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Early leaving and the NEET agenda across the UK

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ABSTRACT

While measures to combat ‘*Early Leaving*’ (EL) have been widely adopted internationally, as a means of curbing rates of economic and social exclusion among young people, the term itself is not widely utilised across the UK. That is not to say that measuring and reducing the number of young people who drop out of education (or training) before meeting minimum age and/or qualification standards is not important. Rather, the emphasis has remained on maximising participation in learning and reducing NEET (not in education, employment or training) rates.

Drawing on a recent policy review which was conducted in the UK, this article examines variations which exist between the four UK nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) in terms of: compulsory education age requirements; capturing and measuring the number of young people who are defined as NEET and crucially, equality of access to support and intervention. It highlights that the four UK nations are increasingly pulling in different directions in terms of policy and practice. This has widespread implications for the opportunity structures that are available to all groups of young people across the UK.

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Introduction

Efforts to maximise young people’s participation in learning with the dual goals of improving nation economic performance and reducing social and economic inequalities are the mantra of many policymakers across the advanced world (Reid and Young 2012). How these goals are achieved varies between nations and may include one or more of the following policy strategies:

- developing initiatives which attempt to minimise early leaving (EL) rates;
- introducing legislation which extends the compulsory learning age among young people;
- adopting policies which prevent young people from becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) and
- reintegration measures targeted at young people who become NEET.

While there is a raft of interventions across the UK targeted at preventing EL from education and training, it has never become a designated term that has been widely used by policymakers or indeed constituted a stand-alone strategy. This article considers the reasons for the focus being on NEET reduction, as well as why raising the participation age in learning, which was designed to compel young people to remain in education and training for longer periods of time, became mandatory in England but not in the devolved UK nations. Crucially, it will examine the extent to which the four UK nations (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and

Wales) increasingly act as independent entities, in order to improve their economic performance and to reduce social and economic inequalities through a range of independent targeted initiatives to support youth transitions.

Youth transitions – NEET versus early leaving

In recent years, youth transitions in most advanced economies have been characterised by reduced levels of employment and training opportunities for young people in the labour market, an emphasis on expanding the number of young people remaining in full-time education for extended periods of time and reducing rates of economic and social exclusion among young people. The term NEET (not in education, employment or training) is now commonly used to capture disengagement and social exclusion, as well as levels of unemployment among young people. It embraces younger adults (up to the age of 35 years in some countries), as well as including the young unemployed who are actively seeking work and growing numbers of young people who are economically inactive, i.e. those who are not actively seeking work due, predominantly, to illness or caring responsibilities. A report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) argues that, while there is an international standard measurement of unemployment and employment, no such measure exists for the NEET group (International Labour Organization (ILO) 2013). Cultural differences also generate variations in the ways in which the NEET population is estimated, in particular in relation to the ways in which females are included in the statistics. Females have a much greater propensity to be defined as economically inactive, due to their caring and/or household duties (OECD 2017). Moreover, the age range covered by the NEET group has increasingly been elongated, with many counties and organisations adopting different age measures. For example, Eurostat provides breakdowns of the NEET population in the EU-28 between the ages of 15 and 34 (Eurostat 2018), while the OECD concentrates on the 15–29-year-old age group (OECD 2018).

In addition, there is no universal definition of early (school) leavers, who may be termed ‘drop-outs’, or, on occasion, incorporated in the NEET category. In Europe, the definition tends to be age-related and predominantly refers to those leaving education at the end of compulsory education. The definition used by the European Commission (2013) reduces it to ‘young people aged 18–24 who have only lower secondary education or less and are no longer in education or training’ (p.8).

In contrast, in the United States, although there is no agreed definition of ESL, it tends to be used in the literature to describe those who leave full-time education before graduation and therefore do not gain their high school diploma (Neild and Balfanz 2006). Approaches to identifying ESL in the USA are therefore focused on those who are likely to drop out of school before a specific level of qualification attainment.

A similar distinction is made by Estêvão and Álvares (2014) between functional and formal dropout, with the former emphasising ‘the legal aspects of leaving school before completing compulsory education’ (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE), 2016, 15) and the latter focusing on leaving school ‘without adequate skills, knowledge or qualifications to deal with adult life and employment’ (p.5). This clearly suggests that dropping out is likely to have long-term negative consequences for those who do so.

