

Access All Areas

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“ Access to high skill work experience is vital for young people to develop the skills and capabilities that determine life chances. ”



Summary

In today's labour market, soft skills, or 'character capabilities', are a critical component of a young person's employability and life chances. Character capabilities are cognitive and affective skills.

The ability to answer a phone politely, communicate ideas, empathise with colleagues and demonstrate 'gumption' and self-confidence, are critically important in an economy increasingly dominated by the service sector.

Examination of longitudinal surveys by analysts hoping to understand why some people succeed and others do not, support the intuitive claim that one's character defines one's life: these skills are actually more important than academic credentials and they are, often, the preserve of the more affluent.

A growing literature explores the way in which character capabilities are developed. A new lexicon is simultaneously developing to capture the key capabilities that matter: 'assets', 'soft skills', non-cognitions, social and emotional skills all refer to the key social, emotional and behavioural competencies of self-regulation, empathy, application, social skills and self-understanding. Evidence shows that individuals who are exposed to more consistent and stress-free parenting are more likely to possess these skills. These are often more affluent groups as the pressure of living hand to mouth or on tight budgets can cause distress, instability and marital strife – not conducive to the kind of calm, predictable and well-resourced home-life in which children thrive.

The 'early years' appears to be a particularly critical moment for character development, in which the infrastructure for later development is embedded. Hence the focus of policy and services has been on the pre-school age population, via Sure Start, home visiting and developmental checks. School age children are now targeted with new agendas to improve empathy and teamwork and develop self-efficacy.

Very little work has explored the activities and experiences that might better develop character capabilities through the teenage and early adult years. The role of work-based training and experience in developing capabilities is particularly overlooked. There is a range of interesting new research that suggests this would be worthwhile. Neuroscience findings suggest that the areas of the brain responsible for character – the pre-frontal cortex in particular – develop rapidly through adolescence and early adulthood: our propensity for character development is not at all fixed in childhood.

This report employs original analysis of the British Cohort Study to examine the impact of apprenticeships on well-being, capabilities and employability of young people aged 16 - 24. It aims to explore the role that pre-work training can have in boosting life chances for disadvantaged groups.

The analysis is supplemented by a focus on the efforts of the Foyer Federation to develop readiness for work programmes for Foyer residents and other at-risk young people. Schemes such as the Foyer Federation's Working Assets programme, are of increasing interest to policy makers as the Coalition Government makes clear its intention to 'marketise' welfare to work: increasingly we are looking to the charity and private sector rather than the state to deliver training and work-readiness programmes to young people. But to what extent are the programmes on offer able to develop the vital character capabilities that not only define success in the work place, but also in life? And what is the role of the corporate sector in facilitating the increased labour market opportunities that young people need to prepare for careers, for instance through work experience, apprenticeships and shadowing?

Main findings

Analysis of the 1970 British Cohort Study revealed that individuals who had taken part in apprenticeships at age 16, were more likely to feel they could run their life the way they wanted (98 per cent, as opposed to 95 per cent of the general population); more likely to have never felt hopeless (92 per cent compared with 75 per cent for non-apprentices); and notably more confident in their ability to solve problems, learn new skills and work in a team. Ultimately, the majority of answers from those who had completed an apprenticeship indicated they were more confident, happy, and more skilled than their non-apprentice contemporaries.

Elsewhere, research suggests that those who leave school with no qualifications reap the most rewards from undertaking an apprenticeship. As well as the positive effect an apprenticeship can have on a person's soft skills and confidence, for those with no qualifications completing an apprenticeship can produce a wage return 13 per cent higher than that of individuals who enter the labour market with no qualifications or apprenticeship. Similarly, those who have GCSE grades D - F or grades A - C can earn between 4 and 9 per cent more with an apprenticeship qualification than those without.

Nonetheless, studies reveal that undertaking an apprenticeship does not bring about a significant return to women. For men, however, completing an apprenticeship-training scheme can increase wages by 7 per cent, keeping other factors constant. That undertaking an apprenticeship

can produce a significant return for young males without any prior qualifications, suggests that this pathway can have a profoundly positive effect on the work-readiness and employability of many at risk and disadvantaged young people.

Similarly, vocational education only offered significant returns at the high-skill end: no vocational qualifications below Level 3 produces significant returns. However, the benefits of NVQs, particularly at Level 2, appear to be notably greater for individuals with lower educational abilities and from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

These findings drawn together in this report have implications for the broader policy framework for young people – employment, training and development, as well as for the Foyer Federation and its Working Assets programme.

The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions’ damning report released in late 2009, illustrated the scale of the challenge: access to high-skill work experience and internships is almost exclusively the preserve of the middle classes. If we do not address the issue of fair access to high-skill work experience, we risk compounding the social immobility experienced by large swathes of young people in every generation.

Recommendations, therefore, focus on seven key areas:

Establish a code of best practice

The evidence shows that quality makes a huge difference to the experience of an apprentice or intern. We support the recommendation of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, that a Code of Best Practice be established, inviting employers and providers of apprenticeships and internships to sign-up and be assessed by an independent body.

While we support the findings of the Panel, if we are to combat the structural drivers of long term unemployment and of those not in education, employment or training (NEET), policy needs to go further and target the most deprived and vulnerable groups.

