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HELPING UNEMPLOYED YOUNG PEOPLE TO FIND PRIVATE SECTOR WORK

Lisa Russell, Ron Thompson and Robin Simmons

This report investigates the initial labour market experiences of two young people working in multinational, private sector companies, and the role of employers and support services. Both young people had previously been NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) for significant periods.

The report aims to understand the factors influencing their transitions into work in order to inform policy and practice in the field of youth employment.

This report found that:

- the two young people wanted to work but experienced barriers to finding employment, some of which were related to social and economic disadvantage;
- employer practices and the effectiveness of liaison between support services and employers were important factors in their experiences;
- employers emphasised 'soft skills'. However, young people were often poorly prepared in this respect;
- for the jobs available to these young people, formal qualifications were used mainly to screen initial applications; and
- knowledge and skills acquired informally were viewed negatively by employers.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from research into the initial labour market experiences of two young people who had recently been NEET, and the practices of multinational companies in which they worked. Relatively little is known about previously NEET young people working in the private sector, the practices of employers, or the ways in which support services work with employers and young people.

This research was carried out at a time of relatively high youth unemployment, and when the scale and scope of advice and guidance services offered to young people were being reconfigured, changing how young people access these services.

Using a case-study approach in two separate geographical areas, the research aimed to understand the practices of employers and support services, the needs of young people entering work, and factors related to gaining and retaining employment. The research focused on the experiences of one young man at each site – aged 17 and 18, respectively. The first case-study site, located in the north of England, was a town-centre branch of a popular restaurant chain providing paid employment to one of the young people. The second case-study site was a construction company involved in a large building project situated in the south-west of England. This company was providing a work experience placement to the other young person. Using qualitative interviews, participant observation and documentary analysis, the perspectives of these young employees were explored, together with the views of managers, Jobcentre Plus staff and careers guidance practitioners.

Background

Young people who have spent substantial periods of time being NEET face significant challenges when trying to enter or re-enter the labour market, and those with low-level qualifications are particularly vulnerable to labour

market marginalisation and exclusion. Although the NEET category is far from homogeneous, young people experiencing personal and social barriers to participation, such as learning difficulties, caring responsibilities or early parenthood, are more likely to spend extended periods of time outside education and employment. It is this more vulnerable group that should be of most concern to policy-makers, as longer periods NEET can be particularly damaging to future earnings and employment chances. An increasingly competitive labour market, in which NEET young people vie for jobs with both better-qualified peers and more experienced adult workers, presents further challenges to them securing paid employment. Although the NEET category has received attention from policy-makers, the media and other commentators, little is known about previously NEET young people working in the private sector, or the ways in which support services work with employers and young people as they attempt to enter the labour market. Understanding these issues and their implications were central to this research.

Youth unemployment is a critical concern of government, and a range of policies focus on equipping young people with the skills and motivations they need to obtain stable employment. These include measures such as raising the age of compulsory participation in education or training, increasing the availability of apprenticeships, changes to benefit systems, and overarching initiatives such as the Youth Contract that aim to provide training, work experience and other opportunities to young people. A range of employer incentives are available, including the Apprenticeship Grant for Employers, to encourage and support them in providing work opportunities for young people. Other reforms include those recommended in the Wolf Review to improve vocational qualifications and ensure that young people obtain key qualifications in English and Mathematics.

Flexible and personalised provision has been shown to be an important factor in the effectiveness of interventions for NEET young people, especially those who are most vulnerable, but good quality training, and advice and guidance about labour market options, remain elusive. The Youth Contract includes tailored support for 16- and 17-year-old NEET young people with low educational qualifications, caring responsibilities or a record of offending. This scheme operates in a similar way to the Work Programme, with public, private and voluntary organisations competing to provide services to eligible young people on a payment-by-results basis. It is hoped that this will result in more innovative and personalised support. There have also been far-reaching changes to information, advice and guidance (IAG) services, and the last two years have seen IAG services in England reduced and reshaped. Connexions, the integrated IAG service for young people aged 13–19, is being replaced with an all-age National Careers Service (NCS), and schools are being given responsibility for careers guidance. There is evidence that schools are responding to this situation in a variety of ways, and that IAG is becoming increasingly uneven and variable according to local circumstances and priorities (Sissons and Jones, 2012). Furthermore, while there remains a statutory duty for local authorities to provide support services to vulnerable young people up to the age of 19 (24 in the case of those with learning difficulties and disabilities), arrangements differ across the country.

Findings from the case studies

Unlike some popular stereotypes of the NEET population, the young people who took part in this study were keen to work. However, it was also clear that they had experienced significant difficulties in finding employment, although many of these derived at least as much from local circumstances and broader societal factors as from any personal or individual deficits. While their lack of qualifications and previous work experience did constitute a barrier to finding work, other factors, such as the nature of the local job market, employer practices, and factors related to poverty and disadvantage, were also important. Job availability, the young person's ability or willingness to travel, and viable access to transport were also important factors, and must be taken into account alongside skills, abilities and qualifications when considering the support and guidance young people need.

The study also found that the young people who took part in the case studies used family members and various informal contacts as sources of local labour market information, and that such influences had a significant effect, not only on the participants' ability to find work, but on the nature of employment they were likely to obtain. Both young people used formal and informal methods to seek employment, with varying degrees of success. However, they tended to resort to personal contacts and other informal methods of application when more formal procedures were unsuccessful. While employers and guidance practitioners claimed that formal methods of recruitment were increasingly important, in both case studies informal processes played a significant part in the young people's entry to the workplace. To some extent, the use of informal methods was linked to disadvantage – one example being a lack of ready internet access.

It was also clear that more effective preparation for job search and formal application procedures is required. Although employers and advice and guidance practitioners emphasised that formal job-search and application procedures are increasingly important, there was evidence that some young people were under-prepared to look effectively for work. Poor self-presentation skills, inability to express a clear motivation to work for the organisation they were applying to, and the use of inappropriate job-search strategies all appeared to disadvantage young people in the labour market. Furthermore, the job-search strategies adopted by young people were sometimes limited by a lack of financial resources or frustration at a lack of success through more formal pathways. The costs of travelling to work, especially in the initial period prior to getting paid, and the costs associated with accessing the internet to pursue job applications also caused difficulties for some young people.

For the forms of employment available to young people in the case studies, academic or vocational qualifications were not high priorities for employers; however, there was some evidence that academic qualifications were used as part of a screening process and/or as a proxy for 'soft' skills. While in the longer term such young people would benefit from access to qualifications with greater labour market value, these findings reinforce the importance of soft skills in gaining initial entry to employment. The case studies also suggested that skills acquired informally – for example, through working with relatives – can sometimes be regarded negatively by employers. Both companies taking part in this study preferred to train young employees in the specific skills they required, and said they did not necessarily see lack of work experience as a disadvantage. However, more general qualities such as a willingness to learn, reliability and interpersonal skills were valued by these employers.

Although many of the challenges surrounding the employment of NEET young people are rooted in broader socio-economic factors, the report emphasises the importance of understanding young people's experiences of work and highlights the contribution that employer behaviour can make to their initial experiences of the workplace. In the case studies, workforce development was more effective in supporting transitions into employment where young people were regarded as integral to the organisation. The research also found that employers can play an important role in supporting young people's transitions into work. Well established structures for socialising new employees into the workplace can have a positive impact on motivation, self-esteem and progression. Practices like formal induction and training, mentoring arrangements and clear opportunities for progression were perceived as being particularly helpful in one of the case studies. However, in the other case study, liaison between support services and the employer appeared to be much less effective, highlighting the importance for some young people of continuing support on entry to work or work placements, and the potential negative impact when this is not delivered in practice.

Experience from both case studies demonstrates that, too often, support is not personalised and young people's aspirations are not adequately taken into account. Although the reasons for this are varied and depend upon the nature of individual cases, a key factor in the case studies was the difficulty in finding suitable work placements, particularly for more vulnerable young people. In both cases, the young people had followed complex and difficult pathways, and there was some evidence of exploitative placements, which impacted negatively on young people's motivation and progression. In one case study, a particularly unsuitable placement had led to withdrawal from an apprenticeship followed by a lengthy period of 'churning' between short-term employability courses and being NEET. In the other case study, the inadequate liaison outlined above resulted in increasing marginalisation of the young person within the placement, reducing its effectiveness as a learning experience.

Implications for policy and practice

While young people's employment prospects are also shaped by the labour market and other opportunity structures, this research highlights a number of specific challenges faced by young people and employers. The implications for policy and practice set out below propose a number of interventions that could alleviate these challenges. The suggestions made build upon the good practice evident in certain aspects of the case studies.

Support for vulnerable NEET young people

Good quality advice and guidance for young people about their labour market options remain elusive. Experience from both case studies demonstrates that, too often, support is not personalised and young people's aspirations are not adequately taken into account. High quality face-to-face advice and guidance is particularly important for vulnerable NEETs. This should include training in job-application strategies that explicitly recognises the growing importance of online job-search and application processes, including help to access free internet facilities.

Support services also need to recognise the barriers to employment presented to some NEET young people by the additional costs of job search

and travel. Wider access to funding – whether in the form of a small grant, a loan or a combination of grant and loan – could help here.

The relationship between employer and support providers

Continuing support for some young people as they enter work or work placements is important. But the respective roles of employers and support services need to be agreed, clearly communicated and delivered upon. Some form of concordat between support services, employers and the young person, setting out their respective roles and responsibilities, could help here. If trialled and found effective, such a concordat could become a condition of publicly funded employer subsidies.

Employers

Employers also have an important role to play in supporting young people's transitions into work. This research demonstrates the impact well established structures for socialising new employees into the workplace can have on motivation, self-esteem and progression. Practices like formal induction and training, mentoring arrangements and clear opportunities for progression were all important in one of the case studies. Employers should review or establish workforce development policies to support young employees as they enter the organisation.

Employers can also take practical steps to ease young people's transition into work, such as flexible initial payment arrangements to help with transport-to-work costs, and the provision of benefits-in-kind such as lift-share schemes or the loan of equipment.

1 INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings from case-study research into the practices of two multinational, private sector companies providing work for young people who had recently been NEET. Although NEET young people have attracted considerable attention in recent years from policy-makers, media commentators and others, there is a lack of detailed knowledge about the experiences of young people who gain employment after significant periods outside education and work.

Indeed, little is known about previously NEET young people working in the private sector, the requirements and practices of employers, or the ways in which support services work with employers and young people. Meanwhile, the scale and scope of advice and guidance services offered to young people are being reconfigured, changing how young people access these services.

Aims and background to the research

Using a case-study approach in two separate geographical areas, the research aimed to understand the practices of employers, the needs of young people entering work, and factors related to gaining and retaining employment. The research focused on the experiences of one young man at each site – aged 17 and 18, respectively. The first case-study site, located in the north of England, was a town-centre branch of a popular restaurant chain providing paid employment to one of the young people. The second case-study site was a construction company involved in a large building project situated in the south-west of England. This company was providing a work experience placement to the other young person. Using qualitative interviews, participant observation and documentary analysis, the perspectives of these young employees were explored, together with the views of managers, Jobcentre Plus staff and careers guidance practitioners.

The aims of the project were:

- to understand how two private sector organisations recruit, retain and support previously NEET young employees;
- to identify what young people want from their support structures when trying to find, maintain and progress within paid employment;
- to identify policy measures and best practice to support young people in gaining paid employment; and
- to inform employers and local authorities about how they can stimulate better-quality jobs for young people.

The report begins by reviewing current knowledge on NEET young people, their relationship with the labour market and the policy context. It outlines the local labour-market structures in the two case-study areas and the methodology upon which this research is based. The project findings are then presented and discussed, highlighting the pathways into work of the young people involved, and the practices of employers and other stakeholders. The report concludes by identifying implications for policy and practice.

2 NEET YOUNG PEOPLE, YOUTH TRANSITIONS AND EMPLOYMENT

This chapter reviews the background and policy context to the research. It begins by examining the contested nature of the NEET category, and outlining the main features of existing knowledge about NEET young people, the risk factors associated with becoming NEET and the impact on life chances of being out of work at a young age. This is followed by a discussion of young people in the labour market and recent government policies aimed at engaging them in education, employment or training.

