. The questionnaires and the interviews, which consisted of a mixture of open and closed questions and one Likert scale, cover much the same ground and we have analysed them together as much as possible, thus achieving a response rate of 27.5%. The results of the research are then described but we would not claim that the results are necessarily transferable to the whole group of young people who have taken part in community education with the NLN since its inception. Firstly, the sample of young people who have responded to the questionnaire survey and those interviewed do not reflect the make-up of the current group of 16-19 learners registered with the NLN: in our sample male learners are over-represented and the learners tend to be somewhat older than the current group of 16-19 learners. Secondly, the group is somewhat self-selecting as only a small proportion of learners chose to respond to the questionnaire. The response

rate does, however, exceed that envisioned in the original proposal and the research brought up interesting issues, which can be followed up in a larger study.

#### **4. Ethical considerations**

Approval for the research design was sought and granted from NLN. Interviews were conducted in a careful and considerate environment and the data is fully anonymised.

#### **5. Data analysis and interpretation**

The data collected in the NLN's Community Learning Plan provides a profile of 16-24 year old learners registered with NLN. This document shows that in 2004/05 286 beneficiaries aged 16-24 were recorded. This equates to 20% of the total cohort for that year (*Appendix*, 2006, p. 68). This relatively high percentage of young beneficiaries, of whom 66% were recorded as unemployed, provided the starting point for this research.

The current database shows that 51 16-19-year-old learners are registered at the NLN. 14 learners are male and 37 are female. Most learners are at the upper end of the 16-19 age range, i.e. seven learners are 16 years old, eight learners are 17 years old, 16 learners are 18 years old and 20 learners are 19 years old. These learners take courses with different providers, which include community education providers as well as local FE colleges.

The employment status of the learners is varied. 37.3 % of learners are in employment (19), but the data does not differentiate whether this is part-time or full-time work. The highest number of learners do low-level manual work (6), four are doing low-level clerical work, four are doing bar work/waitressing, three are in sales, one is a hairdresser and one is an area manager.

The courses the learners take are equally varied.<sup>2</sup> The majority of learners are engaged in Level 2/3 courses (Level 2, 19 learners; Level 3, 10). A large group of

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<sup>2</sup> The following analysis categorises the courses according to the National Credit and qualifications Framework for Wales: NQF Levels are Entry, Level 1 (Foundation), Level 2 (Intermediate; GCSE equivalent), Level 3 (Advanced; A-level equivalent), Level 4 (HE Certificate); Level 5 (HE Diploma); Level 6 (HE Honours Level); Level 7 (HE Masters Level); Level 8 (HE PhD Level).

learners are also taking lower-level courses (14) and some students are taking courses whose level is not known (8). Course types vary: the most popular course is GCSE Maths (13 learners), followed by Summer Sorted (Summer Activities, 7) Access to Health and Social Care (4), GCSE English (3). The following table shows the courses chosen by our sample of questionnaire respondents and interview participants. Our sample chose a similar variety of course subjects and levels and the discussion below reveals that the primary motivation for choosing these courses are interest in the subject as well as career considerations (see Table 6).

*Table 1: Range of courses/current 16-19 learners at NLN. Note: more than one answer is possible.*

Course type	Number of learners (questionnaires and interviews)
British Sign Language	1
Computer Software/IT	2
Explore your potential	1
Enterprise Learning	1
Spray Art	3
Karate	1
Preparation for Access to Social Care/Nursing	1
Hip Hop Dance	1
Graphic Art	1
Firefighting	3
Rock-climbing	1
NVQ 1 Catering	1
NVQ 1 and 2 Maths	1
NVQ 1 and 2 English	1
NVQ 2 Childcare	1
NVQ 3 Childcare Learning and Development	1
AS/A-level Chemistry	1
AS/A-level Human Biology	1
AS/A-level Physical Education	1
[indecipherable]	1

Of the participants of the survey/interviews, six were male and eight female. In this group, most of the respondents were 16 and 17 years old: four participants were 16, four were 17, two were 18, one was 19, two were 20 and one was 21.<sup>3</sup> None of the participants had children. The employment status of the participants is illustrated in the following table:

<sup>3</sup> The last three respondents commented on courses they had taken when they were in the age group considered in this research.