Targeted support for young offenders and care leavers

There is a serious need to improve the opportunities for vulnerable young people – particularly those leaving care and former young offenders who lack access to social

networks. Employers should be encouraged to link up to educational, care and young offenders’ institutions in order to help facilitate access to work experience and training opportunities, and to also ensure that any training undertaken or qualifications achieved are fully recognised by prospective employers.

Government has a role in providing a meaningful incentive structure – one which both encourages employers to offer placements and encourages high quality and useful experience, which supports the development of social and life skills. Our research suggests that this requires structured placements in which meaningful tasks are allocated and there are clear reporting lines with mentoring or coaching provided in-house.

Incentivising opportunities

The Government should offer performance-based, financial incentives in the form of a ‘pay-back’ scheme to employers that provide work experience opportunities for disadvantaged and at risk young people. Employers should receive a payment if their intern has found stable employment within a year after completing the placement. This scheme would help encourage employers to take on and train young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and help to change the culture around high quality placements.

This scheme would also ensure that incentivising internships is not an additional cost to the Government, since the cost of paying host companies is balanced by the saving of a structurally unemployed young person coming off out of work benefits.

Establish a network for employers to share experiences

There is space for a nationwide internship network, allowing companies and businesses to share experiences of working with former young offenders and at risk young people and draw awareness to the wider socio-economic benefits of offering high-skill work experience opportunities to this cohort.

In order that young people are ready to benefit from work experience opportunities, more needs to be done to improve their skills and capabilities. The charity sector has a vital role to play in delivering work-readiness programmes and there

are already examples of very successful albeit small-scale schemes in operation.

Ensure Voluntary and Community Sector organisations have the resources for work-readiness schemes

The election of the Liberal-Conservative Coalition Government and the introduction of the ‘Big Society’ agenda presents a real opportunity to empower voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations to deliver work-readiness programmes and employability schemes. The Foyer Federation’s Working Assets programme is a good example of this but there are several similar schemes being offered elsewhere. Currently, there is little opportunity for charities to build upon such programmes and serve a wider client base. Given that there are around 85,000 NEETs in England, there is a clear demand for programmes which focus on developing life skills and employability.

The new Government should ensure that VCS organisations have the upfront financial resources they need to develop, improve, provide and replicate such services. In addition, there is a need to evaluate and audit the efficacy of work-readiness schemes to ensure we are offering disadvantaged young people the best chance of success. Allowing accredited organisations better access to funding streams such as those provided by the Big Society Bank, would be fundamental to achieving this aim.

Fast-track at risk young people to specialist service providers

We recommend a redesign of the current welfare-to-work system with special regards to young people who are considered to be severely disadvantaged and lacking life skills. When coming into contact with state support services like Job Centre Plus, young people who are considered to be severely disadvantaged and lacking life skills should undergo a basic ‘capabilities test’, in which they are assessed for social and work-readiness skills. Those young people who are found to be lacking such skills should be fast-tracked to specialist service providers like Foyers, so that they may benefit from work-readiness programmes and employability schemes like Working Assets.

Review Jobseekers Allowance eligibility

The Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) system should be reviewed to ensure that it does not disincentivise young people – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds – from undertaking work experience and internships. There is some suggestion that the technical difficulty of organising a ‘break’ from JSA to undertake short stints of paid or unpaid work experience may impact on take-up by the most deprived young people.

1. A 'lost generation': youth unemployment

Youth unemployment: a post-recession outlook

Although this report is not primarily interested in employment, it is worth situating the research in the context of current employment trends. The financial crisis – one of the worst in recent memory – had a dramatic and disproportionately detrimental impact on youth employment prospects. By the end of 2009, almost one million young people were out of work.¹ For many, the effects of the downturn are still being felt: Labour Force survey data for June 2010 revealed some 0.213 million 16 - 17 year olds to be out work; at the same time, 0.713 million 18 - 24 year olds were unemployed.² Those young people left workless from the recession have become known as Britain's 'lost generation'.³ Even now, as the economy convalesces, the risk of worklessness remains. The Emergency Budget, announced in June 2010, saw job schemes for young people like the Future Jobs Fund scrapped. For young people today, many believe things will get worse before they get better – economists predict youth unemployment will rise by “at least a quarter of a million” by June 2011.⁴

Following the fallout from the financial crisis, the number of NEET young people continues to pose an intractable problem. Indeed, it has done for many years now. According to the House of Commons select committee on Children, Schools and Families, the proportion of 16 - 18 year old who are NEET has “changed relatively little over the past decade”.⁵ The data in Figure 1 below serves to substantiate such a statement.

The 'NEET effect'

Being NEET can be extremely damaging to young people's employment prospects – today's generation of NEETs risk being out of work for much of their lives.⁶ For some of those who do manage to find employment later on, their wages can be 8 to 15 per cent lower than those of their contemporaries.⁷ The wider, social costs of being NEET are also substantial – especially considering the state of the economy following the downturn. Recent estimates suggest that each person who is NEET between the ages of 16 and 17 costs almost £120,000 (prices as of 2009).⁸ The current cohorts of 16 - 18 year olds who are NEET are thought to cost around £4.6 billion a year.⁹

Figure 1: Number of 16 - 18 year olds NEET in England, 1996 - 2008

Source: Lucas, B et al *Mind the Gap: research and reality in practical and vocational education* (Edge Foundation, 2010)