In the absence of any formal definition of ‘dropout’, an array of literature highlighted by EASNE (2016, 49) differentiates ‘dropout’ as an outcome into distinct processes, principally:

- Push-out: This suggests that it is factors within the school system which lead young people to drop out. These could include: poor attendance; being subject to school discipline policies; consequences of bad behaviour; being expelled; and poor exam results.
- Pull-out: Students who are ‘pulled out’ from school are those who make the decision to withdraw as a result of factors such as: financial worries; being offered employment; caring for a family member; childbirth; being involved in criminal activity; and illness (Doll, Eslami, and Walters 2013, 2).

- Fall-out: Here, students disengage from school as a result of factors such as: student apathy; not completing schoolwork; and insufficient educational support.

A common thread that runs across NEET and EL interventions is an emphasis on two broad themes – ‘preventive’ and ‘reintegration’ strategies. In assessing the appropriate response to the problems of EL, an appraisal of approaches adopted in a wide range of European countries (EU, 2011) distinguished between:

- Strategic level responses – wherein policies are coordinated within an overall framework
- Preventive strategies – these are early interventions designed to reduce the likelihood of drop-out at a later stage. ‘At risk’ young people are identified on the basis of their neighbourhood, school, family background etc.
- Reintegration strategies – these are targeted at those who have already dropped out of the education and training system.

The distinction between ‘preventive’ and ‘reintegration’ strategies is of crucial importance in deciding when and where mechanisms for establishing risk factors are introduced. In the context of EL, prevention points to the need for predominantly school-based data to be collected and analysed at an early stage in a young person’s experience in the education system, whereas reintegration is likely to require the input of a range of agencies and takes place once an individual has fallen out of the system (Dale 2010).

Recent years have seen a proliferation of ‘early warning systems’ or ‘traffic light systems’ being introduced in countries across the world in an attempt to provide early identification of young people who may be at risk of becoming NEET or dropping out of education. These early warning systems tend to be school-based, with data routinely collected in order to flag the existence of risk factors which point to a heightened possibility of drop-out or disengagement. Levels of attendance and fluctuations in academic performance are prominent as indicators of young people at risk. There is also often a recognition of the importance of external agencies for their ability to address specific problems being encountered.

A NEET re-integration strategy at the level of the individual requires systems which have the capacity and capability to identify young people who become NEET and support them to achieve positive outcomes in terms of re-engagement. While initiatives targeted at re-engaging young people in education are broadly equivalent to EL programmes, active labour market policies (ALMPs) play a pivotal role in NEET reintegration programmes. Youth ALMPs are designed to stimulate the supply and demand for labour. Five main types of ALMPs can be distinguished: job-search assistance; training programmes; subsidised employment; direct job creation and public employment programmes, and start-up subsidies, self-employment assistance and support. ALMPs may comprise one, some, or all of these elements. There is also a weight of evidence about the importance of the role of profiling, early intervention and following up with those young people who are most vulnerable at early stages of their unemployment/inactivity (Martin and Grubb 2001; Quintini, Martin, and Sébastien 2007). A report published by the ILO in 2001 argued that a major problem with ALMPs in many countries was that policies tended to focus on young people who were ‘work ready’, thereby further disadvantaging ‘harder to help’ and ‘harder to reach’ groups of young people (O’Higgins 2001).

Other shared characteristics between EL and NEET status are the scarring effects emanating from them. Overall, the literature concludes that EL has a negative effect, as in:

Early school leaving (ESL) is costly for the individual, for society and for the economy. Not just in economic terms, but also in terms of low self-esteem, and the risk of social exclusion. More, and, in particular, better education can lead to positive outcomes, in relation to employment, level of salaries, better health, less crime, higher social cohesion, lower public and social costs, and higher productivity (Oomen and Plant 2014, 05).