NEET definitions and characteristics

Although youth unemployment has attracted considerable attention from politicians and academics since the 1970s, NEET as a specific policy category became prominent in the mid-1990s and, particularly in the early years of the New Labour government, was closely associated with the concept of social exclusion. The focus on participation in education, employment or training not only reflected broader concerns related to the ability of the UK to compete in a global economy, but emphasised the potential for long-term harm to individuals and society as a consequence of exclusion from education and employment in early adulthood (Coles, *et al.*, 2002). To some extent, the NEET category took into account the quality of employment outcomes, by positioning 'jobs without training' as unsatisfactory – although it has been argued that the distinction between this type of job and those

with training can be unhelpful (Lawy, *et al.*, 2010). The NEET category has also proved useful in other respects, for example by concentrating policy initiatives and resources on marginalised young people (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). As educational participation rates have increased and education to the age of 21 or beyond is increasingly common, the NEET category has come to include 19–24 year olds as well as those aged 16–18.

It is important to recognise that NEET is a contested term that has attracted numerous criticisms, including its tendency to focus on the boundary between inclusion and exclusion while neglecting inequalities within work and education (Thompson, 2011). Unlike unemployment, which has an internationally agreed definition, the term NEET is particularly associated with policy discourse in certain English-speaking countries, and international comparisons are difficult. However, increasing cross-European interest in the NEET category may alter this situation to some extent (Eurofound, 2012).

Since the mid-1990s, a substantial body of knowledge relating to NEET young people has accumulated, drawing on a range of disciplines, notably sociology, economics and education studies, and utilising both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. In this chapter, we focus on three key areas of existing knowledge: the structure of the NEET population, the risk factors associated with becoming NEET, and the experiences of NEET young people in the labour market and the practitioners working with them.

Structure of the NEET population

In England, the great majority of 16–18 year olds participate in some form of education, training or employment. However, the NEET population is large enough to remain a significant concern, and for most of the last decade NEET rates for this age group have remained within the range 8–10 per cent. For 19–24 year olds, NEET rates are higher, at around 18–20 per cent (DfE, 2013). The NEET population is gendered as well as age-dependent: at age 16, boys are more likely to be NEET than girls, and overall non-participation rates in England are around 5 per cent; at age 18, the gender difference in participation shows little change, but overall rates are around 15 per cent (DfE, 2013). Since the onset of the recession, NEET rates have increased across Europe, with the exception of Austria, Germany and Luxembourg. Between 2008 and 2011, the EU average increased from 10.8 per cent to 12.9 per cent (Eurofound, 2012, p. 30). However, particularly among 16–18 year olds, educational participation can provide an alternative to being NEET, and in England there is some evidence that the NEET rate for this age group decreased again between 2011 and 2012 (DfE, 2013).

For most young people, being NEET is a temporary state as they move between different forms of participation and non-participation in education, training and employment. Periods of non-participation greater than six months are relatively uncommon, although this varies significantly with social class. On average, fewer than 5 per cent of 17 year olds from higher professional backgrounds have spent more than three months NEET, while for those from routine and manual backgrounds the equivalent figure is over 20 per cent (DCSF/ONS, 2009). While the individual consequences of being NEET depend on factors such as educational qualifications and family background, there is evidence that the 'scarring' effects of labour market exclusion at an early age increase with the length of periods of exclusion. Gregg (2001), using the National Child Development Survey, finds that – depending on background characteristics – an extra three months of youth unemployment before the age of 23 leads to an additional 1.3 months of unemployment between the ages of 28 and 33. However,

several studies find a stronger impact on income levels than on future unemployment, with periods of youth unemployment longer than one year reducing future income levels by up to 20 per cent (Scarpetta, *et al.*, 2010). In addition to economic scarring, there is also a significant long-term effect of early exclusion on other outcomes, such as health and well-being (Bell and Blanchflower, 2009). Although it is difficult to generalise, periods spent NEET of six months or longer would give rise to serious concern for the future prospects of more vulnerable young people.

The NEET category includes people in a variety of circumstances, such as those travelling or doing voluntary work, care leavers, young people with disabilities, and those who drop out of college or leave employment, voluntarily or otherwise. Spielhofer, *et al.* (2009) provide a typological analysis that distinguishes between groups at greater or lesser risk of long-term exclusion. In this typology, 41 per cent of NEET young people were 'open to learning' and likely to return to education in the short term; these people tended to have higher levels of education and more positive attitudes to learning. By contrast, 38 per cent were 'sustained NEET', many of whom had few qualifications, negative school experiences, and/or specific barriers to re-engagement. A similar distinction is drawn by Eurofound (2012), between 'vulnerable NEETs' lacking in social, cultural and human capital, and the non-vulnerable, for whom re-engagement is likely to be less problematic. The main focus of concern has therefore fallen on NEET young people with one or more of the following characteristics:

- lacking in social, cultural and material capital – particularly as manifested in having few or no qualifications and/or minimal work experience;
- having specific barriers to learning – such as ill-health or major caring responsibilities;
- having unstable circumstances that are likely to result in significant barriers to learning – for example, estrangement from family or substance abuse; and
- negative previous experiences of education or employment.

Some indication of the extent of vulnerability may be obtained from data on the breakdown of the NEET population in terms of the primary reason for their NEET status at any one time. According to data from the Youth Cohort Study of England and Wales (YCS) and the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), the most common individual reasons given by young men aged 17 is that they lacked qualifications or academic ability (25 per cent), or lacked experience (16 per cent). Young women also gave these reasons, in similar proportions, but their most frequently-cited barrier to engagement was pregnancy or childcare (30 per cent). Age, and disability or ill health, were also relatively common reasons given by both sexes (DCSF/ONS, 2009, p. 34). A similar pattern is found in Scotland (Furlong, 2006). Unsurprisingly, many NEET young people have few or no qualifications, providing an underlying reason for unsuccessful job seeking or unsatisfactory experiences in post-compulsory education. However, even among 16–18 year olds, relatively high levels of education are not uncommon, and in England approximately 20 per cent of NEET young people aged 16 in 2008 had 5 or more GCSE passes at grades A*–C (DCSF/ONS, 2009, p. 30).

Risk factors associated with becoming NEET

For many young people, exclusion from education and employment is both an outcome and a continuing part of social and educational disadvantage. In particular, family poverty and deprivation increase the likelihood of

disaffection and educational underachievement, and reduced likelihood of participation in post-compulsory education (Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012). Children receiving free school meals in their final year of compulsory schooling are considerably more likely to become NEET after leaving school than those who are not (DCSF/ONS, 2009). Conversely, Coles, *et al.* (2002) noted that the young people least likely to be NEET were those living with two parents in owner-occupied housing with a father working full time. However, although its influence on the chances of becoming NEET is strong, social class and/or family poverty appear to operate indirectly in shaping early labour market outcomes, operating largely through levels of educational achievement (Bynner and Parsons, 2002; Iannelli and Smyth, 2008).

Although the relationship between achievement and participation is complex and mediated by gender and ethnicity, qualification levels are a major factor in post-16 participation. In England, being NEET at age 17 is four times more common among those with no qualifications than for those who achieve the relatively modest level of 1–4 grades A*–C at GCSE, and nearly twenty times the rate of those with 8 or more grades A*–C (DCSF/ONS, 2009; see also Eurofound, 2012: 56). Researchers in other countries also report an association with low educational attainment, for example in Australia (Hillman, 2005) and Scotland (Furlong, 2006). Analysing longitudinal data on a cohort of people born in Great Britain in 1970, Bynner and Parsons (2002) found that young people with no qualifications were six times more likely to be NEET than those with 'O' level qualifications or above. Ethnicity also modifies to some extent the relationship between achievement and participation, and there is evidence that young people from certain minority ethnic groups are more likely than their white peers to participate in full-time, post-compulsory education, in spite of lower average levels of educational attainment among young people from Pakistani, Bangladeshi and African-Caribbean backgrounds (DCSF/ONS, 2009).

Bynner and Parsons (2002) found little independent effect from social class on the likelihood of being NEET, but significant contributions from a small number of related factors, which also showed gender differences, relating to specific aspects of material disadvantage. After educational achievement, which showed the strongest effect for both males and females, living on a council estate or in inner-city housing was most important for young men, whereas for women family poverty, indicated by eligibility for free school meals or particular state benefits, had the greatest influence. This suggests that in some respects family circumstances and experience add to educational achievement, rather than simply operating through it, in influencing post-16 participation (Bynner and Parsons, 2002). That is, young people from working-class backgrounds living in poverty and/or in social housing were more likely to become NEET than other working-class young people with similar levels of educational achievement living in other circumstances.

A number of other factors are associated with an increased risk of becoming NEET. For example, being born to a teenage mother, growing up with a lone parent, low levels of parental education, and suffering from ill health or engaging in risky behaviour while growing up have all been reported as associated with an increased chance of becoming NEET (Duckworth and Schoon, 2012; Eurofound, 2012), although there are many nuances to these findings. Having parents who have experienced long periods of unemployment is a further risk factor, even when social class and parental education are controlled for (Barnes, *et al.*, 2012). However, parental worklessness *per se* was generally not responsible for this increased

risk; the socio-economic risks faced by workless families appeared to be more significant.

It is important to recognise that, even among young people with one or more socio-economic risk factors associated with NEET status, many do not become NEET. Duckworth and Schoon (2012) find a number of protective factors, including prior achievement, educational aspirations and engagement at school, experience of part-time work and attending a school with a relatively low proportion of children from poorer backgrounds. For those at 'deep risk' – having three or more socio-economic risks – aspirations, school engagement and school characteristics are particularly important.

The long-term costs to society of a significant NEET population are substantial, so that early intervention, although initially costly, may prove economic in the long-term. Coles, *et al.* (2010) estimate that being NEET may cost the UK economy between £22 billion and £77 billion (reflecting lost productivity and additional welfare payments), and £12 billion to £32 billion in public finance costs (with some possible overlap between the two).

Young people and the labour market

There are dangers in regarding the causes of being NEET as deriving exclusively from individualised factors such as personal attitudes and dispositions, or insufficient motivation to learn and do well in education (Coles, *et al.*, 2010). Although these factors can be important, de-industrialisation, the associated collapse of the traditional youth labour market, and an increasingly marketised and competitive education system have had far-reaching consequences for young people (Ball, 2003). Furthermore, current NEET rates for 16–18 year olds are considerably lower than UK youth unemployment rates in the 1980s and early 1990s; what is different is that today most young people stay in education much longer than was the case in the past. Those who leave at the earliest opportunity to seek work are now a small minority, and increasingly differentiated from their more advantaged competitors in the labour market, such as experienced adult workers and better-qualified young people.

Since the 1980s, many full-time jobs that would traditionally have been filled by young people have been recast as part-time work, and the number of women in the labour market has increased substantially. Other jobs that less well-qualified 16–18 year olds might have sought are now taken by full-time students working on a part-time basis (Bradley and Devadason, 2008; Coles, 2008; MacDonald, 2009). There is some evidence that recent migration, particularly from Eastern Europe, may have had some effect on NEET rates among 16–24 year olds since 2004, but this is largely confined to London, and most studies show that the effect of migration on youth unemployment is not significant (ACEVO 2012, p. 119). As the supply of graduates increases, even those young people who are able to take maximum advantage of education face increased competition for employment commensurate with their qualifications and aspirations. More recent changes in government policy, such as further reforms to education and training, reductions in the funding of careers guidance services and a labour market still struggling in the aftermath of recession, must also be taken into account. Consequently, some young people are unable to enter employment, not because of any personal deficit but as a direct or indirect result of the 'social congestion' described by Brown (2006). While young people with greater access to economic and social capital may be

able to relocate in search of work, or find other ways of enhancing their employability, the most vulnerable are less able to pursue these options.