Year	16 year olds	17 year olds	18 year olds	No. of 16-18 year olds	% of 16-18 year olds
1996	39,800	60,800	73,000	173,600	9.9%
1997	35,700	49,400	74,900	160,000	8.9%
1998	39,700	51,600	75,400	166,600	9.2%
1999	40,600	42,500	62,400	145,500	8.1%
2000	40,700	44,200	71,300	156,100	8.7%
2001	48,500	58,900	75,000	182,400	9.9%
2002	49,100	57,800	81,500	188,400	10.0%
2003	49,600	49,200	84,800	183,500	9.5%
2004	48,800	60,500	80,500	189,800	9.6%
2005	50,600	70,200	92,900	213,700	10.7%
2006	44,600	65,000	100,100	209,700	10.4%
2007	36,900	62,400	95,700	195,000	9.7%
2008	34,000	61,300	113,200	208,600	10.3%

It is widely accepted that being NEET can have seriously deleterious effects on young people's health and well-being. Not being in education, employment or training increases the likelihood of a young person living an unhealthy lifestyle, using illegal substances, engaging in criminal behaviour, getting caught up in violent situations, and ending up in prison.¹⁰ At its most extreme, being NEET has been connected with premature death.¹¹ Not being in education, employment or training can exacerbate anxiety and foster feelings of insecurity, isolation, rejection and depression.¹² In a UK survey of young people who are NEET, one in five said they had lost the confidence to attend job interviews; a quarter said being NEET caused arguments with their family.¹³ "Young people who are NEET", Sodha and Margo point out, "also claim to be less happy and confident across all aspects of their life including education, work and training".¹⁴

Risk factors for becoming NEET

"Being NEET", Sodha and Margo argue, "is not a start point but an end point for young people who become disengaged and disaffected from their education earlier on."¹⁵ There are indeed a range of factors that can indicate the extent to which a young person is at risk of becoming NEET, including:

- ▶ parental unemployment;
- ▶ low school attendance;
- ▶ drug and alcohol abuse;
- ▶ having spent time in care; and
- ▶ having a history of crime or violence or both.¹⁶

Educational disengagement is often a precursor to becoming NEET in later life. Disengagement from education can happen early on in a child's life: evidence suggests that children as young as nine – or possibly even earlier – can become disaffected from their education.¹⁷ Such disengagement is often expressed by a range of behaviours – such as truanting, disruptive behaviour and low educational attainment – outlined in Box 1 on the right.¹⁸

Box 1: Indicators of educational disengagement

Truancy

Truancy may be a late indicator of educational disengagement and is connected to negative outcomes like criminal and anti-social behaviour and substance abuse. Truanting is increasingly problematic in today's schools: between 1996-7 and 2007-08 truancy levels rose steadily from 0.73 to 1.01 per cent.¹⁹ More than one in twenty young people persistently truant during secondary school, missing more than a fifth of the school year.²⁰ Truanting is especially pervasive among pupils from low-income families: over 8 in 100 students eligible for free school meals persistently truant – a rate three times that of the student population.²¹

Risky behaviours and attitudes to learning

Young people, particularly at age 14, with more positive attitudes towards education are less likely to be NEET at age 17.²² (They are also less likely to engage in risky behaviours – such as substance abuse and underage drinking – at ages 14 and 16.²³ Adolescents engaging in such behaviour tend to suffer poor educational outcomes.²⁴) The UK also has one of the highest proportions of children with poor attitudes towards reading in the developed world.²⁵ Regarding attitudes towards learning, a small, qualitative study conducted by Demos of 75 pupils, is – although not generally representative – telling. Among this cohort, just under a third did not find their lessons interesting; more than half agreed with the statement: 'lessons were boring and seemed pointless'.²⁶ As with truancy, such problems appear more widespread among young people from poorer backgrounds: studies show that children from more disadvantaged families are less likely to say that they have had a positive learning experience.²⁷

At risk young people

Foyer residents tend to be multiply disadvantaged and may well be much more vulnerable to becoming NEET. Below, Figure 2 shows a breakdown of issues experienced by many Foyer residents.

Figure 2: Characteristics of Foyer residents (sample size: 2598)

Source: Foyer Federation *Benchmarking Review 2007* (Foyer Federation, 2007)

	UK Average	Maximum reported figure
% Excluded or suspended	13.3	60.0
% Offending history	21.9	57.1
% Mental health	17.6	56.3
% Used illegal drugs	23.6	64.0
% Alcohol problems	16.5	78.6
% With disability	3.8	25.8
% Suffered parental abuse 12.3	53.3	
% Single parents	3.1	26.7
% Asylum seekers	1.8	21.1
% Refugee status	3.7	100.0*
% Care leavers	9.9	49.1

In general, any one of these issues can have a significant effect on a young person’s prospects of finding work. More specifically, young offenders, young parents and young people leaving care are at significant risk of becoming NEET.