In addition to the adverse effects on individuals, the costs to the public purse are considerable. For example, in 2009, it was estimated that, 'in terms of lower productivity, lower tax revenues and higher welfare payments', EL in Canada was costing 'more than \$37.1 billion per year' (Dale 2010, 5). The impact on individuals from EL is profound, as they have been found to be more likely than those who did not drop out to be unemployed, earn less, work in blue collar occupations and have precarious and unstable employment (Dale 2010, 49). Other consequences of EL are a greater propensity to experience: unplanned/early pregnancy; crime; violence; alcohol and drug abuse; suicide; reliance on welfare benefits; and shorter life expectancy (Dale 2010, 32). This evidence was derived from a study in Europe and in four non-European OECD countries (namely USA, Australia, Canada and Japan) (GHK 2005). Similar consequences were identified in the European Commission report *Tackling Early Leaving*, which cites studies from France, Finland, Scotland and Europe-wide showing calculations of the financial impact of ESL related to health-care, criminal justice and social benefit payments (European Commission 2014, 23).

In a similar vein, the (UK) Commission on Youth Unemployment showed that young people aged 16–24 years who were unemployed were more likely to spend longer out of work throughout their lives, be paid less when in work (Macmillan 2012), have poorer mental and physical well-being and be involved in criminal activity (Bell and Blanchflower 2011). In 2010, the total estimated additional lifetime costs of being NEET at age 16–18 at 2000/01 prices in the UK, at a conservative estimate, were £7 billion resource costs, and £8.1 billion public finance costs (Coles et al. 2010). Eurofound (2011), estimated the weekly cost of the NEET group across 21 EU states to be €2 billion per week and the annual total to be approximately €100 billion, which corresponded to 1% of their aggregated GDP.

Transition systems

Given the extended periods of time that many young people spend in learning, and the risk associated with dropping out and/or entering the NEET group, it is important to consider how well the UK's transition systems are functioning. Raffé (2008, 2014) examined the significant body of research on transition systems over the previous two decades and offered some pertinent observations about its empirical and theoretical underpinnings which are relevant within this context. The term 'transition system' encompasses a country's structures and arrangements to manage young people's education-work transitions. He asserted that research into transition systems needs to shift its focus from a description of individual institutional arrangements to developing theoretical frameworks to explain changes and 'to move beyond a view of nation states as homogeneous and independent units of analysis' (Raffé 2008, 1). Crucially, this included a recognition that within-country divergence both exists and has increased in recent decades, in terms of 'regional, sectoral and cultural divisions', which are often overlooked in research on transition systems (Raffé 2014, 187). He cited the four UK nations as a good example of where within-country differences exist within transition systems, specifically in relation to their education provision. The research evidence presented in this article on interventions to support young people classified as 'NEET' illustrates increasing policy divergence in another key area of youth transitions.

Policy context

To understand the UK's focus on reducing NEET rates rather than embracing a strategy of reducing early leaving from learning, it is important to remember that the term 'NEET' was constructed in the UK in the 1990s (Istance, Rees, and Williamson 1994; Furlong 2007; Thompson 2011). Young people who were not in education, employment or training became a policy focus following the publication of the Social Exclusion Unit's (SEU) report

'*Bridging the Gap*' (SEU 1999). The report had a strong emphasis on tackling social exclusion among young people, as well as describing the factors associated with becoming NEET and making key policy recommendations. A number of policy interventions to help reduce the NEET population have been implemented in recent years in response to a fluctuating, although persistent, policy concern.

Sitting alongside this agenda were strenuous efforts to raise participation, retention and achievement rates in post-16 (and higher education), supported by a raft of policy interventions (Maguire 2020). This was accompanied by legislation from the UK government to raise the participation age (RPA) in learning to the age of 18 by compulsion, as opposed to adopting a strategy of inclusion which focused on programmes to reduce early leaving. The rationale for the introduction of the RPA was summed up in the following quotation:

We have a duty to prepare all young people for a labour market which will be radically different to the one their parents faced. Raising the age until which a young person must participate in some form of education and training would go a long way towards meeting this challenge. (Alan Johnson, former Secretary of State, DCSF 2007, 'Raising expectations: staying in education and training post-16', p. 3)

The 2008 Education and Training Act specified that, from 2013, young people who had reached the age of 16 and who had not acquired a Level 3 qualification would have a duty to participate in education and training in England among young people to 17 years from 2013 and to their 18th birthday from 2015 (Maguire 2013). This must comprise 'appropriate full-time education or training; a contract of apprenticeship; or part-time education or training towards an accredited qualification as part of a full-time occupation or alongside an occupation of more than 20 hours a week'.¹ Within the coalition government's implementation of the RPA, there was a lack of any form of enforcement in the immediate future, thereby implying a voluntary commitment on the part of young people to participate (DfE 2010). There has been no published independent evaluation of the impact of the legislation since its roll-out in England. Post-16 destination data provide evidence that rates of participation in education have increased since 2013, although training rates have fallen. This suggests that the RPA is encouraging more young people to remain in school, although it is impossible to isolate its impact from other changes which occurred over the same period, such as the introduction of the apprenticeship levy. Crucially, the devolved governments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have not implemented the RPA and continue to pursue their own policies to promote the value of post-16 learning.

