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A NEET Solution?

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UK YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT: A NEET SOLUTION?

YOUTH unemployment across the country rose by 20,000 last month and almost one million 18 to 24-year-olds are classified as NEET – not in education, employment or training. PROFESSOR ROBIN SIMMONS and NEWCASTLE COUNCILLOR STEPHEN LAMBERT argue we need radical solutions to youth unemployment.

Youth unemployment is now higher than 2009 – and the North-East is being hit the hardest. The implications are serious for hard-pressed businesses and public services, and being NEET is often associated with youth offending, ill-health, early parenthood and other long-term ‘scarring effects’. However, research carried out at the University of Huddersfield challenges stereotypes about youth unemployment, and offers a range of recommendations for policymakers concerned with this area.

The three-year project, funded by The Leverhulme Trust, has a number of important findings. One of these is that, nationally, three-quarters of 16 to 18-year-olds who are NEET come from households with at least one parent in work, and that normally they are unemployed for relatively short periods (on average 12-weeks). Moreover, whilst generally NEET young people have lower than average qualifications, it’s easy to forget that many unemployed graduates are also officially classified as NEET. Either way, the research found that most NEET young people want to work – although many ‘churn’ chronically between low-grade courses and poorly-paid, insecure work. On the few occasions those taking part in the research found decent, secure work they usually stuck with it.

Moreover, although some are quick to blame the unemployed for their own plight, the Huddersfield research has found that most NEET young people are essentially ordinary working-class kids with mainstream attitudes and opinions. Data for Newcastle-Upon-Tyne illustrates this quite vividly. 18 per cent of the city’s 16 to 24-year-olds are classified as NEET but, whilst affluent wards such as Gosforth, have NEET rates for 16 and 17-year-olds as low as 1 per-cent, comparable rates for working-class areas such as Benwell, Scotswood and Walker are far higher – 7per-cent and 11per-cent respectively. In Cowgate, unemployment amongst 18 to 24-year-olds is 30 per-cent!

The research draws a number of conclusions, some of which relate to education and training, which is often not effectively matched to young people’s ambitions or capabilities. However, it also argues that there is a desperate need to stimulate demand for labour across the economy, and for the labour market to be effectively managed and regulated. In other words, an industrial policy is needed. Yes, we need realism: long-closed coal mines and shipyards won’t re-open. But work in the green economy, in housing regeneration, on public infrastructure projects can be created, and in the last six-months Newcastle Council has begun a huge capital programme investing in infrastructure: roads, pavements, housing, and ultrafast broadband. This

will help create much-needed jobs, instil business confidence, and give NEET young people the meaningful opportunities they need.

Other local authorities are making a difference too. In Liverpool, Leeds and Sheffield, they've created Apprenticeship Agencies, organising training and work opportunities for thousands of apprentices. The Labour Party has committed to a Job Guarantee – a real job for anyone who's been workless for two years (a year for under-25s). However, much more needs to be done to give young people a brighter future. Significant changes in social and economic policy – both at regional level and in the broader political economy of the nation are required.

Professor Robin Simmons and Councillor Stephen Lambert

Robin Simmons is Professor of Education at the University of Huddersfield and has had numerous articles and books published, based on his research with NEET young people. He has recently been appointed as Special Advisor to Learning First, a North-East charity for adults with learning disabilities.

Stephen Lambert is a Newcastle City Councillor and a lecturer in Politics and Citizenship Studies at Newcastle Sixth-Form College.