*Table 2: Employment status/Questionnaire and Interview respondents. Note: more than one answer is possible.*

Employment status	Number of Responses
Employed full-time	2
Employed part-time	5
Unemployed	3
Doing other part-time education	5
Doing other full-time education	5

The table reveals that most respondents are engaged in part-time education, part-time work or full-time education. These categories are not mutually exclusive – indeed, it is to be expected that these learners move in and out of employment and learning as opportunity dictates. Overall, the data reveals that education programmes are often seen as supplementary to work (see below).

Most of the participants questioned had done courses at community centres in the past and were not currently engaged in community education.

*Table 3: Course participation*

	Currently engaged in one or more courses	Participated in courses in the past
Yes	4	11
No	9	3
No answer	1	0

The number of courses participants engaged in varies considerably. It appears, though, that a sizeable number of students took/take more than one course.

*Table 4: Number of courses*

Number of courses	Current Participants	Past Participants
0	9	2
1	3	5
2	4	5
3	4	1

The participants study at seven community centres and colleges across Neath Port Talbot. When asked why they chose courses in the community, their responses indicate that convenience, considerations of staff and career considerations matter to them most. What is also noticeable is that careers advice does not seem to play a large role in their decision-making. The table highlights the predominant attitudes of the participants.

Table 5: Participants attitude towards community education (1 = agree strongly; 2 = agree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = disagree; 5 = disagree strongly)

	1	2	3	4	5	no answer
It is close to where I live	11	2	0	0	0	1
It is convenient	13	1	0	0	0	0
Because of its friendly atmosphere	5	6	3	0	0	0
I like the centre staff	7	3	2	0	1	1
I like the teaching staff	9	3	1	0	0	1
Because it's better than school	5	2	3	2	1	1
A careers adviser encouraged me to go	1	1	5	4	1	2
Family/friends encouraged me to go	4	4	3	0	1	1
I can combine study and other duties (e.g. childcare, p-t job)	3	5	3	0	0	3
It's a good way to start a career	6	4	3	0	0	1
Because childcare is available at the centre	0	2	5	0	4	3

The reasons participants give for choosing their courses are primarily interest in the subject as well as career considerations (see Table 6).

Table 6: Reasons for doing a course. Note: more than one answer is possible.

Reasons for doing the course/s	Number of responses
Interest in the subject	11
Career opportunities after studying	11
It's part-time and I can do other things besides studying	2
Preparation for going back to full-time education	3
Preparation for going on to full-time work	6
Other reasons	2

It is interesting to note that career aspirations play such a large role for participants considering that the majority engaged in short, low-level courses. Here the young people's aspirations clearly reflect more broader social discourses around employment and the need to gain skills in order to be ready for employment. The answers to the next question reflect this. The question asked whether participants thought that the courses were useful to them. All participants (14) thought the courses were useful. Asked to specify in what way the courses were useful, the following reasons emerge:

Table 7: In what way were courses useful to participants.

Responses	Number of responses
I gained expertise and knowledge	6
The knowledge gained will be useful for further study	2
The knowledge gained will be useful for further study and career opportunities	1
The knowledge gained will improve career opportunities	2
I had good experiences	2
Courses helped me to make up my mind about further study	1

Most participants spoke about the usefulness of the courses in terms of a gain in knowledge, expertise and skills and a significant number connected those to further study and career considerations.

It appears that the careers advice participants have received is of mixed value to them. With the exception of one, the participants have had no contact with Job Centre Plus workers. Only one has been given useful careers advice and only one (a different participant) has been offered courses or training in IT. This participant thought the course was not very useful. In response to the question “What type of work would you like to do in the long run?” participants’ responses were largely a reflection of the subjects of their community education courses. This data does not reflect, of course, whether these aspirations will translate into real careers.