Young offenders

Each year, some 70,000 young people enter the youth justice system in the UK.²⁸ Of these, around three quarters are expected to reoffend within two years of release.²⁹

Many young offenders suffer from entrenched educational disadvantage: according to the Prison Reform Working Group, many prisoners “have rejected the model of education and learning offered to them as a young person”.³⁰ Among those of school age, almost half – 48 per cent – have literacy and numeracy levels below those expected of an eleven year old.³¹ A quarter of young offenders have the reading skills below those expected of a seven year old.³² Improving social skills and literacy levels are essential to reducing recidivism by young offenders.³³

Educational disadvantage is often compounded by other issues, like poor communication skills. A report issued last year by the Youth Justice Agency and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, estimate 60 per cent of young people in the youth justice system have a communication disability, which is often misinterpreted as behavioural problems.³⁴ Self-esteem is also a significant issue: a small-scale study by The Prince’s Trust involving 40 young offenders revealed a lack of self-confidence to be a significant barrier to changing past behaviours.³⁵ Finally, many young offenders also suffer from a multitude of other disadvantages, including disrupted family backgrounds, behavioural and mental health issues, and a history of sexual or physical abuse – all of which can have a devastating effect on their employability.³⁶

Care leavers

Young people leaving care achieve notably poorer outcomes in education, employment and training than their peers. Last year, 29 per cent of 19 year old care leavers were NEET, in

contrast to 10 per cent of the general population.³⁷ Studies by Barnardo's suggest there to be a strong association between being looked after and low educational attainment: over three quarters of young people in care have no qualifications.³⁸ According to the National Leaving Care Advisory Service, in 2003 only 44 per cent of young people leaving care had at least one GCSE or GNVQ, as opposed to 96 per cent of all Year 11 children.³⁹ In 2003, estimates for the number of unemployed 16 - 24 year olds with experience of being in care ranged from 50 to 80 per cent (the national rate of unemployment for the rest of their peer group was far lower at 17 per cent), which suggests that unemployment among care leavers was a significant problem before the onset of the recession.⁴⁰

Young parents

In a recent survey of over 2,500 Foyer residents, 3.1 per cent were single parents.⁴¹ For young parents, extra costs and issues involving childcare can prevent them from starting an apprenticeship.⁴² (Although the former Government's Care to Learn scheme did provide £160 - £175 per week to pay childcare costs, this programme did not extend to apprenticeships.⁴³) Indeed, studies show half of lone parents consider childcare costs as a major barrier to undertaking education or training. Although this is not specific to young people, it is nevertheless informative.⁴⁴ In addition to these costs, many lone parents lack the necessary qualifications for education, employment and training opportunities: in 2007 there were 357,000 lone parents who had no qualifications.⁴⁵

Young homeless people

Many homeless people lack the basic skills needed to move into employment – not only functional skills like literacy and numeracy, but crucial character capabilities and soft skills (see below) like self-efficacy, self-confidence and communication skills.⁴⁶ Mindful of this, young people make up a significant proportion of Britain's homeless population: a study by Off the streets and into Work of 200 homeless individuals, revealed over a third of this cohort to be under 25 years old. A second study, in which 300 homeless people were surveyed, showed more than a quarter were 24 years old or younger.⁴⁷ In 2007 - 08, at least 70,000 young people experienced homelessness⁴⁸ (however, this estimate only accounts for those young people who came into contact with

local services – figures that also account for those who did not will be considerably higher). Many young people who are homeless have experienced relationship breakdowns, which, for some, may have involved long-term conflict or violence or both.⁴⁹ Critically, there is strong evidence to suggest that homelessness can seriously inhibit young people engaging in employment, education and training.⁵⁰ As a result, many young people become NEET after leaving their last stable home.⁵¹ Many young homeless people have complex, often overlapping needs. As a 2007 - 08 survey of Centrepoin's⁵¹ clients – some 1,586 young people (of whom 80 per cent were aged 16 to 21) – shows:

- ▶ 17 per cent had been looked after in care;
- ▶ 26 per cent had no qualifications;
- ▶ 11 per cent had substance abuse issues; and
- ▶ only 25 per cent were in education, employment or training.⁵²

More generally, Foyer residents often have complex, multiple and overlapping needs; for many, problems such as leaving care, offending and homelessness will overlap. Lack of basic skills is also widespread among residents: surveys show more than three quarters – 77 per cent – of residents need assistance with basic life skills like budgeting, cooking, personal health and hygiene.⁵³ Finally, many residents suffer from low levels of educational attainment and a lack of qualifications: a third of young people entering Foyers have no recognised qualifications; only 11 per cent have a qualification at Level 3 (equivalent to A-levels). In today's economy, in which professions are becoming increasingly exclusive, these issues and disadvantages reproduce and reinforce the already significant barriers this cohort faces in engaging in employment, education and training. That social mobility – discussed in the next section – appears to have stalled only serves to compound such disadvantages.

2. Social mobility in a changing economy

The rise and stall of social mobility

Following the end of the Second World War and the creation of the welfare state, British society witnessed a significant rise in rates of social mobility. People born after the war in the fifties and sixties were three times as likely to be a professional by the age of 35 than those born before or during the war, and many people from less well-off backgrounds were able to climb up the rungs of the social ladder.⁵⁴ However, following this initial increase, social mobility rates soon begin to plateau: people born in 1970 experienced the same rate as those born in 1958.⁵⁵ This has had a detrimental impact on many (then) young people: young adults from low-income families born in 1970 faced greater disadvantage in terms of the probability of being in employment and the size of the earnings penalty, than those born in 1958.⁵⁶ About 38 per cent of people born in 1970 to parents in the poorest income quartile remained in that quartile throughout their life, as opposed to 30 per cent of those born in 1958.⁵⁷ Such trends considered, it is widely agreed that social mobility has stagnated in recent decades.⁵⁸