Methodology

The evidence presented here is derived from a three-year project (2016–2019), which was undertaken with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It formed part of a project funded from the Open Research Area (ORA) for the Social Sciences to undertake a comparative quantitative secondary data analysis study of young people not in education, employment or training in the UK, the Netherlands, Japan, Germany and France to understand the causes and consequences of NEET status. Alongside the quantitative analysis within the UK strand of the research, a review of NEET policy interventions across the four UK nations was undertaken to explore the absence of a UK-wide strategy or common approach to address the issue.

An initial visit was made to policymakers with responsibility for the NEET agenda in England (Department for Education), Wales (Welsh Government), Scotland (Skills Development Scotland/Scottish Government) and Northern Ireland (Department for the Economy) to discuss policy strategy and intervention, obtain policy background information and to secure their cooperation. This was followed by a two-or-three-day visit to each locality to conduct a series of face-to-face meetings (or follow-up telephone interviews) with key stakeholders, including representatives from government

departments and agencies, charities, youth organisations and training providers. Between December 2016 and December 2017, a total of 62 participants were interviewed. The final stage of the fieldwork, undertaken from October to November 2018, comprised convening policy seminars in each of the four localities, in order to feed back initial findings and, crucially, to assess their accuracy, as well as to identify shifts and changes in policy direction since the case study visits.

Findings

The purpose of the policy review was to gauge the extent to which a UK-wide NEET strategy exists and to identify the degree to which there is divergence between the four UK nations, in terms of policymaking and intervention to support young people who are defined as NEET. This involved ‘unpacking’ the use and relevance of the term ‘NEET’ within policymaking, ascertaining the extent to which NEET policies existed, as well as the age range covered, and, crucially, determining who was delivering programmes to support the NEET group and how they were funded.

A key finding was that, while there was commonality across the UK about who is defined as NEET and the age group that it embraces, that is 16–24-year-olds, there were significant differences between the four nations with regard to the range and scope of interventions to support young people. Most notably, differing responses to the impact of post-2010 austerity measures across the four UK nations were evident, in terms of how interventions to support the NEET group were being sustained (if at all), the funding sources employed and the role and type of different delivery agents in programme implementation. This is a significant finding because the stark reality is that where a young person happens to live within the UK increasingly shapes the scale and type of support that they will receive. It also endorses Raffae’s position on transition systems by signifying the importance of local policymaking, as being equal to or above nation-state or UK-wide decision-making (Raffae 2008).

What has emerged is a scattergun approach to policymaking, which is evidenced through examples of different policies being operational across the four UK nations. For example, the Welsh Government implements the *Youth Engagement and Progression Framework* as its main NEET intervention policy. This incorporates an early intervention programme to prevent young people becoming NEET, re-engagement programmes, and active labour market policies targeted largely at the under 18s group (Welsh Government 2016). In Northern Ireland, *Pathways to Success* comprises a number of targeted interventions to support the NEET group (Wilson et al. 2015) and is similar in design to the model that exists in Wales. Independent evaluations of both initiatives point to the relative weaknesses within the employability strand of individual programmes, which are linked to difficulties with employer engagement and, critically, finding young people access to sustained employment as a route out of NEET status (Welsh Government 2016; Wilson et al. 2015).

In Scotland, the *Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland’s Youth Employment Strategy* incorporated interventions to support vulnerable groups of young people make successful transitions into education, employment or training (Scottish Government 2014). This included:

- the introduction of a commitment to an offer of an appropriate place in learning or training to all 16–19-year olds not already in employment, education or training;
- the Youth Employment Scotland Fund (YESF), which offered recruitment incentives to help employers take on young people; and
- Community Jobs Scotland, which provides placement opportunities in a supportive third sector environment for young people.