*Table 8: Employment aspirations of participants*

Employment aspirations	Number of responses
Health Care/Medical Care	1
Computing	3
ICT teacher	1
Working with children	3
Design/drama	3
Fitness trainer	1
Arts	1
Drama	1
Nursing/Social Care	1
No answer	1

The fact that career aspirations closely reflect the course subjects of their community education courses might reflect participants’ enjoyment of the courses or a more general concern with finding work which either might have influenced their course choice in the first place or led them to consider career options in these subjects following the courses. Generally, the group of participants appears to be goal-oriented even if the goals are obviously constrained by their experience and – as will be shown below – by the limited advice they have had.

In response to the question “Do you think courses at the community centre prepare you well for your future career?”, participants agreed overwhelmingly (13;). One answered ‘yes and no’ and one answered ‘no’. Here participants emphasised that courses enabled them to focus on what career they might be interested in – they seemed to experience the courses as stepping stones into employment.

*Table 9: Reasons why community courses prepare well for future employment*

Reasons	Number of participants
Employers are interested in skills beyond work skills	3
You choose a course that you enjoy and it's better than college	1
Good courses	1
More freedom, ability to show initiative and self-discipline; no spoonfeeding	1
Courses helped me to prepare for further study	1
Courses gave me friends	1
Because it's close	2
The courses show you what the world of work is like	2

Far from expressing disaffection, these participants experience themselves as agents who both enjoy courses for their own sake but who also think of their future. Interestingly, three respondents gave an ambivalent answer: they thought that courses were interesting and gave basic general knowledge but complained that no direct work-related knowledge was involved. These responses reflect learners' preoccupation with relevance for work-related contexts.

When it comes to advice about work and training, the responses show that the young people in question may not always get the full range of advice possible. A certain poverty of aspirations seems to be a result of the narrow range of influential people who give them advice. It is particularly striking how little influence school and careers workers seem to have on the decision-making of the respondents. However, the results are slightly compromised by a high degree of non-responses. In most cases, though, the non-responses can be classed as answering 'no'.

*Table 10: Help and advice about work and training*

People/Media	Yes	No	No answer
Family	13	1	0
Friends	8	4	3
School	4	6	3
Careers Worker	6	5	3
Newspapers	1	7	6
TV/Internet	7	2	5

It appears that most of the participants receive their main advice and guidance (education and work) from family and friends. It appears that less participants receive advice outside the circle of people they know well, which may lead to a narrowing of their perception of options. This may account for the relatively high correlation

between subject choice at community education and career aspirations. If these courses are the most recent positive education/work-related experience, the influence over the young people's career aspirations is likely to be high.

## **6. Conclusions**

The analysis of the data available broadly confirms our initial hypothesis, namely that the lengthened transition period between childhood and adulthood is a period of considerable change and fluidity that young people negotiate as best they can. Having left full-time education they appear uncertain about their future and vacillate between several options. Furthermore, Catan's findings are broadly confirmed: young people move back and forth between education, training and work as opportunity dictates. These young people do not appear to be disaffected or in danger of exclusion. They seem to use the opportunity of part-time community education (consciously or unconsciously) to help shape their decisions of a return to education or of moving into full-time employment. Their own words reflects the language of 'skills' and 'work-related' learning familiar from policy contexts and they conceive of themselves as firmly within that discourse – i.e. they do not reject that discourse, which would be a criterion of disaffection. However, their choices seem to be constrained by immediate experience and by the lack of independent careers advice and guidance. The fact that many of the young people's career aspirations closely mirror the subjects of their community education courses, which were sometimes at the level of short holiday activities, seems to suggest that they are not aware of the full range of options available and are unlikely to make rational, informed choices about their careers. This perceived lack of options might cause fatalism and a degree of disaffection in the future, but it is not noticeable at this stage. What emerges from this study is an understanding that young people who are marginal NEETs should not be conceived of in terms of social exclusion and disaffection. Neither are they, however, the kind of rational, well-informed agents described by the post-Thatcherite political discourse. It seems that community education fulfils a valuable function in providing courses and activities that young people enjoy, perhaps even suggest that learning itself is an enjoyable activity and point out career opportunities at the same time. However, education is no substitute for social policy and independent careers guidance and advice.

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