The recession that began in 2008 has had a disproportionate effect on the young, and although youth unemployment began to rise well before the recession, the position of young people has worsened considerably. The sharpest increase in unemployment rates was experienced by 16–17 year olds, closely followed by those aged 18–24 (UKCES, 2011a). In 2006, 50 per cent of unemployed young people found work within a year; by 2009 this figure was 27 per cent. Unemployment rates for young people aged 16–24 peaked at slightly more than 22 per cent at the end of 2011, and the proportion of this age group unemployed was the highest since 1984–85 (ONS, 2012); after falling back slightly during 2012, the 16–24 unemployment rate¹ has remained close to 21 per cent throughout 2013. Unemployment rates for 16–17 year olds not in full-time education have been considerably higher throughout this period, again showing some decline in 2012, but increasing during the early months of 2013 to a high of 42.6 per cent compared with the post-recession peak of 44.7 per cent in May–July 2011. In July 2013, the unemployment rate for this group was 39.9 per cent (ONS, 2013a).

Compared with older workers, young people are less likely to be employed and more likely to be laid off (McFall, 2012). They are more likely to be employed on a part-time and/or temporary basis, and their employment is concentrated in certain sectors. The proportion of young people working in hotels, restaurants and retail is, for example, far higher than for the working population as a whole. Health and social work, construction and manufacturing are also significant employers of young people (UKCES, 2011b). These are all sectors that have large numbers of low-paid, low-skilled jobs. The risk of work with poor terms and conditions and a lack of opportunities for progression is greater for NEET young people than for others: where NEET young people do find work, they tend to be located in low-paid, low-skilled and insecure work (Scarpetta, *et al.*, 2010).

Some of the experiences of young people trying to gain employment may be explained in terms of segmented labour market theory (Tomlinson and Walker, 2010). This proposes that labour markets are not unitary, but segmented in various ways within and between industries. Different segments of the labour market are characterised by differing employment conditions, levels of pay and opportunities for progression. In some versions of the theory, terms such as ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ labour markets are used, the emphasis being on distinctions between industries or the quality of employment offered at different levels within an industry. In other versions, the terms ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ are used to recognise that different labour markets may be represented within a single company. Either way, markets for more advantaged workers are contrasted with those less fortunate. Primary or core labour markets are characterised by more stable and secure employment, progressive career ladders and higher wage returns to education. Secondary or peripheral labour markets offer little security, poorer working conditions, few or no qualification requirements and little opportunity for career progression.

The opportunities for progression are further undermined by what is known as the ‘hollowing out of the labour market’. Goos and Manning (2007) report that, over recent years, the UK has witnessed one of the largest declines in ‘middle’ paying occupations among comparable nations, although some modest growth in lower and higher skilled jobs has continued. This change in occupational structure has affected young people in particular as more experienced adult workers have been displaced from mid-range

employment, intensifying competition at the bottom end of the labour market. Furthermore, the route from low-level work into better-quality jobs is becoming increasingly difficult (Bell and Blanchflower, 2010), and the policy orthodoxy that low-paid, insecure work provides a stepping-stone to more stable and better-paid employment is increasingly untenable (Shildrick, *et al.*, 2012).

A substantial literature exists on employers' views about the skills required by young people entering the workplace (see, for example, UKCES, 2011b), but less is known about their strategies for easing young workers into employment (however, see UKCES, 2012, which contains studies of good practice and recommendations for employers). There is also a lack of knowledge relating to young people's experiences of gaining work, specifically NEET young people, and especially a dearth of literature that concentrates on the private sector.

An issue of some concern is the current gap in the literature relating to the expectations and experiences of young people in Britain, before and after starting work, from the time of the 2008 recession onwards and in the context of deepening youth unemployment.

– Oxenbridge and Evesson, 2012, p.4

This research aims to help fill this gap in the evidence base by taking a detailed look at the transition of two previous NEET young people into jobs and work experience in the private sector.

Government policy and youth transitions

Youth unemployment remains a critical political and social concern (Oxenbridge and Evesson, 2012). Three government departments are responsible for policies relating to youth employment: the Department for Education (DfE), the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The 16–24 Participation Strategy (HM Government, 2011) focuses on reforms to schools, vocational education, skills and welfare policy, and outlines five priorities that aim to increase participation in both education and employment by:

- raising educational attainment in school and beyond to ensure that young people have the skills they need to compete in a global economy;
- helping local partners to provide effective and co-ordinated services that support all young people, including the most vulnerable, in order to achieve full participation for 16–17 year olds by 2015;
- encouraging and incentivising employers to inspire and recruit young people by offering more high quality apprenticeships and work experience placements;
- ensuring that work pays and giving young people the personalised support they need to find it, through Universal Credit, the Work Programme and Get Britain Working initiatives; and
- putting in place a new Youth Contract worth almost £1 billion over the next three years, to help get young people learning or earning before long-term damage is done (HM Government, 2011, p. 5).

Although referring to reforms spanning all phases of education, the first of these priorities is related to early interventions aimed at young people considered 'at risk', and the raising of the education participation age in

England that will require all young people to continue in some form of education or training (including employment with training) until the age of 18 by 2015. Other reforms include those recommended in the Wolf Review (2011), such as removing 'perverse incentives' that promote low-quality vocational qualifications to the detriment of core academic study, and ensuring that young people obtain key qualifications in English and Mathematics.

A key area of policy activity has been the Youth Contract, which consists of a range of interventions aimed at getting young people into work or training. It includes tailored support for getting 16- and 17-year-old NEET young people with low educational qualifications, caring responsibilities or a record of offending back into education, training, an apprenticeship or employment with training. This scheme operates in a similar way to the Work Programme (a welfare-to-work scheme that aims to place unemployed people in employment), with public, private and voluntary organisations competing to provide services to eligible young people on a payment-by-results basis. Like the Work Programme, it is hoped that giving organisations the freedom to design support packages will result in more innovative and personalised support. It is too early to be able to evaluate the performance of this programme, but early assessments of the Work Programme offer some cause for concern, with evidence that contractors tend to focus their efforts on individuals who are easier to support, rather than those with circumstances and needs that mean they are classified as 'harder-to-help' (National Audit Office, 2012).

For young people aged 18–24, further support includes: weekly rather than fortnightly meetings with Jobcentre advisers; fast-tracking onto the Work Programme for those out of work for nine months or more; and access to sector-based work academies providing pre-employment training, work experience and a guaranteed interview following work experience. There are also incentives for employers to take on young people, as discussed in the next section.

There have also been far-reaching changes to information, advice and guidance (IAG) services, which are likely to have a significant impact on young people's transitions. Evaluation of a range of programmes for NEET young people over the last ten years indicates that the quality of the relationship between young people and IAG staff is a significant factor in providing flexible training tailored to young people's individual needs (Spielhofer, *et al.* 2009). Research into Connexions, the integrated advice and guidance service for young people aged 13–19, has highlighted the importance of personal advisers responding to young people's particular needs and interests rather than pursuing target-driven outcomes (Hoggarth and Smith, 2004, p. 14). The ability of personal advisers to establish a respectful and trusting relationship with young people, thereby facilitating the identification of tailored support, was also highlighted as a key factor in evaluations of Activity Agreements² (Hillage, *et al.*, 2008, p. 32). More recent programmes such as provision within the Youth Contract have reinforced this point (McCrone, *et al.*, 2013, pp. 60–61).

Further characteristics of effective provision include flexibility of learning programmes in terms of start dates, attendance patterns and course content, as well as the use of participatory learning methods such as team working, peer mentoring and project work. Structured induction arrangements and on-going communication with young people and partners such as work-placement providers are also important (Spielhofer, *et al.*, 2009). There is some evidence to indicate that relatively modest financial incentives can also have an impact on re-engaging young people in learning, although take-up

of provision does not necessarily reach those most in need (Hillage, *et al.*, p. 32; Spielhofer, *et al.*, 2009, p. 7). One of the challenges faced by provision of this nature is the need to compensate for early negative experiences of the labour market. In an evaluation of Youth Contract provision for NEET young people aged 19–24, approximately half of those interviewed described having experienced many different types of job. In general, these jobs had not worked out for various reasons, including the quality and security of the employment involved. Consequently, while many participants were motivated to improve their qualifications, they suffered from lack of confidence and low self-esteem, which needed to be addressed before more concrete development could be undertaken (McCrone, *et al.*, 2013). This ‘discouraged worker’ phenomenon is widely recognised not just in the UK, but also internationally (Eurofound, 2012).

The last two years have seen IAG services in England significantly reduced and radically reshaped as a result of funding cuts and legislative change. Across the country, Connexions services are being dismantled and replaced with an all-age National Careers Service (NCS), schools are being given responsibility for careers guidance, and local authorities have a duty to support NEETs to participate in employment or education up to the age of 19. It must, however, be noted that such changes would have been likely whoever won the last general election. Published under the previous government, the *Unleashing Aspiration* report (HM Government, 2010) criticised Connexions in various ways – especially its emphasis on providing services for the minority of vulnerable young people at the expense of other young people – and recommended a fundamental overhaul of IAG in England. However, it should be pointed out that the NCS receives far less funding than was previously allocated to Connexions and, perhaps most importantly, its services are run mainly via telephone helplines and web-based material rather than through face-to-face guidance offered by personal advisors, as was the case with Connexions services. In many ways this will limit access to support, particularly for the disadvantaged (Institute of Career Guidance, 2011; Sissons and Jones, 2012). NEET young people under the age of 25 are, however, entitled to three face-to-face sessions with an NCS adviser each year.

Rather than using IAG provided by local authorities in partnership with Connexions, schools are now expected to commission such services from external providers – although they have not been provided with additional funding to do so. There is evidence that schools are responding to this situation in a variety of ways, and that IAG is becoming increasingly uneven and variable according to local circumstances and priorities (Sissons and Jones, 2012). Furthermore, while there remains a statutory duty for local authorities to provide support services to vulnerable young people up to the age of 19 (24 in the case of those with learning difficulties and disabilities), arrangements differ across the country; many local authorities are not offering discrete careers guidance for these young people due, at least in part, to the severe budgetary constraints under which they now operate. Many careers advisers have either been made redundant or redeployed as more generalist local authority ‘youth support officers’ (Institute of Career Guidance, 2011).

Support for employers

While supply-side factors such as education, training and various other aspects of human capital are undoubtedly important, stimulating the demand

for labour needs to be central to policy on employment and unemployment. Like their predecessors, the present government's youth labour-market strategy is based largely upon providing incentives for employers to take on young people: wage subsidies, for example, are available to organisations taking on a young person (aged 18–24) through Jobcentre Plus and the Work Programme. In 2012 these initiatives, alongside other measures such as the Apprenticeship Grant for Employers (AGE), were subsumed within the Youth Contract, a £1 billion programme designed to help young people enter employment. This three-year programme aims to provide opportunities for 18–24 years olds including apprenticeships and work experience placements, and support for younger people in the form of increased funding for apprenticeships and a NEET prevention strand.

As yet there is little evidence on the effectiveness of the Youth Contract. However, experience with earlier schemes – particularly those introduced by the previous government following the onset of the recession in 2008 – suggests that key difficulties will be complexity, employer knowledge of the various schemes, and a lack of permanent job opportunities when young people complete a scheme. Research in 2010 by the UK Commission on Employment and Skills found that employer knowledge was greatest in relation to well established schemes such as apprenticeships and the New Deal, whereas more recent initiatives were less well known – indeed, only 15 per cent of the employers surveyed were aware of the Future Jobs Fund or the Young Person's Guarantee (UKCES, 2011b). Consequently, use of these initiatives was low: 8 per cent of employers had used apprenticeships and only 1 per cent had used the Future Jobs Fund. Both awareness and use depended on the size of the organisation, with larger employers being both more aware and more likely to use these schemes. Among employers who used them satisfaction was quite high, although employer satisfaction is not necessarily the same as long-term effectiveness in terms of moving young people into employment. Initial evaluations of the Youth Contract indicate that complexity will again be a problem, with Jobcentre staff reporting that aspects such as wage incentives are difficult to explain to employers (Jordan and Thomas, 2013). Crucially, any long-term job creation as a result of the Contract is likely to be small, and its main benefits may be in terms of changed attitudes among employers towards taking on young people and, of course, the work experience benefits for the young people involved (Jordan, *et al.*, 2013).