Today, the futures of young people in Britain are more strongly determined by their backgrounds than was the

case for previous generations.⁵⁹ Family background, not individual talent, is believed to be the main determinant of young people's outcomes.⁶⁰ An adolescent today has poorer prospects of progressing up the ladder of opportunity than a teenager in the 1950s.⁶¹

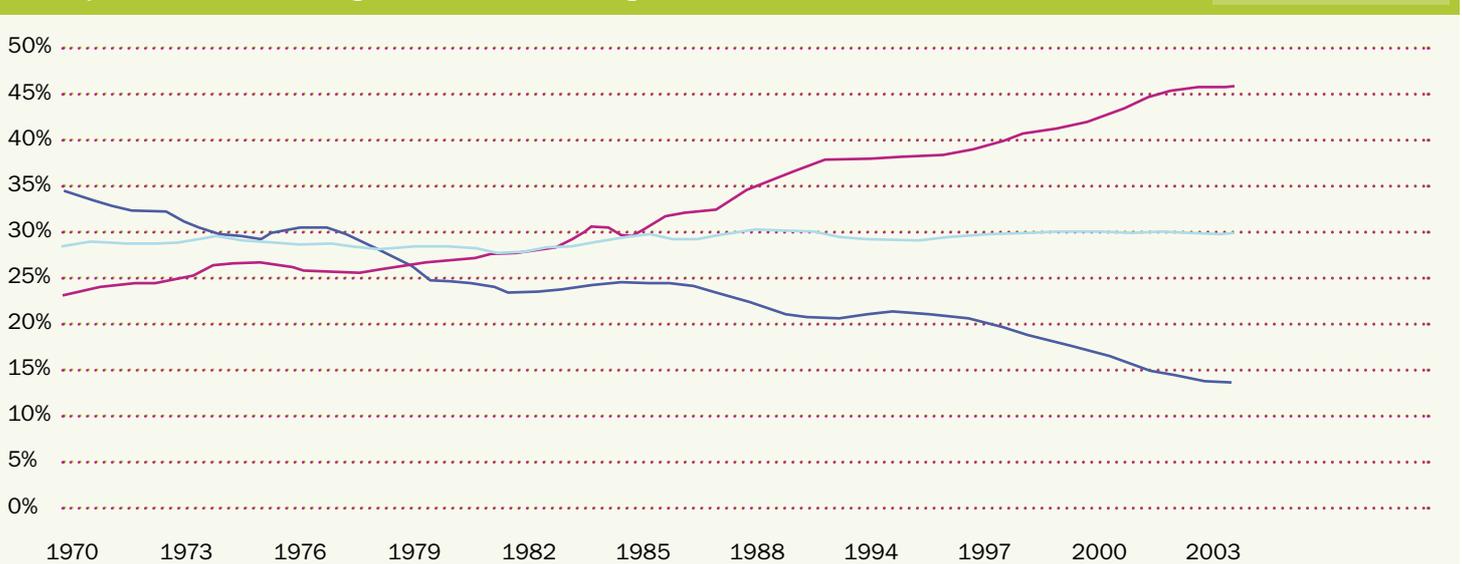
This change in social trends has also had an effect on the professions, which have become more concentrated around higher skilled jobs, while becoming increasingly exclusive and less socially representative.⁶² Supply of lower skilled jobs has dwindled over the last fifty years: between 1960 and 2010, the number of unskilled jobs halved from around 8 million to 3.5 million.⁶³ Conversely, more and more professions have become open to graduates only. In 2009, only one in four of The Times's Top 100 Employers accepted candidates without a university degree.⁶⁴ This has left many without a degree unable to pursue a professional career.⁶⁵

Accelerating towards a knowledge-economy

As social mobility rose and stalled, so Britain accelerated further towards a service and knowledge-based economy. Knowledge-based and knowledge-intensive services underwent unprecedented expansion during the last three decades, as evident from Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Growth of knowledge-based service industries in the UK

Brinkley, I. et al 2009 *Knowledge Workers and Knowledge Work* London, UK: The Work Foundation



“ There is now an established body of evidence indicating that from the perspective of social mobility, this point in history is not a good moment to be young in the UK. ”

Hannon, C & Timms, C *Anatomy of Youth* (Demos, 2010)

In a growing knowledge economy, high skills have become increasingly valuable; they are now worth more in labour markets than ever before.⁶⁶ In the UK, graduates are now paid around 25 per cent more than non-graduates; people with good numeracy skills can earn 10 to 15 per cent more than people without.⁶⁷ However, although high skills are increasingly sought after by employers, soft skills like creativity and empathy remain paramount.⁶⁸ In a 2009 Young Foundation report, Roberts notes:

“Tomorrow’s world will require adults who have been taught to draw on a wider range of capabilities and competencies; who are curious, resilient, self-disciplined and self-motivated; who can navigate differences, overcome language and cultural barriers, and who are at ease working in a team.”⁶⁹

In fact, personal qualities are often given precedence over qualifications.⁷⁰ Recent research reveals that in today’s labour market employers are less demanding of technical skills, which can be trained and developed, and more concerned with an employee’s employability as well as their interpersonal and communication skills.⁷¹ Motivation and flexibility; willingness to work and learn; confidence; and an individual’s appearance, behaviour, positive gestures and mannerisms are among the key characteristics that employers look for.⁷² Indeed, they constitute a keystone in the foundations of the modern work ethic – an ethic to which empathy, teamwork and listening skills, and the ability to work cooperatively are central.⁷³ As is discussed in the next chapter, the ability to think creatively and empathise with others is believed to have a significant impact on a young person’s educational attainment and their well-being, as well as on social mobility and progression towards a good society.⁷⁴