The absence of the term 'NEET' in policy documents in Scotland was reported to represent a deliberate emphasis on achieving positive outcomes for all young people, while at the same time recognising that barriers to attaining successful transitions need to be addressed through targeted programme intervention. However, an independent review of *'The Life Chances of Young People in Scotland'* (Eisenstadt 2017) criticised this approach and recommended that:

'The Scottish Government should continue to move the focus away from the term 'positive destinations', which has the potential to mask difficulties some young people face after their first transition from school and make it harder to direct help in the right way.' (Ibid: 11).

In addition, Eisenstadt reported that there were disparities between regions in Scotland with regard to the effectiveness of schools and colleges to work with local employers to identify job opportunities for young people and to identify future skill needs within the implementation of *Developing the Young Workforce* (DYW) (Eisenstadt 2017). In the Scottish Government's 'The15-24 Learner Journey Review', which was published in 2018, it pledged a commitment to addressing regional inconsistencies relating to DYW within a three-year period (Scottish Government 2018).

In England, while the Department for Education has strategic responsibility for the 16–24-NEET group, there is no nation-wide, government-led programme to address this policy area. Transitions beyond full-time academic or vocational education provision are managed within Apprenticeship programmes and a small-scale Traineeships programme (for young people who require bridging provision before entering apprenticeship programmes). The Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) legislation was identified by some respondents as an additional recent policy initiative to curb the number of young people entering the NEET group. However, the RPA legislation was watered down to such an extent before its implementation in 2013 that, while young people are expected to remain in education or training until their 18th birthday, there remains no legal enforcement of this requirement (Maguire 2013).

Post-2010, government changes, coupled with austerity measures in England, resulted in policies targeted at supporting disadvantaged groups of young people to remain in EET being withdrawn. Examples include: a) the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), which was a financial incentive targeted at young people from lower-income families to encourage their participation in post-16 learning, and b) Activity Agreement pilots, which offered financial support, intensive support and tailored learning packages to young people in the under 18s NEET group. While the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland currently retain the EMA offer, the Scottish Government offers AAs as an incentive to young people under the age of 18 years who are at risk of disengagement from learning.

Employability programmes

Scottish and Welsh policymakers identified the issue of poor job quality as a key issue that is causing considerable social, economic and health problems. Both have started to address this through wide-ranging policy interventions linked to the over-arching concept of 'fair work' (Scottish Government 2016a, 2016b; Dickens et al. 2019). This provides a very different contextual backdrop to policies on youth transitions and those who are NEET to that which exists in England, where the issue of bad jobs and poor employment practices was not evidenced through policy intervention.

Recent policy initiatives introduced by the Scottish and Welsh Governments appear to be striving to embed responsibility for employment services in their own hands and away from the UK government, together with a much greater emphasis on voluntary participation on the part of individuals. In 2018, the Scottish Government launched *Fair Start Scotland*,² which is an employment support initiative delivered to individuals who are furthest away from the labour market in nine contract areas across Scotland. It is delivered by a mixture of public, private and third sector organisations. *Fair Start Scotland* sits alongside other interventions targeted at socially and

economically excluded groups, including those targeted at young people. The move from a mandatory requirement for individuals to participate marks a significant shift away from the approach adopted by UK government-led programmes, most recently the Work Programme, where mandatory participation and a payment-by-results delivery model were centre stage (National Audit Office 2014).

In a similar vein, in 2019 the Welsh Government launched *Working Wales*, which is targeted at offering employment support to both economically active and economically inactive groups (Welsh Government 2018). Again, an emphasis is placed within the policy design on individuals' voluntary participation in job seeking and guidance services. The advent of both *Fair Start Scotland* and *Working Wales* represents a significant departure from a UK-wide employment service strategy towards much greater devolution of responsibility for expenditure and policy implementation. Statistical and evaluation evidence should, in due course, be able to demonstrate the extent to which 'locally' devised policymaking, with less emphasis on compulsory participation in employment services and movement towards an individualised approach, further reduces unemployment and economic inactivity rates, as well as creating high quality jobs in greater volumes within local labour markets.