Chapter 2 contextualises the case study sites within their local labour market landscapes. These landscapes are particularly important to young people from poorer backgrounds, as their ability to travel long distances to and from work, or to move away from their immediate locality to seek employment, is often constrained by lack of financial resources.

3 LOCAL LABOUR MARKETS: HUDDERSFIELD AND SWINDON

Initial labour-market experiences tend to be realised locally. Most young people get their first job within a few miles of their residence, and the nature and availability of work is as important as the skills and qualifications young people possess. This section of the report outlines the economic landscapes in which the two case-study sites are located. The first is in Huddersfield, a largely post-industrial town in northern England where, outside public service employers, the majority of jobs are located in small- to medium-size businesses. The second case study is in Swindon, a relatively prosperous town in the south-west of England where large multinational corporations provide significant levels of employment.

Huddersfield

Huddersfield is a large town in West Yorkshire. With a population of 133,293,³ it is the biggest place in Kirklees, a local authority which also includes Dewsbury, Batley and a number of smaller towns and villages. Huddersfield is ethnically diverse with 67.8 per cent of its population classified as White British (West Yorkshire Observatory, 2013). The town experienced tremendous growth during and after the Industrial Revolution:

between 1801 and 1901 its population grew from 14,400 to 72,000 (Kirklees Council, 2011). In the early 1960s, in their classic study of working-class education, Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden described Huddersfield as 'a rich city ... [whose] unemployment problem is slight ... It enjoys a protective variety of industries ... [which] guards it from the lesser trade cycles that trouble neighbouring cities' (Jackson and Marsden, 1962, p. 5).

In contrast, unemployment and poverty in Huddersfield now both exceed the national average: 6.3 per cent of the population claim Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) compared with an England average of 3.8 per cent, and 24.6 per cent of children live in families receiving Income Support/JSA or whose income is below 60 per cent of median income. As much as 23.9 per cent of the population lives in neighbourhoods classified as in the top 10 per cent most multiply deprived in England (West Yorkshire Observatory, 2013). The recession that followed the global financial crisis of 2008 has had a disproportionate effect on young people, and in Kirklees the 18–24 age group has considerably higher claimant rates than others (see Table 1). Kirklees is characterised by lower than average educational attainment (see Table 2). While in Great Britain 30 per cent of people aged 16–64 have no qualifications or qualifications below Level 2, in Kirklees this figure is

Table 1: JSA claimants by age and duration (January 2013)

| | Kirklees (%) | Swindon (%) | Great Britain (%) |
|----------------------------|--------------|-------------|-------------------|
| Aged 18–24 | | | |
| Total | 9.6 | 6.5 | 6.7 |
| Up to 6 months | 6.6 | 4.5 | 4.5 |
| Over 6 and up to 12 months | 1.4 | 0.7 | 0.9 |
| Over 12 months | 1.6 | 1.2 | 1.3 |
| Aged 25–49 | | | |
| Total | 4.8 | 2.9 | 3.9 |
| Up to 6 months | 2.6 | 1.8 | 2.1 |
| Over 6 and up to 12 months | 0.8 | 0.4 | 0.6 |
| Over 12 months | 1.4 | 0.7 | 1.2 |
| Aged 50–64 | | | |
| Total | 2.4 | 2.1 | 2.2 |
| Up to 6 months | 1.2 | 1.2 | 1.0 |
| Over 6 and up to 12 months | 0.4 | 0.3 | 0.3 |
| Over 12 months | 0.9 | 0.5 | 0.8 |

Note: % is number of persons claiming JSA as a proportion of resident population of the same age
Source: ONS, 2013b, c

Table 2: Qualifications of people in Kirklees and Swindon (Jan–Dec 2011)

| | Kirklees (%) | Swindon (%) | Great Britain (%) |
|----------------------|--------------|-------------|-------------------|
| NVQ4 and above | 25.7 | 27.1 | 32.9 |
| NVQ3 and above | 45.6 | 49.7 | 52.7 |
| NVQ2 and above | 63.4 | 68.0 | 69.7 |
| NVQ1 and above | 76.8 | 84.8 | 82.7 |
| Other qualifications | 7.3 | 6.5 | 6.7 |
| No qualifications | 15.8 | 8.7 | 10.6 |

Note: % is a proportion of resident population of area aged 16–64
Source: ONS, 2013b, c

37 per cent. The proportion of young people who are NEET is also higher than average, standing at 7.3 per cent in July 2012 for 16–18 year olds, compared with 5.8 per cent across England.

Employment reflects the national shift from manufacturing to service sector work. However, manufacturing continues to play a significant part in the local economy, and the proportion of jobs in this sector is twice the Great Britain average (see Table 3). Cummins Turbo Technologies, Birkby Plastics, David Brown Gear Systems and the chemical company Syngenta are some of Huddersfield's largest employers. Elsewhere in Kirklees, manufacturers of greetings cards, biscuits, paints, mattress fillings and pharmaceuticals all have relatively large workforces. Nevertheless, the majority of jobs are in service industries, particularly in the public sector. Kirklees Council employs over 19,000 people and other large employers include the NHS and the University of Huddersfield.

Table 3: Employee jobs in Kirklees and Swindon (2008)

| | Kirklees (%) | Swindon (%) | Great Britain (%) |
|--|--------------|-------------|-------------------|
| Mode of employment | | | |
| Full-time | 65.7 | 68.9 | 68.8 |
| Part-time | 34.3 | 31.1 | 31.2 |
| Employee jobs by industry | | | |
| Manufacturing | 20.2 | 13.2 | 10.2 |
| Construction | 5.1 | 2.9 | 4.8 |
| Services | 73.9 | 81.4 | 83.5 |
| Distribution, hotels and restaurants | 24.1 | 24.7 | 23.4 |
| Transport and communications | 4.2 | 6.6 | 5.8 |
| Finance, IT, other business activities | 13.6 | 25.4 | 22.0 |
| Public admin, education and health | 27.8 | 19.6 | 27.0 |
| Other services | 4.2 | 5.0 | 5.3 |
| Tourism-related | 6.8 | 5.6 | 8.2 |
| Total employee jobs | 150,200 | 110,600 | |

Notes: % is a proportion of total employee jobs. Employee jobs exclude self-employed, government-supported trainees and HM Forces
Source: ONS, 2013b, c

Swindon

Swindon is a large town and local authority in Wiltshire. Its population has grown significantly over recent years and just over 209,000⁴ people now live in the Borough of Swindon, with further population growth predicted over the next 20 years. Around 88 per cent of Swindon's population is white, although there is a long-standing Polish community in the town. Although pockets of deprivation exist, smaller proportions of Swindon residents claim Jobseeker's Allowance than the national average, across almost all age groups (see Table 1). Among 16–18 year olds, 5.8 per cent are classified as NEET (Swindon Borough Council, 2012, p. 2). However, despite having fewer residents without qualifications than the national average, Swindon has fairly few highly qualified residents (see Table 2). This may be explained, at least in part, by the fact that Swindon is the UK's largest population centre without its own university.

Swindon experienced significant expansion during and after the Industrial Revolution, with Isambard Kingdom Brunel's Swindon Works, built to service the Great Western Railway, being the driving force behind this. The railway works once provided employment for over 14,000 people, but the plant went into decline in the 1960s; much of the works closed in the late 1970s, and it shut altogether in 1986. However, manufacturing remains an important part of Swindon's economy: Honda and BMW-Mini both have plants in the area, as do a number of other manufacturers.

Research conducted in 2012 found Swindon to be one of the top five locations for business investment in the UK. The Nationwide Building Society, Zurich Financial Services and companies such as Motorola, Arval and the energy supplier RWE have head offices in Swindon. The National Trust's headquarters are also located in the town. Outside the local authority, the largest employers are the UK Research Council, Zurich, Nationwide and Network Rail.

In the following chapter, the research methodology is outlined. Each case-study site is described, together with biographical details of the two young people taking part in the research. These biographies focus on their experiences of education, training and employment, and illustrate the complexities involved in helping previously NEET young people enter and maintain a place within the labour market.

4 A CASE-STUDY APPROACH

This chapter presents evidence from case-study research to understand how two multinational private sector companies recruit, train and retain young employees. The main corpus of data was collected during November and December 2012. Fieldwork comprised three days' participant observation and six semi-structured interviews encompassing one previously NEET young person, other young staff, and managers in each organisation, together with local careers guidance practitioners and Jobcentre Plus managers. Photographs and documentary analysis were also used.

Case study 1: a branch of a multinational restaurant chain

This restaurant is located in the centre of Huddersfield and is one of a chain of 255 such outlets across the UK. The parent company is a large multinational organisation with restaurants in 30 countries. The company has an established employee progression structure and employs many young people, especially students. There is considerable local autonomy in staff recruitment, and this particular branch uses a number of different strategies. As it is situated in a busy town centre, its usual approach is simply to advertise vacancies in its front window. The branch does, however, use various job-search websites and on occasion has approached the local Jobcentre. Managers reported an increase in job applications over the past year or so, but view sifting through CVs as a time-consuming activity. When managers screen job applications, candidates are sorted into categories, such as part-time or full-time applicants, or cashiers or grillers, and the filtering process continues with an initial phone call to establish the applicant's characteristics, interests and needs. If applicants pass this initial screening, they are invited to a recruitment day. Some proceed to

two-week recruitment placements and undertake in-house training; others are asked to do a one-day unpaid trial. New recruits are offered a contract of employment if their performance is deemed satisfactory after a three-month probation period.

The importance accorded to employability or 'soft' skills by employers, particularly in the service sector, is well supported in the literature (Sissons and Jones, 2012; UKCES, 2011b). These skills are generally understood as including self-motivation, time management and communication skills, a sense of responsibility and the ability to relate to other people. Particularly among recent school leavers, many employers report deficiencies in these skills (and more diffuse qualities such as 'common sense') as key reasons for rejecting young job applicants (UKCES, 2011b, p. 18). A particular issue raised by employers is that young people often lack understanding of competence-based recruitment processes, and therefore fail to recognise the importance of responding to interview questions in ways appropriate to the company's needs (ibid., p. 19). Due to increased competition for employment, this may be an issue of *relative* rather than *absolute* employability, disadvantaging the most vulnerable young people in particular:

For some employers the sheer volume and calibre of candidates available allowed them to raise their recruitment standards. This has the effect of further disadvantaging low skill candidates and bars candidates who would have been acceptable in the past ... [However,] while tackling employability issues is important, there is a risk that employability skills become over-stated as an issue in tackling youth unemployment.

– UKCES 2011b, p. 19

In the restaurant case study, managers said they wanted employees who are confident, able to work in a team and demonstrate good communication skills. Flexibility is also seen as crucial as shifts vary, including a combination of weekends, nights and days. NVQ training, which is delivered in-house, is seen as important but an applicant's qualifications are not the most important factor in the recruitment process. Even a lack of work experience may be overlooked – there seems to be a desire to take on young staff, train and retain them. The company has relatively low staff turnover, compared to similar employers:

“Qualifications don't mean anything because we train our staff and that's why we take on young people who haven't worked before and who have no qualifications ... we try and find people with the right personality and we like people to come and feel that they are socialising with friends, rather than coming to work. We don't want people who don't want to be here ... they might not answer questions in the way we want or they might not look you in the eye or they might fidget. It's very difficult to judge how they would be in the workplace. But they have to be a person that is hard working and who has a good personality and will get on with people ... [Being unsuccessful at an interview] would definitely be around things like confidence, belief and not being able to answer the questions.”

Second-assistant branch manager 1

All training is delivered by the company, mainly on-site, although some training also occurs via off-site conferences. This branch has designated training facilities above the restaurant. The restaurant operates a 'buddying' system, whereby each new recruit is mentored by a more experienced member of staff.

"Well if people come in and they get the job that's great and then, from there, they will have a chat after two weeks and one after four weeks and then they are assessed after three months and after six months. They have their buddies with them for two weeks ... If they didn't have the buddies and the people to support them there would be certain things that they just couldn't do. As I say, they get doubled up for two weeks and then, after that, they will still be supported by somebody else who is more experienced."

Second-assistant branch manager 2

The length of the buddy relationship is dependent upon progress and is monitored by a restaurant manager. There is a clear career-progression pathway: from new recruit, to buddy, two levels of assistant manager, through to restaurant manager. Most managers have worked their way through this structure; they reported that few are recruited externally. Staff seemed to value the idea of having 'home-grown' managers.

