

Looking for a NEET solution – the elephant in the room

The UK has a long-standing problem with youth unemployment, with the number of 16-24 year olds classified as NEET (not in education, employment or training) hovering at around a million for a number of years now. The consequences of this are profound: being NEET for substantial periods of time is associated with a range of negative consequences for the individual, including social isolation; a greater risk of long-term unemployment; increased likelihood of involvement in crime; ill-health, and other sustained disadvantages. There is, in other words, a 'scarring' effect associated with being NEET. But research suggests that high levels of youth unemployment also have serious consequences for the economy in terms of lost tax revenues, additional benefit payments, increased expenditure on health and other forms of social welfare. There are broader social costs to consider too: young people who have experienced lengthy periods outside education or the labour market are less likely to participate in the democratic process – not only in party politics but also through voluntary groups, trade unions, and other aspects of civil society. NEET young people also tend to have lower levels of 'institutional trust' relating, for example, to policing, health services, the education system, and so forth. Obviously, all this is deeply problematic, but what should be done?

At least since the late-1970s, successive governments have effectively chosen to 'educationalise' youth unemployment – and initiative after initiative has charged schools, colleges and other educational institutions with improving the 'employability skills' of young people. The relationship between education and work is important and young people today require a diverse range of knowledge and skills if they are to successfully make their way in the world work, but it is also important to recognise that education and training can only ever be part of the solution - however robust or well-delivered any particular programme or initiative may be. Here there are harsh realities for government to grasp. One is that, contrary to official discourse, the main cause of youth unemployment is located in the nature of the economy, not the education system. There was, until the 1970s, a separate and identifiable youth labour market but basically this collapsed as much of Britain's traditional industrial base withered away, ravaged by increased global competition, successive economic crises, and a hostile political climate. Young people are now forced to compete with often much more experienced older workers for the remaining jobs and much employment, particularly at the bottom end of the labour market, is increasingly part-time, temporary or otherwise insecure.

A related matter is that, despite constant claims about 'skills shortages', nowadays most young people are in fact over-qualified and under-employed. The elephant in the room is that a comprehensive and coherent industrial policy is what is required if government really is serious about tackling youth unemployment. Admittedly, reopening the mines, mills and factories that once dominated the British economy is not practicable, but still much can be done to stimulate the demand for young people's labour. The UK desperately needs investment in housing and infrastructure projects, renewable energy, and high-tech manufacturing. Young people also deserve to be treated properly at work and to be encouraged to use and develop coherent work-related skills - but all this needs the creation of decent employment rather than just more courses, of whatever kind. It also requires the state to take responsibility for creating employment and managing the economy. But, in the meantime, it remains convenient to blame the education system for failing to solve the problems of youth unemployment.

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