3. Learning life skills and character capabilities

Character capabilities

In today's labour market, soft skills, or 'character capabilities', are a critical component of a young person's employability. Character capabilities are cognitive and affective skills; they are key social, emotional and behavioural competencies.⁷⁵ According to Lexmond and Reeves, being of 'good character'; "means excelling at the task of pursuing a good life".⁷⁶ Character capabilities are life skills – pivotal to enabling people to pursue and achieve their own well-being.⁷⁷ These skills include:

Application

Application refers to the ability to concentrate and motivate oneself to pursue and complete a task.⁷⁸ Application is strongly associated with educational engagement: a child with strong application is much more likely to continue in education and succeed academically than one without.⁷⁹

Self-regulation

Self-regulation describes a person's ability to control their emotions and bounce back from disappointment and frustration – it is vital to their ability to refrain from overreacting, and even resorting to violence.⁸⁰ It is also associated with more hours spent on homework, better attendance at school and improved educational performance.⁸¹

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to see the world from other people's perspective⁸² and behave in a way that is sensitive to this.⁸³ It also refers to a person's ability to understand and enjoy difference, pay attention and listen to others.⁸⁴

Self-understanding

Self-understanding refers to having a positive and accurate sense of self; a person's ability to acknowledge their strengths, as well as weaknesses, and their responsibility towards other people.⁸⁵ A child with good self-understanding is thought to be more resilient and better disciplined in the classroom.⁸⁶

Social skills

Social skills are central to a person's ability to communicate and get along with others, as well as their ability to try to solve problems and stand up for themselves.⁸⁷

Box 2:

Character traits – a survey of Foyer residents

A small-scale survey, while not representative, is revealing about the character traits of some of the young people who reside in Foyers.

Confidence-related

- ▶ More than half of residents surveyed agreed with the statement: "I find it easy to talk in front of a group of people".
- ▶ The majority believed they could do almost anything if they put their mind to it.
- ▶ However, a quarter of respondents agreed with the statement: "things never turn out well for me".

Self-regulation-related

- ▶ Most respondents said that they lost their temper "almost never" or "not often".

Application-related

- ▶ Three quarters of respondents said that they found it hard to concentrate while doing a difficult task "not often" or "never".

Empathy-related

- ▶ Just over a quarter of respondents said they found it easy or quite easy to trust people.
- ▶ But, the majority of respondents felt that others would say they had close friends.

Impact on life chances

Character capabilities are fundamental to an individual's well-being and propensity to prosper and flourish. They affect life chances: studies show character capabilities, while not connected to incomes of children born in 1958, were closely connected with the incomes of those born in 1970.⁸⁸ Recent research reveals such skills to be just as important for positive life outcomes as academic abilities, especially for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.⁸⁹

Studies show young people with stronger application, control and self-understanding at the age of 14, perform better at age 16, making more progress between these ages.⁹⁰ Furthermore, character capabilities can often predict educational engagement more accurately than IQ.⁹¹ US studies show self-regulation to be twice as important as IQ for predicting educational engagement.^{3,92} Having well developed soft skills can also help reduce the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours.⁹³ Young people with good communication skills and relationships with others are less likely to smoke, become pregnant, and commit crime than those with poor communication skills.⁹⁴ Young people with a developed internal locus of control are less likely to be racially intolerant by the age of thirty than those without.⁹⁵

The ‘capabilities gap’

There remains a longstanding ‘capabilities gap’ in the UK – young people from poorer families are much less likely to develop character capabilities than their wealthier counterparts.⁹⁶ Many of the softer skills sought after by employers correlate with social class background.⁹⁷ Character capabilities are particularly pertinent to addressing ‘the NEET problem’ and educational disengagement early on. Previous analysis by Demos of the Millennium Cohort Study, suggests approximately 127,000 children aged five are starting school in 2010 with behavioural problems; 100,000 with hyperactivity; 95,000 with issues relating to other members of their peer group.⁹⁸ Some 11.5 per cent of five year olds begin school with behavioural issues that hinder their ability to learn and empathise with others.⁹⁹ Among adolescent age groups, problems of behavioural conduct in 15 year olds have doubled between 1974 and 1999 from 6.8 to 14.9 per cent.¹⁰⁰ In 1999, almost 17 per cent of 15 year old boys had behavioural conduct problems, while rates of hyperactivity among this cohort increased from 11.1 to 16.9 per cent between 1974 and 1999.¹⁰¹ For boys, behavioural issues when young can have wider ramifications when older: poor behaviour and low levels of self-esteem at school age are considered good predictors of male unemployment and low wages.¹⁰²

Life skills: a portrait of a generation

Mindful of the evidence outlined above, it is not just more recent generations that suffer from widespread behavioural issues and poor soft skills. Our original analysis of the 1970

British Cohort study shows a dearth of capabilities among much of that generation too. In this examination, thousands of (then) 16 year olds were assessed on the five character capabilities outlined above. In terms of application, 17.7 per cent of this cohort believed their concentration span to be less than that of the average person; 12.3 per cent displayed weak confidence and motivation, agreeing with the statement: “it is not worth trying as it will never work out anyway”. With regards to social skills, almost half – 48.4 per cent of 2,635 respondents – felt “silly” speaking in front of their classmates. Many displayed relatively weak self-control and self-regulation skills – one in ten agreed that the statement “fights frequently with others” applied to them; over 10 per cent appeared to be quick to anger. Also evident from the study, is that much of this cohort felt under pressure: almost 16 per cent believed they could not overcome their difficulties; when asked if they felt constantly under strain, more than a fifth replied “more than usual”. Around 14 per cent admitted losing sleep due to anxiety and worry. Finally, more than 15 per cent exhibited confidence issues; when asked if they thought themselves to be ‘worthless’, over one in ten replied that they did at least “rather more than usual”. All this considered, it would appear from these results that between 10 - 20 per cent of this population have relatively weak character capabilities and lack the key skills identified to be successful in the modern labour market.