"Our training process is very good and we've got the entire training department and we have courses that people go on and we have courses that train people how to train people. I would say it's very good and it's very flexible in how you can use it and we have a lot of people that work here using it. That's why this organisation has managed to grow so well. Since I've been here, I've managed to develop my skills, my social skills and organisational skills. This organisation is all about people and that's what makes it tick!"

Second-assistant branch manager 1

This assistant manager described her own experience of progressing within the company:

"I was nineteen [when I started here] ... I'd been working since I was fifteen ... this was my first restaurant job. I actually was a part-time cleaner ... and also an entertainer in a nightclub. [All my training here] was in-house ... when they opened this restaurant I attended a recruitment placement and I had two weeks of pure training [as a cashier] ... Well, I showed them that I was determined to be a leader; always doing things before you're asked; just being aware of the surroundings and what's happening in the restaurant. And when you have the reviews as well ... for me now, as an assistant manager, I have a review every four weeks ... [The next step up for me] would be first assistant

manager. The first assistant's role is somebody who is capable of running the whole restaurant. I'm in the process at the moment of working my way to that level and I wouldn't be left with a restaurant for longer than a week by myself."

The restaurant has a vibrant atmosphere. Latin-American music is played during opening hours and there is a young, energetic feel to the place. The kitchen and restaurant are open-plan: customers can view meals being cooked, staff interactions and general activity. Staff are expected to smile and show a united team spirit at all times. The customer base is varied and includes professionals, young and mature families, couples and groups of friends. The company employs many young people, particularly students.

In addition to paid staff, the company also provides short periods of work experience to students in further education. This relationship appears to have been generally positive:

"To be honest, we just got a phone call about four years ago saying 'Oh, I've got this gentleman who wants some work experience' and [the company] said yes but there were not so many organisations that did say yes ... To be honest we just see the positives of it because two people here now came here on work experience ... I think it's a positive thing ... I mean there was one guy who spent most of his time in the toilet but 99% of our guys have been great."

Second-assistant branch manager 1

Steven

Steven was 17 years old and lived alone in a flat a few miles from the restaurant. He was from an economically deprived family, lived in poor housing and experienced difficult family circumstances. He had experienced several of the risk factors discussed in Chapter 1, although he had relatively strong educational qualifications. The family home was overcrowded, and although his stepfather was in work, money was very tight. Not long after leaving school, Steven became estranged from his family and had no fixed address for several months, increasing the difficulty of finding employment or a suitable course. However, Steven was strongly motivated in his career choice and also had a level of educational achievement commensurate with his aspirations. He may therefore be regarded as less vulnerable than many other NEET young people, although until he obtained work at the Huddersfield restaurant his situation was precarious.

Steven completed his schooling and gained five GCSEs at A–C, including English, Maths and Science. Immediately after school he started a catering apprenticeship, which he wanted to pursue partly because his stepfather worked as a chef. However, the excessive hours he was expected to work meant he had little time or energy left to fulfil his college obligations and, after a few months, he left his apprenticeship. The college through which the apprenticeship was provided stopped using the work placement provider soon afterwards and it was closed due to food hygiene issues shortly thereafter. The college could not find Steven another suitable placement or offer him an alternative course as he had left his apprenticeship midway through the academic year. Subsequently Steven was NEET for several

months. He looked for work via the Jobcentre and Connexions, and dropped his CV off at various shops and restaurants in the hope of finding work. Steven comes from a large family and is one of seven siblings, and his mother and stepfather put him under pressure to bring in some kind of income:

“They [mother and stepfather] couldn’t afford to keep me because I wasn’t in any education so they weren’t getting any money for me. So I was basically living there and having no money coming in so they needed me to either get a job or I needed to move out because they couldn’t cope.”

After several months of searching for a job Steven became resigned to going onto an employability programme – training provision designed to provide those without work with various functional and social skills. Although Steven felt coerced into attending, he received a training bursary due to his age and circumstances. However, he still wanted to work in catering and did not feel the employability programme provided him with the necessary skills or experience to gain employment as a chef:

“I prefer actually doing it because when I did go to college I did the apprenticeship first which meant doing work and that was better than being sat in a classroom five days a week.”

Steven saw the job at the restaurant advertised in the window and decided to apply, although initially he was unsuccessful:

“The first time I handed my CV in I didn’t get it, and I got called again later and they wanted me to come in because they were having trouble with the four shifts so they were pretty desperate.”

Steven described feeling well supported when he began working at the restaurant. Initial workplace experiences are important: they shape how young people view work, and positive experiences can help them adjust to the demands of entering the labour market. Conversely, it is well established that many workers become discouraged by negative labour-market experiences, and that their motivation to find a job can fade as a consequence of repeated failure to secure decent employment (Raffe and Willms, 1989; Benati, 2001; van Ham, *et al.*, 2001).

“Yeah, it was good because rather than being thrown into the deep end they said this is how you do it and then I was left to try it for myself and that’s a lot easier to learn.”

Steven described the skills he had acquired and the training he had undertaken:

“Everyone has to go through the basics when they first start ... to see how you get on and that, but as you go through it you learn all the organisation spec and all the stuff you need to learn like all your temperatures, your hot and cold temperatures. And

... e-learning, which you get tested for after, and that is all about health and hygiene and the safety side ... you have to pass that ... otherwise you've got to ... redo it all. And then you do a test, dependent on your job role, which will basically show all of your knowledge and you've got to get at least 80 per cent on that otherwise you've got to retake it ... You have to know the whole process because if you don't, and the food isn't cooked properly and it goes out, then somebody might get food poisoning and that's not good for business."

Steven was paid the minimum wage for a 21-year-old (although he could have been paid less), and was contracted to work for 16 hours per week. This could be extended to 20 hours once he turned 18. He envisaged becoming a 'buddy' at some future point, which would entail a pay increase.

Steven's life had certainly changed since gaining employment. He was financially self-sufficient, living independently and getting on better with his mother and stepfather. He felt proud of what he had achieved:

"I've gone from doing nothing, although I was looking for jobs ... And I've gone from where I'd moved out and had nothing [he lived with his girlfriend and her mother for a few months after the relationship with his mother and stepfather broke down] to now having a job and my own place. So I've done quite well really ..."

Steven was satisfied at work; he felt his job was a step above working for a fast-food restaurant, as it was about the 'dining experience' rather than a quick 'bite to eat'. His peers concurred, which helped give him pride in his work. External perceptions appear to have an influence on a young person's decision to pursue certain forms of employment, and play an important role in shaping attitudes to work once in the post. Steven had started to think about a long-term career and aspired to work in a Michelin-starred restaurant in the future.

Case study 2: a large construction site

Our second case study was located at the site of a £25 million construction project in the centre of Swindon. It entailed building a multi-storey car park and a block of flats over a two-year period. The multinational company running the project had agreed to take two young men on work placement as part of an employability course they were undertaking with a recently established training provider. This provider was a local social enterprise which aimed to become self-sustaining by offering property-maintenance services. According to information provided to local stakeholders, the social enterprise:

- will develop tailored work-based learning opportunities for 16–24 year olds who are not participating in any form of learning or work.
- By working on housing development projects, the service will help young people get into employment with training or back into full-time learning by supporting them to develop employability skills.
- Training provider

The six-month employability programme offered by the training provider was similar to many others across the country. Trainees received a training bursary of £100 per week, and the programme was planned to involve four days per week of work experience, with one day a week developing employability skills and first-aid training. A weekly individual tutorial to review progress and set targets was also intended. All workers entering construction are required to have a Construction Skills Certificate Scheme (CSCS) card and pass a basic health and safety test. The employability programme helped learners acquire the CSCS card and take the safety test.

Some initial screening was undertaken before young people were accepted as trainees, with motivation being among the key selection criteria:

“[One of] my set questions ... was why were they applying for this and, in a couple of cases, they said it was because my adviser told me to and, for me, that’s not a positive sign because it does take a really big commitment from them. I can’t send them to employers if they don’t show up or if they are not interested.”

Social enterprise managing director

The social enterprise had been set up six months earlier, with funding from Swindon Borough Council, and was accountable to the council for retention and progression of learners. The relationship with the local Jobcentre was of key importance; links with guidance services and the Borough Council, which was co-ordinating a number of local initiatives connected with reducing NEET rates, were also recognised as valuable:

“I went to the Jobcentre and told them about what we were and gave them an information sheet and that sort of thing ... [they] give that information to the young people, and then we would have an interview session with young people ... [The local guidance services] are more in the loop about what’s going on in the local community so when we do our next cohort we are actually going to have someone from the council involved.”

Social enterprise managing director

At this stage in its life, the provider needed to obtain work placements from other organisations, and was experiencing some difficulty in doing so. Prior to its involvement with the construction company, the provider had a number of young people awaiting placement. The relationship between the social enterprise provider and the construction company came about because of an informal contact between the managing director of the social enterprise and a member of the Salvation Army – an organisation which had connections with the social enterprise and also knew one of the construction site managers.

The company offering the work placements is a multinational organisation; its core business is construction, but it also has interests in quarrying, property management, healthcare and other activities across Europe and the Middle East. It employs over 2,000 people and has a turnover of more than one billion euros. The company’s strategy was to continue to grow and diversify. A stated aim was to make the company ‘a great place to work’ and to inspire workers to ‘be the best they can be’. It claims to place a strong emphasis on ‘performance, quality, teamwork

and hands-on management'. One of the ways it aimed to achieve this was through investment in workforce development. The company's literature states that 'teamwork lies at the heart of our culture'. It also states it has low staff turnover and high levels of employee loyalty.

Staffing varied from site to site depending on the size of the project. This particular site had a senior contract manager, who held ultimate responsibility for the site; a project manager who oversaw on-site operations; a finance manager; a supply manager; and a team of site managers, project managers and engineers. Some staff are recruited via external agencies, but the majority are recruited internally. Staff recruitment, especially external recruitment, was given careful consideration:

"Taking on staff is generally done from me as an initial request and, because of the economic situation, we will have several staff meetings at director level before we even consider taking on anyone."

Construction manager

While much recruitment was done via networking, the company claimed that official channels, such as recruitment agencies, were an increasingly important way of recruiting new staff. Little recruitment was done through informal processes such as speculative site visits. Even when such an approach was successful, the work secured tended to be short-term, insecure and poorly paid.

Few young people were employed as apprentices on this particular construction project. Some of the newer, younger employees were engineers, the majority of whom had come directly from college or university and through the engineering development scheme – an accredited training scheme that takes up to two years to complete and involves both on-the-job and off-the-job training. However, although it was recognised that certain qualifications may constitute a basic entry requirement for a specific job level, they were not regarded as the most important factor when taking on new staff:

"It gets to the point where having a degree kind of separates you and shows that you've actually got learning but, thereafter, it doesn't make much difference. It really comes down to – can you actually do the job?"

Construction manager

For this type of employee, largely graduates or college leavers, staff development was extensive. The company stated that it offered training tailored both to the needs of the individual and the specific project on which the employee was working. A new recruit undertakes a six-month probationary period and a formal appraisal, after which a 'personal development plan', which includes a training scheme, is put in place and monitored by the site manager. Much training takes place on-site, but the company also has its own training facilities for any off-site training that is required. Practical training, like traffic marshalling, would usually be done on-site. However, as will be seen below, the company appeared less well equipped to support the inexperienced young people on work placement who joined them from the social enterprise.

Reese

Reese was 18 and was born in Swindon. He came from a large family and had three sisters and one brother. His parents split up when he was four and, following this, he moved further south for a period and changed primary schools. Later, he was excluded from another primary school and attended two secondary schools. Despite experiencing disrupted education, Reese completed his schooling, although he went through most of his secondary schooling on a reduced timetable, which he attributed to his poor behaviour. Nevertheless, he obtained 3 GCSEs at grade C or below, in Maths, English and ICT. Reese described liking a 'hands-on' approach and talked about being better at 'practical work'. His father was originally a plumber, but for the last 16 years had worked for a company that erected cabins, although he continued to undertake plumbing jobs on a casual basis. His birth mother was out of work at the time of the research. Like Steven, Reese's father seemed to influence his career aspirations and Reese described having helped his father 'on the job' in the past.

