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Young people and Labour Market Marginalisation: The case for a Youth Resolution

Youth unemployment is a matter of significant international concern and unemployment rates amongst young people in countries such as Greece, Spain and Italy now almost match those which have long characterised the Middle East and North Africa. Whilst comparable figures are much lower in the United Kingdom, nevertheless over one in five 16-24 year olds in the UK are classified as NEET (not in education, employment or training). There is no doubt that being NEET for significant periods of time can have serious consequences: young people outside education and work tend to be more vulnerable to social isolation, loss of confidence and low self-esteem (UCU 2013), and they are also more likely to be involved in crime and anti-social behaviour, to become young parents, and to suffer various forms of illness than their peers (Bell and Blanchflower 2010; Scarpetta et al 2010). Young people who have spent significant periods of time outside the labour market are also more prone to long-term unemployment, and even when they are able to find employment are more likely to be in low-paid and insecure jobs. The broader social costs of youth unemployment are also considerable. Welfare benefit payments, lost tax revenue, and funding support services all present significant challenges to the public purse.

Although the NEET population is made up of a diverse range of individuals with a range of different circumstances, abilities and ambitions, those from families which suffer from poverty and other forms of social and economic disadvantage are particularly vulnerable to becoming NEET, and to spending sustained periods outside education and the labour market. It is important, however, to note that only around 10 per cent of the NEET category is made up of those classified as 'long-term NEET'. Whilst many politicians and certain sections of the media present youth unemployment largely as a symptom of the shortcomings of the education system and the inability of many young people to find paid work, for most, being NEET is usually interspersed with various forms of labour market activity, if only for relatively short periods: despite popular stereotyping, most NEET young people actually 'churn' repeatedly between various sites of labour market participation and non-participation. Findings from a series of research projects I have conducted with my University of Huddersfield colleagues, Lisa Russell and Ron Thompson, also challenge a number of orthodox assumptions about the nature of youth unemployment. Since 2008 we have worked with over seventy young people categorised as NEET or vulnerable to becoming so and whilst there is no doubt that, at times, some of those who took part in our research behaved problematically, we also found that, almost without exception, the individuals concerned actually have quite mainstream attitudes, values and ambitions. The vast majority aspired to the traditional signifiers of adult life – including a job, their own home, and eventually a conventional family life. Moreover, although a significant proportion of our participants had parents who were economically inactive, contrary to dominant discourses about cultures of worklessness, we did not find any young person who came from a household where nobody had ever worked – and it is important to note that our participants include young offenders, care leavers, and those suffering from multiple forms of disadvantage.

The most recent project with which we have been involved is a three year study of the lives of NEET young people funded by the Leverhulme Trust. Using ethnographic methods, based upon spending extended periods of time with young people in a range of everyday settings, the longitudinal nature of the study allowed us to explore their lives in a way that is not possible in most

research projects. Whilst David Cameron's (2013) call to get all young people either 'earning or learning' has a certain populist appeal, the findings of the Leverhulme study suggest that, for some individuals, participation in education and work can often be as problematic as non-participation. Those who took part often experienced the 'employability' programmes they were required to undertake as dull and repetitive, and only rarely did such training lead to a job. The most common destination on completion of these programmes was to become NEET once more, and the next most frequent outcome was going onto another employability training programme. When they were able to find work participants were often poorly paid, harshly managed and subject to conditions which it is difficult to avoid describing as exploitative. Consequently, although the commitment and motivation of many of those that took part in our research was surprisingly durable, it was also evident that, over time, some young people – perhaps understandably – adopted an increasingly negative orientation to education and work. Such findings presented a challenge to some of our attitudes, values and beliefs. One such belief was that doing something must be better than doing nothing, but what became clear is that participation itself is not enough. One of the central arguments of our latest book, *Education, Work and Social Change* (Simmons et al. 2014) is that we need to look past the false dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion if we are to understand the nature of labour market participation and non-participation in post-industrial economies such as twenty-first century Britain. We believe the concept of *marginalisation* – a process which spans certain forms of low-quality education and employment, as well as exclusion – is a more effective way of understanding the lives of many young people in contemporary society.

Whilst there is no 'silver bullet' solution to the problems outlined above, it is evident that focusing only on supply-side initiatives and promoting labour market flexibility do little to address this matter. High-quality training and secure employment with future development prospects are required if we are serious about providing better opportunities for young people. Whilst there is a strong case for increased labour market regulation to improve the quality of work in the UK, it is not possible to turn the clock back and recreate the conditions that existed in post-war Britain - even if this were thought to be desirable. Like other nations, the UK is now part of a globalised economy; labour and capital is more mobile than was the case in previous decades; and social expectations have altered radically. There is nevertheless a need to improve the quality of opportunities available to young people and there is some evidence that key figures within the Labour Party recognise this. Labour's Real Jobs Guarantee for 18-24 year olds and the call for all workers to be paid the Living Wage are examples of this.

It is, however, necessary to provide other ways of delivering better opportunities for young people and I am currently working with the UCU on the idea of a *Youth Resolution* to help improve the standards of education and work available to young people (see UCU 2014). At the heart of the Youth Resolution is a commitment by training providers, advice and guidance services and, perhaps most importantly, employers, to commit to certain core principles when working with young people. This would not only entail offering decent pay and job security but providing young people with structured training opportunities, clear and accessible career progression routes, and access to workplace mentors. Underpinning the Youth Resolution is the principle that young people are an asset to be nurtured and developed rather than merely a resource to use. It is envisaged that local authorities will be central to developing and implementing the Youth Resolution. In England, they are already responsible for co-ordinating the raising of the participation age, and they have significant duties in relation to the support and care of young

people across the UK. In many ways, the Youth Resolution offers a win-win scenario. Young people would be provided with good quality labour market opportunities whilst employers, support services and training providers would be provided with a quality kite mark which would help promote their status, locally and nationally. Whilst young people and practitioners concerned with their welfare would be provided with a clear signal of value, the Youth Resolution could also open up significant opportunities for participating organisations. Local authorities have a key strategic role as commissioners and purchasers of a wide range of products and services and are well-placed to develop partnerships with organisations committing to a Youth Resolution when developing and securing services for local people.

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