Looking after life skills

Character capabilities are, for the most part, developed during childhood. Empathy, for example, is developed as a direct result of a child’s attachment to their primary carer.¹⁰³ During the first three years of a child’s life, the number of neural connections – synapses – in their brain multiplies by 20, mostly as a result of their experience of a new environment.¹⁰⁴ A nurturing and responsive environment, combined with a carer well attuned to their needs, is paramount to an infant developing a strong sense of empathy. Empathy is vital to relational capabilities that allow an individual to effectively interact with others.¹⁰⁵ In addition to empathy, children also develop their sense of self during the early years and begin to respond emotionally to the acts of others. Around this time, a child’s sense of pride, shame, guilt and embarrassment – ‘socially orientated emotions’ – also begin to emerge.¹⁰⁶

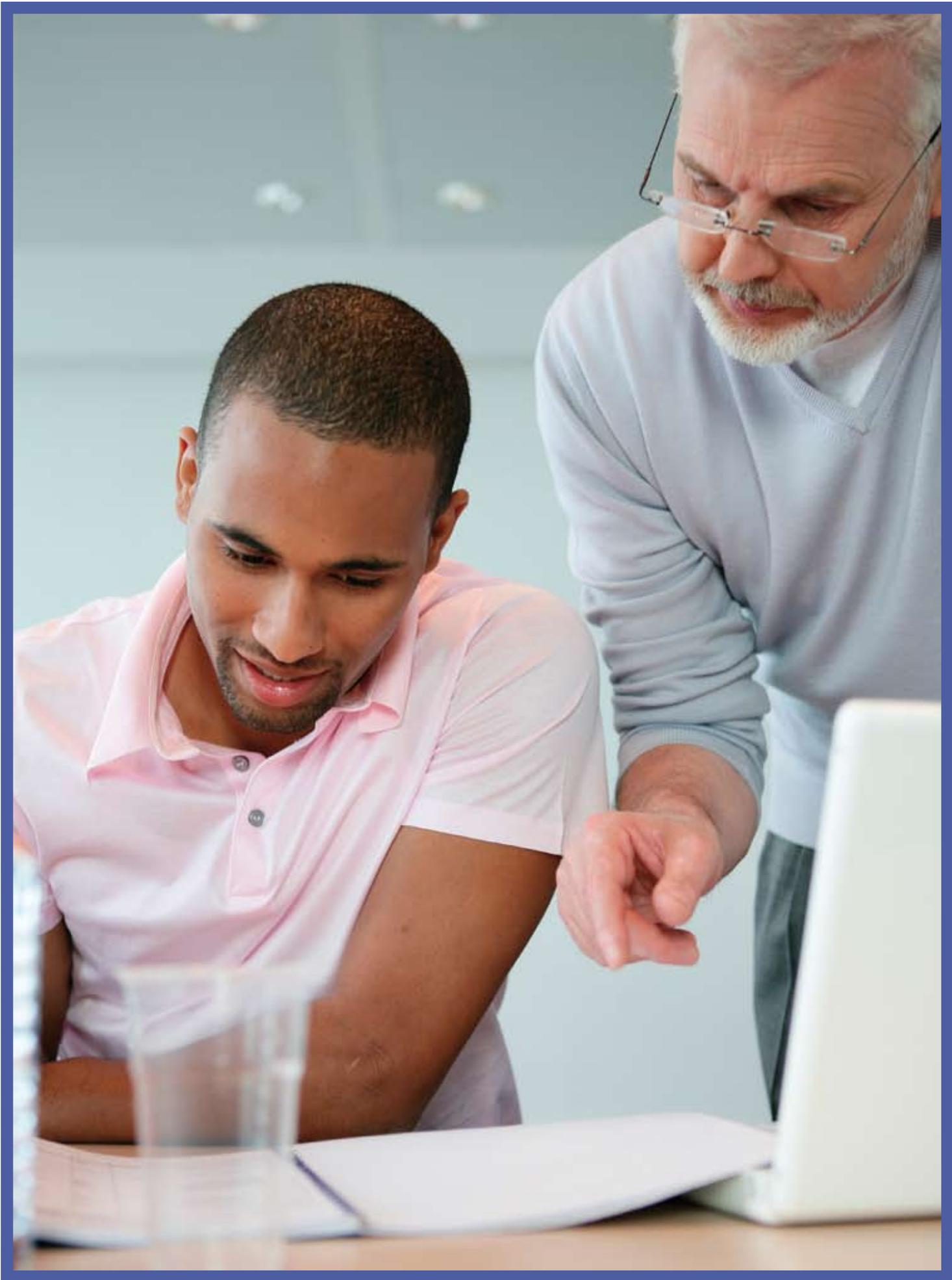
These skills and capabilities then continue to grow and develop through adolescence and young adulthood – during this time, the human brain continues to mature.¹⁰⁷ The young adult brain is flexible and continues to develop new cells and connections. The brain’s frontal cortex – the region responsible for cognitive abilities required for planning, multi-tasking and remembering to do things in the future – develops well beyond childhood, even into the twenties and thirties.¹⁰⁸ The frontal cortex is also central to a person’s sense of self-awareness and their ability to understand other people.¹⁰⁹ Cognitive development does not, as previously thought, end in childhood – rather, as Sarah-Jayne Blakemore of the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience points out: “there is no age limit for learning”.¹¹⁰