After leaving school, Reese completed a two-year plumbing course at a local college and obtained NVQ Levels 1 and 2 in plumbing. Reese said he enjoyed plumbing and that he had some experience of working with his father undertaking plumbing work in domestic homes:

"He was a plumber and he did everything to do with plumbing, like housing work, and I would help him after school, so I thought I'd go to college because it's always something that I've done, I've always done plumbing and I'm really, really good at it apparently, or so the college said, and so I thought I'd carry it on."

Reese's original plan was to complete a plumbing apprenticeship after his NVQs and then continue working with his father to build their own business. However, his father's plumbing activity fell away and the college couldn't find him a placement for an apprenticeship, so Reese needed to rethink his future:

"My personal advisor at college called me into the office about four months before we finished and she said, look we can find an apprenticeship for you, are you interested? So I filled out the form and everything and she said that as soon as I finished college they would sort it all out, and the end of college came and they got me to fill out another form so I did that form and she said no one ever replied, so I don't know."

Subsequently, Reese became NEET for a period of four to five months. He approached the Jobcentre where he was informed about the social enterprise scheme, which found him his work placement on the construction site. He said his personal advisor at college supported him in finding 'something that would get him money'.

Reese described his work placement as an 'apprenticeship'; however, while on-the-job training was a key part of his programme, the placement was not actually an apprenticeship. This confusion in terminology was also shared by the employer, and may have been due to the hurried arrangement of the placement. Moreover, there is some evidence that young people are often allocated work placements wherever there is availability rather than in an area in which they are particularly interested (Russell, *et al.*, 2010). There

is a risk that in target-driven education and welfare systems young people's needs or ambitions become secondary to meeting government-driven performance targets. As support services often face financial penalties if they are not able to meet participation targets, young people may be pressured into taking a particular job or enrolling on a certain training programme, even if this does not match their aspirations or abilities. In addition, there is mounting evidence that outcome-driven funding regimes also tend to lead to a concentration of effort on individuals who are seen as easiest to place at the expense of those regarded as more complex and difficult cases (Yates and Payne, 2006).

Previously, Reese had found that formal channels, such as applying for work via the Jobcentre or through responding to newspaper adverts, were unproductive. Both Reese and Steven viewed Jobcentres primarily as places to sort out their benefits rather than as establishments where they would be able to find a job, and both were keen to end their contact with them: 'Being at the Jobcentre is the bane of my life!' (Reese). However, while the young people taking part in this research did not find work through their local Jobcentres directly, Jobcentres still have an important role to play as brokers or facilitators. For example, the Jobcentre referred Reese to the social enterprise scheme – although, ultimately, personal knowledge and contacts were used by the social enterprise to help him secure his work placement.

Evidence from this chapter is used later in the report to illustrate how labour markets affect young people's attempts to find work, and to illustrate the challenges involved in integrating a young person into specific forms of employment.

5 YOUNG PEOPLE'S PATHWAYS INTO WORK

NEET young people use a variety of formal and informal pathways into work. While informal pathways may sometimes lead to employment, there is some evidence that they are more likely than formal pathways to lead to low-paid, insecure work – particularly low-paid work in the informal economy (Katungi, *et al.*, 2006). This chapter presents evidence from the case studies on how the young people taking part in this research looked for and obtained work, the barriers they experienced, the role of qualifications and skills, and their early experiences as they settled into their new employment.

Formal and informal pathways into work

Like many others who have been NEET, Steven and Reese used a variety of strategies to seek employment, which we broadly categorise into formal and informal pathways.

Formal pathways involve accessing employment, training or work placements through official advice and support agencies, such as Jobcentre Plus, careers services and voluntary organisations. Other formal pathways include applying for jobs using the standard procedures of individual employers, which are increasingly web-based but may also include advertisements placed in Jobcentres or in the national and local press. Jobcentres have shifted towards a web-based approach to advertising vacancies.

Informal pathways are based largely upon localised networks and communication with family, friends and other personal contacts. They also

include unsolicited applications, sometimes by email or post, but often by directly calling into workplaces to leave a CV.

Steven and Reese looked for work through their local Jobcentre and the careers service, but found these agencies focused mainly on referring young people to work schemes, education and training programmes, or voluntary placements, rather than helping them to find paid employment. Staff in these organisations attributed this to a gap between young people's readiness for work and the requirements of an increasingly competitive job market. Consequently, the young people in this study relied mainly on informal methods when searching for work, including using personal contacts (largely friends and family) and direct enquiries at employers' premises, 'dropping off' their CV at various workplaces. Steven found his job by responding to an advertisement placed in the employer's window, and Reese obtained his work placement through a social enterprise scheme, which worked through personal contacts. However, such informal routes into employment were reported by guidance agencies as contrary to the more formalised methods preferred by employers. The young people taking part in this research initially used formal pathways, but adopted informal approaches when these proved unsuccessful. Nevertheless, there appear to be contradictions between the young people's experiences of finding work and the views put forward by employers, who stated that formalised, official procedures were increasingly – although not exclusively – used in recruiting staff:

“Occasionally we get some people knocking on the door and leaving their CVs behind but, generally, people know that they should go to agencies, and so they do that.”

Construction manager

“We advertise for assistants and it may be at the Jobcentre or we might just advertise on our front windows that we need assistants. People will come in and hand us their CVs and sometimes we will respond to that. We do get a large number of applicants.”

Assistant restaurant manager

It is necessary to highlight that this research focuses on the experiences of young people with multinational organisations, and that recruitment and selection practices may be significantly different among small- and medium-sized enterprises. Moreover, even in the two case-study employers, both informal and formal processes appeared to play a significant role. For Reese, the initial referral to his employability programme had occurred through a formal relationship between the Jobcentre and the training provider; however, the arrangement of Reese's work placement between the training provider and the construction site stemmed from informal contact between the provider manager and a member of the Salvation Army, who happened to know one of the site managers. Such contingencies are not uncommon in work-based learning, where the availability of work placements is a recurrent problem (Russell, *et al.*, 2010); however, they pose particular challenges to training providers and employers, in that arrangements can be short-term, often hurried, and inimical to careful consideration of the needs and abilities of the young person being placed.

Barriers to employment

Looking for work entails costs for items such as travel, work clothes, newspapers and internet access. Submitting applications, attending interviews and meeting requirements for criminal records checks all require financial resources. As Katungi, *et al.* (2006) point out, for those on very low incomes even small costs for repeated interviews can provide significant barriers to obtaining work, particularly in the formal economy. Indeed, Lister (2004, p. 147) argues that 'poverty itself constitutes an obstacle to unemployed people getting jobs'. In our case studies, a lack of ready internet access, insufficient money for travel, and changes to welfare systems were identified by participants as significant barriers to finding and retaining work; all of these factors are related, at least in part, to poverty.

Travel costs

For some young people, financial constraints can act as a significant barrier to finding work. Employment in the construction industry often requires workers to commute long distances or to work away from home, and managers at the construction site indicated that many young people are unable to do this, often because of the costs this can incur. Moreover, financial barriers can often disproportionately affect those with unstable domestic circumstances. When Steven began his job at the restaurant he was unemployed and living outside the family home after a series of disagreements with his mother and stepfather. Unable to afford the bus fares to get to work or to borrow money from his parents, simply getting to work was difficult when he began his new job. Lisa Russell asked Steven:

- LR: So the way that you applied for the job and the way you went through the trial process – was that an OK process for you or were there problems with it?
- Steven: Not with the interview and not with my first week of work, but for the second week I couldn't actually get there because I had no money to get there so that did cause a bit of a problem to begin with, but then that all got sorted and I got back into work.
- LR: How was it sorted?
- Steven: The pay got put through for the next week. I was supposed to get paid whilst I was there.

A careers service manager identified disrupted finances due to wages being paid in arrears as a disincentive for NEET young people to take work:

"When a young person [signs off] Jobseekers Allowance ... very often they don't get paid for a month ... So they've got to get themselves to work; get their lunch and live for a month before they get any money. That is impossible – that's one thing. The second thing is that some employers do their payrolls at certain times of the month so if somebody starts in the middle, say, they don't get paid the first payroll ... so they've worked six weeks before any money is forthcoming. Now if you've got a supportive family and mum and dad can give you the bus fare, that's great,

but some of these families are so poor they haven't got the bus fare to give them."

Other practitioners also identified this as a problem, but anticipated that the new Universal Credit would be able to respond more rapidly than the existing system.

Transport costs meant that Steven often walked quite lengthy distances to get to work even after he had been working at the restaurant for a number of months. However, such difficulties were not new to Steven. He had experienced a similar problem when he began a work-based learning programme with a local training provider some time before.

LR: You went on a training course, didn't you?

Steven: Yeah ... but I went to live with my girlfriend and it would take a lot of time to get to the training place and cost a lot of money. Although I could get a bus pass, it would take a couple of weeks to get through.

Flexibility was seen as a major factor in staff recruitment and retention in both case-study sites. In the restaurant, a willingness to work unpredictable shifts, evenings and weekends is viewed as important, but is also likely to involve additional costs for travel and other arrangements. In the construction industry, workers need to be able to travel, be away from family and work long, sometimes unsociable hours. They need to be where the work is. However, travel and accommodation costs may prevent some young people, especially those from poorer backgrounds, working away from home:

"The biggest problem as a construction company is that the work is finite and you typically might get a year and maybe a year and a half, so the problem is that when this job finishes we leave the area and then what happens? So what happens to the young people that we might employ here? ... A young person will generally be living at home and if they work for us and they live locally, they will get a bus or get dropped off, but as soon as the work is ten, fifteen or twenty miles out of town they have to pay for their transport and that doesn't make sense for them."

Construction manager

Lack of internet access

Another barrier facing the young people taking part in this study was a lack of ready access to the internet. Reese outlines the problems he encountered when trying to apply for jobs online:

Reese: And then they brought in this new thing, which is on the computer, and we have to apply for 11 interviews, but I can't get onto the computer because of our internet. When we moved house our internet was cut off and they are messing about to try and get it back on. The only time I can do it is when I go to my granddad and

- my granddad is always in and out of hospital so it's hard getting to his house.
- LR: Can you go up to the library or something?
- Reese: No, because I haven't got a library card.
- LR: Is there nowhere you can go where you can access a computer?
- Reese: I don't know.
- LR: How do you look for work then?
- Reese: Well I go to the Jobcentre and I get the newspaper and I look at shop windows when I'm walking round.

In both case studies, careers staff and employers reported that the internet was used increasingly for recruitment. This may be problematic for those young people who do not have ready internet access at home. Although they may be able to access the internet through libraries and via career services, sometimes free of charge, travel costs are incurred, access is not necessarily immediate and is usually time-limited. Often this allows insufficient time to search for vacancies, prepare applications and engage in correspondence. A careers service manager identified precisely these problems with internet access for NEET young people:

“They have no money; they haven't got a computer! Only if they are in libraries and all of that ... Well, it takes over an hour to apply for some [jobs] and they get an hour free on a library computer so if they haven't finished the application form, hard luck because, in some cases, they can't go back. Now we have our public computers and a lot of customers do come and use them but how much longer we can afford to offer that service – because it costs us money – I don't know.”