The role of EU funded initiatives and programmes

Another significant feature, which was evident throughout the research, was the strategic importance of EU funding and programmes to support the needs of young people in the NEET group. This has heightened since 2010, due to austerity measures and budget cuts that have impacted on the availability of other provision. While, in 2013, the UK government supported the EU's political commitment to a Youth Guarantee, it did not implement the programme, asserting that similar provision already existed, most notably through the Youth Contract. Subsequently, this programme, which offered a range of provision to young people in the NEET group, was wound up in 2015. Instead, the Youth Guarantee pledges to give every young person under the age of 25 a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, and an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education (European Commission 2018).

However, while the UK failed to implement the EU's Youth Guarantee, it has benefited substantially from the huge investment in the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) and the European Social Fund (ESF), which are the key EU financial resources to support the implementation of the Youth Guarantee for the 2014–2020 programming period. For example, the YEI attracted overall funding of €8.8 billion in 2017 (European Commission 2018). YEI is targeted at regions with rates of youth unemployment which exceed 25% and associated economic inactivity, and funds initiatives such as increasing apprenticeships, traineeships, job placements and qualification attainment. Across the UK, the research identified a large number of NEET projects, programmes and initiatives supported by YEI and ESF funding. For example, the total YEI allocation for the South West Scotland region (the sole area in Scotland to receive priority funding) is €46.3m which is matched further by funds from Scotland's mainstream ESF and matched again by project partners, giving a total budget of approximately €139m (Scottish Government 2016c).

There were three significant findings in relation to EU funded NEET programmes. Firstly, the scale of funding available should not be underestimated. During 2014 to 2020, the ESF and European Regional Development Fund invested around €11.8 billion across the UK. The ESF share of €4.9 billion funded six operational programmes in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, England and Gibraltar, and included €206 million for the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI).³ While the funding was tied to certain regions across the UK (and not allocated UK-wide), the availability of funds enabled NEET provision to continue in some areas which have been affected by budget cuts. This

stream of funding has been of particular importance to the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, in ensuring their continued commitment to recognising and supporting the needs of young people in the NEET group.

Secondly, it was difficult to identify the scale of intervention across the UK that is currently underpinned by EU funded support. For example, traineeship programmes are marketed as individual government initiatives, yet are supported by EU funding. In Wales, although 'Jobs Growth Wales',⁴ which offers financial incentives to employers to recruit young people, is promoted as a Welsh Government initiative, the programme is EU match-funded. Therefore, it was difficult to gauge the extent of EU-funded support for NEET policy development and implementation across the UK and to map it.

Thirdly, there was acute concern among most interviewees in our sample about the impact of Brexit on this policy arena. In the absence of UK wide initiatives to support young people in the NEET group, EU money was 'shoring up' policy intervention. The House of Lords EU select committee on youth unemployment (2014) concluded that:

'EU funding should not be used to subsidise national approaches but should be put towards establishing new initiatives and trying new methods, including those that have been successfully pioneered in other countries or regions worldwide.' (House of Lords 2014, 48)

Notwithstanding these assertions, our evidence shows that EU-supported NEET interventions were, in fact, replacing national approaches, in particular in England, and that the devolved administrations were heavily reliant on EU funds, in order to sustain any support for young people in the NEET group. Of great concern to many in our sample was how this current stream of funding would be sustained post-Brexit and what, if any, future provision would exist and be funded in the absence of a UK-wide commitment to sustained funding.

The role of charities and philanthropy in NEET provision

The research findings also pointed to the critical and expanding role of charities and philanthropic organisations in supporting young people in the NEET group across the UK. Three primary components within this role were:

- Sponsoring interventions locally and/or nationally;
- Managing and delivering programmes on behalf of government/EU;
- Acting as a sub-contractor to deliver programmes and initiatives.

In England, for example, government has rowed back from ownership of the delivery of interventions to young people in the NEET group, leaving the role of charities and philanthropic organisations to be amplified in recent years, in terms of determining what is available and where. While this has enabled some organisations to take an active role in supporting their local communities, it raises very important questions about coverage, quality and availability of provision, as well as whether funding for interventions should be so heavily reliant on charity and philanthropy.

At the same time, it was apparent from the evidence that charities across the UK play a very important role in delivering EU/government led initiatives, particularly in identifying and supporting hard-to-help/hard-to-reach groups and by acting as a powerful lobby on government. This centres around the outreach work undertaken by local community-based charities, which enables programmes to engage with young people who fail to register or engage with statutory support or welfare services.