Although at the time of the research the new Universal Credit system had not been implemented in the case-study sites, online applications for benefits will progressively be introduced, with the aim of improving integration between benefit claims and attempts to find employment. Furthermore, Jobcentres aim to individualise job advertisements and better match them to the jobseeker's preferences and skills. Although this strategy may reduce administrative complexity and benefit some jobseekers, it is also likely to systematically disadvantage individuals with a lack of information technology skills, as well as those without ready access to the necessary equipment and facilities – and it is important to note that people from lower socio-economic groups are likely to be disproportionately affected in such ways. Furthermore, there is also evidence to suggest that the poorest claimants will find the shift from weekly to monthly benefit payments, which is central to the implementation of Universal Credit, particularly challenging (Tarr and Finn, 2012). A Jobcentre Plus manager (JBC) below explains some of the implications of such changes:

- JBC: IT access is an issue and, going back to the Universal Credit ... 80 per cent of claims will be made online so anybody who needs to claim next year will need access to IT. We're doing quite a lot of work on that at the moment ... [However] they'll still need to come in and

- sign on every fortnight and our advisers will still be there and they have a caseload of probably about forty people and they will see them on a regular basis.
- LR: What is the client supposed to be doing?
- JBC: Everybody receiving Jobseeker's Allowance has what we call a Jobseeker's Agreement that stipulates what they are looking for ... and so, for example, if they are looking to be a care assistant ... we look at the skills around that and also, when they sign up for the Jobseeker's Agreement, they specify what jobs they are looking for but also what jobs they'll do – so whether they will go onto our new universal job match or whether they'll go to Careers Service or whether they'll look in the papers and the internet, and so on. And that is a condition of receiving benefit so ... every fortnight we will review their progress.

Informal learning and 'negative capital'

Young people learn through informal as well as formal processes. By formal learning, we mean education and training provided by recognised institutions such as schools, colleges, company training schemes and training providers. These usually, but not always, lead to recognised qualifications or other forms of accreditation – although the labour-market value of such qualifications is variable (Wolf, 2011). Informal learning means knowledge, skills and behaviours acquired – often without explicit intent – in non-institutional settings, from parents and relatives, friends, work colleagues and others. These 'informal educators' typically lack relevant credentials or any recognised status, and may not be accurate or up-to-date in the practices they transmit. Careers advisers appeared sceptical about the value of knowledge about job-search strategies obtained from family members, and in both case studies local managers appeared to regard knowledge of working practices obtained in other contexts – particularly by informal means – quite negatively. If we conceptualise labour-market vulnerability in terms of cultural and other capitals (Eurofound, 2012; see also Chapter 2 of this report, p.12), such knowledge and skills can be regarded as 'negative' capital, subtracting from a young person's ability to obtain employment.

Both Steven and Reese said their parents influenced their views about work and employment. Steven's stepfather was a chef and Steven described how watching his stepfather at work helped form his ambition to work in catering, too. Reese's father had been a plumber and now worked erecting cabins, although he occasionally still did plumbing jobs 'on the side'. Reese described enjoying working with his father and attributed his practical skills to this. However, parental influences were viewed less positively by those working in support services, emphasising the need for good quality IAG:

"Parents aren't experts in the labour market; they know about their own jobs but they don't really know about anything else. So young people don't perhaps get enough of a drive early on to make decisions about what work they might do."

Jobcentre Plus manager

Managers at the case-study sites said they usually favoured training new recruits 'from scratch', and preferred young people with no experience to those with the 'wrong type' of experience; indeed, one restaurant manager referred positively to young recruits as a 'blank canvas'. The construction-site manager emphasised the importance of learning skills in accordance with industry guidelines and procedures, rather than through informal methods:

"I think employers want to take on young people but the problem is what correct training can they offer them? All too often what you see is that they will end up working for their dad or their uncle and ... they get taught incorrectly ... and they feel superior to everyone and start to develop an attitude."

Construction manager

Although some forms of informal work experience may disadvantage a young person seeking to enter the job market, there was some evidence that advice and guidance acquired in formal settings did not result in outcomes sought. Guidance practitioners talked about deficiencies in self-presentation skills, even among those who had attended employability programmes, where it appeared they were given generic information about job application processes, rather than tailored guidance about how to find work in the specific sector in which they were interested.

"I pointed out that his CV was [for a job in a different industry] ... So he had to think about what he really wanted to achieve. I gave him some advice on how to do a CV ... it was all about helping him understand how employers would view that and I said that if I didn't know him before we met and if he'd sent me his CV, he would not be the young man on his CV when I did meet him ... But unless somebody tells them that it needs to be different, [he is] just banging out the same old waffle."

Jobcentre manager

Yet self-presentation and the ability to identify personal qualities of particular relevance to the job were considered key elements by employers:

"What makes them different to anybody else? Why should I employ them? And it's not down to their age but what do they bring that is different to just going to an agency and getting another CV and talking to an average person. You want the person to stand out ... I always ask: what have you done different to the man sitting next to you? ... Have you researched training courses; have you done anything else; what can you tell me that makes you stand out from the next man? [And if they have researched the company] I don't have to spend half an hour explaining to them what we do ... and you can ask them relevant questions and hope that they show an interest and that will go a long way to getting me wanting to talk to them and trying to find out what they have to offer."

Construction-site manager

Adapting to the workplace

The employers and many support service staff taking part in this study believed that many NEET young people were not 'work-ready'. Claims were frequently made about young people lacking a 'work ethic' or 'not being able to cope in a work environment':

“Some people think that they will get a job but you can see that they are not ready for it. Sometimes you can tell they are not ready to work.”

Restaurant manager

In this context, 'work-readiness' appeared to include communication skills, an ability to follow instructions, punctuality, and appropriate manner and appearance, especially if working with the public or as part of a team. The employers said these attributes were more important than qualifications or previous work experience. Jobcentre Plus staff in both case-study sites talked about NEET young people needing to change their attitude and disposition in order to be successful in the workplace. This was presented as a major barrier to finding paid employment and certain views about 'troubled families' and intergenerational unemployment were also evident:

“It is very hard to work with a young person and help them to up-skill themselves if that young person is the only one in the house getting up before ten in the morning. I think there is an acceptance that work focusing on the family is the way forward. There is the troubled family initiative, which is allowing us to think about the family unit and particularly those families that have ASBOs, behaviour issues, truancy and are on benefit.”

Jobcentre Plus manager

As discussed in Chapter 1, family worklessness is a factor associated with increased risk of becoming NEET. However, as we saw, the cultural transmission of worklessness appears to be much less important than the socio-economic risks experienced by workless families. Furthermore, both qualitative and quantitative research shows that most NEET young people are from working families, and that parental behaviours and attitudes are less important in processes of becoming or avoiding NEET than the quotation above would indicate (Barham, *et al.*, 2009; Duckworth and Schoon, 2012). Given the diversity of NEET young people, we cannot say Steven and Reese are typical. Nonetheless, they do display many risk factors associated with NEETs, and once they had obtained work, the young people taking part in this study expressed a willingness to wake up early, be punctual and make the most of the opportunity they felt they had been given. They had actively pursued work as an alternative to living on welfare benefits. Reese talked about how the challenges involved in adjusting to work were outweighed by the rewards of being in employment:

Reese: Well I do get very tired at night and I just want to go home and go to sleep and that. Before I started all I did was sleep so it's just about getting back into the routine

and getting up in the morning and getting to bed at a reasonable hour.

LR: What time are you getting into bed now?

Reese: I get in bed about half nine, quarter to ten. Basically I never used to get to bed until about half three.

LR: What was it like signing off?

Reese: The happiest day of my life.

Ryan: When you sign off you kind of feel happy in yourself. I hated signing on. It made you feel like you were not good enough. And when you get turned down by so many jobs it's the same thing and you think, 'Is there any point?'. So when this came up, I snapped it up because I always wanted to go on construction sites and learn stuff.

Steven, Reese and Ryan (another previously NEET young man working on the construction site), described feeling nervous when they first started work. They expressed anxieties about how they would manage with the working day, and about fitting into a new environment. However, there is no doubt that they all wanted to work and to establish themselves in employment. Steven described getting on well with colleagues in the restaurant, and support structures there appeared well developed and integrated with the company's business model. As noted earlier, young people were valued by the organisation as contributing to a lively and vibrant ambience, providing what Steven called a 'dining experience'. Teamwork was valued, and relationships between staff were relaxed, being further enhanced by company 'away-days':

"If you are not going to fit in well with the team there is no point in you being there ... working in a place like this, it's all about fitting in with the team because people are doing different shifts all the time so you really need to get on well with everyone ... we've been out on a couple of occasions for staff. It's a little bit hectic; we went for a day out to ... one of the theme parks ... The company paid for it all and we didn't have to pay anything towards it so it was quite fun."

Steven

The structured training and the mentoring system discussed earlier helped to increase Steven's confidence and feeling of belonging. The possibility of becoming a buddy provided Steven with a prospect of relatively early promotion, and helped him to envisage a future in the industry, although his perception of internal promotion differed from the views of managers discussed earlier:

"I can either go through being a griller or cashier, to buddy, to supervisor, to manager and then you've got head of region right up [to head office] ... what I'd rather do is I'll stay here for a year and a half because a lot of people who work [here] are university people who are only working there temporarily ... A lot of the

people who are in top positions – like the head manager – they came as assistant managers or second managers or whatever, so really not many come from the bottom right up. So I think I'd rather go for a different job, [one with] a better quality of food and the actual experience of the restaurant.”

Steven

By contrast, Reese experienced some challenges on the construction site:

The site manager informs me that Reese has had some issues fitting in ... One of the subcontractors, known on site as 'Barmy Barney', had a dispute with him. Reese said the subcontractor was 'trying to make me his bitch', explaining that he was being asked to pick up bits of metal and move them all day. The site manager says Reese was in the wrong and asked him to apologise. Originally Reese was supposed to work with 'Barmy Barney', but the site manager had decided that Reese and he didn't work well together. Consequently Reese was shifted to work elsewhere on the site. Reese tells me they are fine now, but later 'Barmy Barney' approaches me and expresses concerns about Reese. He says he doesn't know why the lads are here or what they are meant to be doing.

– Field notes, 18 December 2012

The site manager described Reese as trying to appear as though he knew more than he did. This is perhaps unsurprising, as Reese believed he had some relevant experience gained by working with his father. Moreover, with different subcontractors and tradesmen arriving on a daily basis, often for short periods, it was not always possible to explain who the young men on work placement at the site were and what their role was.

Supporting the employer

Employers in both case studies emphasised the importance of giving young people a chance and, in some ways, appeared more lenient with them than they would have been with more experienced staff. However, NEET young people were also viewed as a potential risk for employers. Local career-guidance practitioners (CP) understood these attitudes, but also highlighted the financial compensation for employers, which they saw as a significant factor in the decision to take on an apprentice:

CP1: Some employers do really try and it's easy for us to see where they are coming from as well because they are taking on somebody who is probably not going to be productive from the word go and some will compromise and they'll do £2.65 [per hour – the minimum apprentice wage rate for 16–18 year olds and 19 year olds in their first year] for, like, a six-month probationary period, then they will review it ... and increase it [the level of pay] if the young person has completed that successfully. So we do get cases like that and when we advertise a vacancy, we can put that

- in so they young person knows. So some will do that but some of the smaller ones just won't or can't.
- CP2: And you might find that the training providers are canvassing a lot of these employers all the time to take apprentices on because they will get £1,500 [that is, the employer will receive the Apprenticeship Grant for Employers, worth £1,500 per apprentice to SMEs with fewer than 1,000 employees] and you can tell sometimes when you get vacancies through and you can see that they've been pushed by someone else.
- CP1: The only reason they're doing it is that they think they are getting somebody for that amount of money [the pay received by the apprentice] a week.
- LR: So, for them, it's a financial decision rather than finding a young person and trying to train them up and retain that young person.
- CP2: And not all employers are like that and you do find those ones who want to find young people and train them up and actually give them a career.

At the construction site, managers responsible for recruitment empathised with Reese's situation. They spoke of 'knowing what it was like' to join the industry and of the difficulties their own teenage children experienced when trying to find work. At the restaurant, youth was explicitly valued, and enthusiasm and eagerness to learn were emphasised as important attributes for young workers. Managers in both case studies viewed the private sector as having a role to play in helping young people enter the labour market, and regarded training new staff in their specific practices as important. They also understood the more general development that took place in work: socialising young people into the world of work, improving their communication skills and providing supportive peer networks. Much can be done to assist and promote such processes, including promoting formal and informal mentoring arrangements, careful job-role allocation, and the appropriate integration of young people into supportive social situations, as well as specific forms of work-related training. However, whereas Steven's work situation seems conducive both to his personal well-being and the acquisition of a range of focused job skills, arrangements at the construction site were less satisfactory. In particular, Reese's placement with a subcontractor rather than a core employee exacerbated this situation, and his subsequent marginalisation and relegation to the unpleasant and unpopular task of 'blackjacking' (applying a tar-like preservative material to walls and other surfaces) appeared to be as much a consequence of a lack of structured support from both employer and training provider as of his attitudes and disposition.