'There's no magic wand, there's no magic formula. I, personally, think it comes down to relationship building, something like going and having a cup of coffee with somebody, bringing them out of their comfort zone to take them, maybe, to a local supermarket that they don't go to. A lot of the reasons that those young people are stuck in their house is because it's anxiety, stress related and, maybe, bad educational experience or worse. They're trapped in a little bubble and that little bubble is comfort.'

Charity worker

One manager of a charity described how it was ‘their intelligence in the local community’ which enabled the sector to be more able to reach young people who are often hidden from statutory services and who consequently experience ‘benign neglect’.

Their frustrations in this role surrounded the challenges of working on initiatives that were often time-limited, required shifts in staffing requirements and programme targets, and crucially, offered little security in terms of sustainability of funding.

‘... we’re bound by trying to wash our own faces for finance that we have very little time to celebrate or to even, sort of evaluate.’

Charity Manager

Conclusion

While the UK has not tackled EL as a dedicated strategy to improve attainment rates among young people in a quest to reduce economic and social inequalities and improve opportunities structures, it has wrestled with the same agenda for thirty years through measures to prevent and reduce NEET rates. Too often, the terms NEET, youth unemployment and early leaving (EL) are used interchangeably to attempt to capture and to quantify a crisis that is facing many EU and OECD countries: that is the lack of opportunities for young people as they make their transitions into adulthood and the long-term consequences of young people not being able to achieve their potential. While many governments are currently having to grapple with the effects of the economic crisis, emanating from the Covid-19 pandemic, it remains an imperative that the lack of good and sustainable jobs that harness the skills and talents of young people is prioritised and underpinned by substantial and sustained investment to support youth transitions.

Measures designed to reduce the NEET/EL populations share similar characteristics. They include prevention and re-engagement strategies for the hardest to help/hardest to reach groups, while NEET interventions often include active labour market policies targeted primarily at the young unemployed. Also, while the NEET/EL issues are stated to be a key priority in many national policy agendas, intervention programmes are often time and funding limited, with an over-emphasis on proving that the programme itself has worked in the quickest possible time, for political expediency, rather than tackling the underlying obstacles to reducing the NEET/EL populations. Moreover, too much emphasis has been placed on quantifying the ‘problems’ within each population, specifically with regard to their social and educational characteristics, rather than tackling the underlying reasons for young people’s disengagement or developing and investing in long-term solutions.

The recent research findings from the UK highlight a number of contradictions that run through the UK’s answer to tackling the NEET agenda, which may exist in other national contexts. Firstly, although there is an array of policy interventions, there remains a paucity of evidence about what works, and when and where to support young people who are defined as ‘NEET’. Secondly, the sustainability of most existing programmes and initiatives is questionable, due to a lack of strategic overview and their funding being time limited. This also raises issues about value for money, when programmes and their expected outcomes are subject to constant change and review.

Finally, within the UK, where a young person lives determines variations in the level, length and type of support that they will receive if they are ‘NEET’. Our evidence supports the work of Raffae (2008, 2014), who argued that studies of transition systems need to dig deeper than surveying nationwide policies and interventions, in order to capture trends towards within-country divergence. It is abundantly clear that significant differences exist and continue to grow across the four UK nations with regard to identifying and supporting young people who are defined as ‘NEET’ or at risk of EL. In addition, the findings illustrate that each of the four UK nations increasingly operates on its own, as it attempts to resolve a shared issue, with little ongoing knowledge or policy exchange operating at a UK-wide level. This raises very important questions about devolution and where

responsibility and ownership should rest. While there is a strong argument that local areas are better placed to understand and develop policy initiatives that are attuned to meeting the needs of their local communities, disparity in funding regimes and policy priorities currently results in an uneven spread of intervention. Sharing intelligence and good practice at UK level would ensure that a strategic overview existed in this policy arena and that a common standard of intervention existed for young people, regardless of their geographical location. This recent study of NEET policy across the UK points to quite the reverse happening.

Notes

1. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/25/notes/division/5/1/1/1>
2. <http://www.employabilityinscotland.com/fair-start-scotland/fair-start-scotland/-faq/>
3. <http://www.creativeeuropeuk.eu/other-eu-funding/european-social-fund-esf>
4. <https://gov.wales/jobs-growth-wales-september-2015-10March2019>

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