The case studies indicate some inadequacies in the support employers and young people receive when vulnerable young people enter work experience placements or apprenticeships. However, in the current marketised IAG system, public, private and voluntary sector organisations compete to offer services, and practices vary between different providers. Where intensive support is required, employers may not be equipped to provide this without themselves receiving support from guidance practitioners. Steven's early, very negative experience as an apprentice at

a café that appeared to exploit his situation is one example, followed by his later sporadic experiences at various training providers that were largely unrelated to his needs and aspirations. For Reese, liaison between the training provider and the employer appeared considerably less effective than it should have been, with the result that his needs were poorly understood. The social enterprise training provider responsible for Reese appeared to be overstretched, resulting in disparities between the support it aimed to provide and the experience reported:

“I do a regular visit to make sure they ... are getting the right development and that it’s not just [cheap] labour ... They finish 15 minutes early and do a record of the day ... and, at the weekly tutorial, when I see them we look at the record and go through it. So that helps with their own long-term development plan in terms of training ... Because I think it is a real challenge for some of them to do four full days a week and so we are very mindful of that and that’s why we do regular visits.”

Social enterprise managing director, 3 December 2012

The lads seem fine, they are enjoying the work ... they are supposed to see [the provider manager] on a Friday but he couldn’t make it last week. So he hasn’t seen them yet and they’ve worked six days including today. [The site manager] says they started last Monday expecting just an induction and were shocked to learn they were starting straight away, Reese describes feeling nervous but enjoyed getting stuck in immediately. They don’t know why [the provider manager] hasn’t seen them yet and they say they would prefer more support ... Reese says he feels as though [the provider manager] isn’t really bothered any more now that he has found them a placement. He says he doesn’t seem to respond to emails or visit when he says he will.

– Field notes, 18 and 19 December 2012

In this case study, there appeared to be a failure in support from the training provider for both the young person and the employer. Expectations of what work experience would be provided and how the young person would be supported were not realised in practice.

The companies taking part in this research did not report a close relationship with Jobcentre Plus. A manager at the construction site explained that, at the beginning of the project, the company had registered vacancies with the Jobcentre. However, although ‘a few people’ had applied for these vacancies, they had not been taken on as their skills were inappropriate. The construction-site manager (CM) also commented about the need for new workers to be multi-skilled:

LR: Did you take on anyone from the Jobcentre?

CM: No, we didn’t, because the problem was that the skills level was too low... people who work here have to have more than one skill. I mean, five years ago it was one man for one job but, the way the economy is going, they now need to do more than one job, and it’s those people who have more than one skill, who get the jobs.

At the restaurant, feedback from the assistant branch manager (ABM) showed an indifference to Jobcentre services:

LR: Do you have much contact with Jobcentre Plus?

ABM: We don't really, no. We do get occasional phone calls to say what positions do we have available. We don't have a very close relationship with them.

LR: Is that something that you would want or not?

ABM: As I say, we're happy with the way we recruit at the moment.

Skills and qualifications

A complex and overlapping set of discourses was evident when employers and practitioners talked about skills and qualifications, which were not always consistent or coherent. In certain areas of work, which were perceived as needing specific skills and experience, young people lacking these attributes were seen as disadvantaged in relation to older, more experienced workers. However, in other areas, it was often taken for granted that unemployed young people would lack skills – and this was not always seen as a disadvantage, as noted in the earlier discussion about informal work experience. But despite this, the employers still talked about requiring five 'good GCSEs', even where the possession of such qualifications was unrelated to the nature of the job in question. This appeared to be a way of job rationing, and of reducing the time spent reviewing applications. However, there may also have been other processes at work here. Employers may well perceive a correlation between achieving academic qualifications and possession of the 'soft' skills so valued in many employment sectors. More generally, formal qualifications might be regarded as indicative of a young person's motivation and willingness to work. Either way, it was evident that young people without qualifications would face disadvantages in the labour market.

Deficits in young people's skills were viewed as a barrier to employment both by Jobcentre staff and by the employers taking part in this study. Employers were looking for workers able to fulfil more than one role if required. Employers can demand more from their workforce in an increasingly competitive job market, but this is challenging for practitioners trying to find work for NEET young people, especially for those lacking qualifications. Careers guidance practitioners reported that some organisations demand certain levels of qualification without really needing them.

"People understand GCSEs ... but all the new vocational qualifications that were supposed to equate have never taken off, seemingly, with employers and they ask for these five GCSEs including English and Maths ... Very often they don't really need those – they need somebody who is capable of doing the job they are offering. Years ago you used to be able to talk to an employer and say, 'I've got this young person, can you give them a chance?' and they would say, 'All right then, we'll give them a go' ... and very often they did well because you knew that they would do well. Things like office juniors ... But it's becoming

harder ... and, of course, the jobs are fewer and fewer and people don't get the opportunity to have a go at something ... because employers need somebody who is going to be effective and economically worthwhile straight away.”

Careers guidance practitioner

This is especially problematic for those young people who have low-level qualifications or none at all. However, the young people in these case studies were not without qualifications. Steven had achieved a range of good GCSEs, and although Reese had only modest GCSE passes, he had later achieved NVQ Level 2 in plumbing, his preferred vocational area.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has investigated two case studies of previously NEET young people entering the workplace, and illustrates contrasting experiences in the ways that young people, employers and practitioners negotiated this important transition. This research points towards the importance of employer practices in shaping the experiences of young people entering the workplace, the tension between formal and informal pathways into work, and the ways in which poverty can increase the chances that young people will encounter practical difficulties when seeking work and in the initial stages of employment. The research also demonstrates the importance of strong links between guidance practitioners and employers in providing appropriate workplace experiences, and the need for education, training and employability provision to ensure that young people are equipped with the 'soft' skills sought by many employers.

NEET young people's pathways into work are often not straightforward, and the most vulnerable often have few qualifications and multiple disadvantages, including difficult family circumstances and severely limited finances. Some are reluctant to undertake further education and training following negative experiences of schooling. Although Reese and Steven, the two young people who took part in this research, were motivated to gain work, and Steven in particular had relatively strong qualifications, they had both

experienced significant aspects of disadvantage and exhibited several of the characteristics associated with more vulnerable NEET young people discussed in Chapter 2.

While young people's employment prospects are broadly shaped by the labour market and other opportunity structures, this research highlights a number of specific challenges faced by young people and employers. The implications for policy and practice set out below recognise that within the constraints of broader structures there is a place for interventions, which could alleviate these challenges. The suggestions made build upon the good practice evident in certain aspects of the case studies and attempt to address some of the more problematic issues we have identified.

Case-study research provides rich data and valuable insights into specific contexts and provides 'exemplary knowledge' that can inform policy and practice in various ways. However, case-study findings need to be used cautiously and the specific nature of the case studies must be recognised. The case studies in this project are not necessarily typical; however, they contain key elements that are likely to be encountered in other contexts.

Implications for policy and practice

NEET young people are a varied group, and it is the more vulnerable NEETs that policy-makers and practitioners should be most concerned with. These are the young people who are most at risk of longer term disadvantage as a result of being NEET. They are also the young people that are more likely to need additional support in order to make the transition into employment, education or training.

Support for vulnerable NEET young people

This research has identified a number of areas where policy and practice can improve the support on offer to vulnerable NEETs. Good quality advice and guidance to young people about their labour-market options remain elusive, and both our case studies demonstrate how too often young people's aspirations are not adequately taken into account. Telephone and web-based IAG for young people can, in some circumstances, be useful services, but such methods should be used to supplement rather than replace face-to-face careers guidance. For young people outside of education and employment, access to high quality face-to-face IAG is particularly important, but it is not clear that this will be adequately delivered through the current fragmented IAG structures.

There was strong evidence in the case studies that a significant number of the young people encountered by employers and guidance/training practitioners were under-prepared to look effectively for work. Poor self-presentation skills, inability to express a clear motivation to work for the organisation they were applying to, and the use of inappropriate job-search strategies were all cited as disadvantaging these young people in the labour market. However, it was not clear whether this was the result of inadequate initial assessment or deficiencies in the provision and co-ordination of employability programmes. It should also be noted that sometimes young people used informal job-search strategies because of lack of financial resources or frustration at a lack of success through more formal pathways. Good quality face-to-face IAG should include training in job-application strategies that explicitly recognises the growing importance of online job-search and application processes, including awareness of where free internet access may be obtained.

Given the interactions between living in poverty, coming from a lower socio-economic background and being NEET, the additional costs of taking up employment can be a significant barrier for young people entering work. For example, the costs of travelling to work, especially in the initial period prior to getting paid, and the costs associated with accessing the internet to pursue job applications cause difficulties for some young people, as our case studies show. Some welfare-to-work schemes put provision in place to help meet these sorts of costs. Wider access to this sort of funding – whether in the form of a small grant, a loan, or a combination of grant and loan – could help here.

For the forms of employment available to young people in the case studies, academic or vocational qualifications were not high priorities for employers; however, there was some evidence that academic qualifications were used as part of a screening process and/or as a proxy for 'soft' skills. While in the longer term such young people would benefit from access to qualifications with greater labour-market value, these findings reinforce the importance of soft skills in gaining initial entry to employment.

The relationship between employer and support providers

At present, there is considerable policy focus on young people getting experience in the workplace, especially through apprenticeships. While this is an important pathway for many young people, there remain problems with finding employers to take apprentices on, the quality of some of the work placements that do emerge, and, at times, a lack of clarity among employers about what is and is not an apprenticeship.

This research also shows that the continuing support offered to young people by some providers while in the early stages of work or on work placements is not always delivered in practice. Getting this in-work support offer right where it is needed, so that providers, employers and young people themselves know what to expect, is crucial. When these relationships do not work effectively there can be a detrimental impact on the young person's transition into work. Some sort of concordat, which provides guidelines for both support services and employers about how best to facilitate the transition of each individual young person into work, could help here. This could set out who is responsible for doing what, with clear expectations for all parties, overseen by a key worker responsible for monitoring the progress of the young people placed in employment. If trialled and found effective, such a concordat could become a condition of publicly funded subsidies given to employers to provide paid employment or work placements, and to training organisations and other providers helping young people into work.

Employers

However, supporting the transition of NEET young people into work is not simply the responsibility of support providers and young people themselves: employers also have an important role to play. One of the clearest findings in this research was the impact of well established structures for socialising new employees into the workplace on the motivation, self-esteem and progression of the young person in the restaurant case study. In addition to training in the specific skills of the job role, these structures included a thorough induction into the company ethos, the importance of teamwork and interpersonal skills, all overseen through a mentoring relationship. In addition, there were clear and well communicated opportunities to take on additional responsibilities with increasing experience. Although such an approach needs to be implemented with care in order to avoid over-specialisation in the practices of a particular employer and the intensification

of the labour process for existing employees, this research suggests that wider use of this kind of structured induction and training would be particularly helpful to young people entering the world of work. Employers should review or establish workforce development policies to support young employees as they enter the organisation.

Employers also need to recognise that previously NEET young people may need additional support when first commencing work. This would include careful work-role allocation and mentoring arrangements involving appropriately experienced colleagues. Employers also need to be aware that financial constraints can disproportionately affect NEET young people entering work. Practical support that takes this into account and helps ease their transition into work would be beneficial. Such measures could include flexible initial payment arrangements to help with transport-to-work costs; benefits in kind, such as the provision of a bus pass, subsidised transport costs or lift-share schemes; or the loan of equipment, protective clothing or materials that the young person may need when beginning employment. Such considerations could form part of a concordat arranged between employers and support services receiving public funding to help young people into work.

NOTES

- 1 The unemployment rates quoted are moving averages taken over a three-month period.
- 2 Activity Agreements were piloted in eight areas across England between April 2006 and September 2009. They were designed to encourage NEET young people into work or learning, and provided an allowance of between £20 and £30 per week in return for participation in activities designed to help them move into education or employment.
- 3 2011 Census data.
- 4 2011 Census data.

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