Young people of school age can develop such skills through – among other things – taking part in extra-curricular activities, clubs and societies.¹¹¹ Participating in extra-curricular activities and after-school clubs is believed to help build and boost resilience.¹¹² Analysis of the 1970 cohort study shows the strength of the connection between undertaking sporting, uniformed or church-related activities and positive adult outcomes.¹¹³ By the age of 30, young people who had participated in sports or community centres were:

- ▶ 16 per cent less likely to be depressed;
- ▶ 5 per cent less likely to be single, separated or divorced;
- ▶ 3 per cent less likely to be on a low income;
- ▶ 4 per cent less likely not to have achieved Level 2 qualifications, and
- ▶ 2 per cent less likely to have no qualifications.¹¹⁴

However, worryingly, there is evidence to suggest that there are far fewer opportunities for young people from less privileged backgrounds to access and benefit from such activities.¹¹⁵ Elsewhere, evidence suggests that spending time with peers in unstable and unstructured environments can be harmful to youth outcomes.¹¹⁶ Conversely, young people from stable secure families – who live in orderly, secure communities – experience better social and emotional outcomes, and have more developed personal skills than those from deprived and disruptive backgrounds.¹¹⁷ Therefore, for young people, spending time with parents or other adults in a secure and nurturing environment is paramount to positive youth outcomes.¹¹⁸

Not surprisingly, an unstable, insecure environment can have the opposite effect. Research from the behavioural sciences demonstrates that social instability as an environmental factor has a profound impact on releasing serotonin – which influences an individual’s level of self-control – in the brain.¹¹⁹ Scientific studies using marmoset monkeys show certain environmental factors such as poverty, disorder and instability, can actually damage the brain by inhibiting neuron growth.¹²⁰ The development and importance of life skills and character capabilities now considered, the next section analyses the current school and wider education system in relation to fostering these skills.



4. Educating employability and character – in and out of school

Part 1: in school

Overview

Success in education and schooling up to the age of 16 years is a fundamental factor in explaining rates of social mobility.¹²¹ It is also, as noted previously, vitally important to young people's employability. However, while qualifications remain an important indicator of an individual's aptitude, and continue to be highly valued by employers, there is a growing premium on soft skills and character capabilities.¹²² Evidence suggests soft skills, like adaptability, are more valuable to employers than educational achievement or qualifications.¹²³ In today's workplace, communication, confidence and team-working skills are highly sought after by employers.¹²⁴ Indeed, many of the new jobs created in service sectors demand good communication skills, flexibility and an ability to empathise.¹²⁵ Yet, many employers complain that new employees lack much needed communication, motivation and self-management skills as well as empathy.¹²⁶ This absence is thought to be particularly acute among new recruits from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹²⁷ In recent years, the British education system appears to have neglected the development of these vital skills, focusing instead on fostering academic skills and conducting intensive testing. This disregard has allegedly left the current system with a 'damaging blind spot'.¹²⁸

The results of a small-scale study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation of 39 employers are of interest here.¹²⁹ Participating employers felt educational institutions focused too strongly on academic skills and qualifications at the expense of employability.¹³⁰ Among those surveyed, the majority perceived schools and colleges as inadequately preparing young people in relation to what would be expected of them in the labour market.¹³¹ The same study also conducted interviews among a similarly sized sample of young people. When asked about the extent to which they viewed their experience of school as relevant to the world of work, the most common answer given was 'not very relevant'.¹³² A much wider study by the Equality and Human Rights Commission of 1,000 young people aged between 14 - 18, showed one in ten believed the subjects they studied were not very relevant to them.¹³³

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) surveys have repeatedly revealed employers to be dissatisfied with school leavers' employability skills.¹³⁴ 'Employability', as they define

it, incorporates a range of skills – many of which mirror or are related to those life skills and character capabilities outlined earlier. These include: self-management (which includes resilience, appropriate self-assertion, and readiness to undertake responsibility), team-working (which includes the ability to respect and cooperate with others), problem solving and communication, among others.¹³⁵ Mindful of this dissatisfaction, other business leaders have voiced similarly strong criticism about the role of skills in the current education system. Late last year, Chris Hyman, Chief Executive of Serco, described the education system as "extremely complex and not very accessible" and stressed fixations with testing and examinations made it very difficult for many young people to build and develop basic skills.¹³⁶

While there are a variety of means and pathways by which a young person – and particularly those considered at risk or vulnerable to becoming NEET – can build their soft skills and boost their employability, four receive special attention here: vocational education, work experience placements, apprenticeships and internships. In addition to these, careers advice is also vitally important to helping young people develop their aspirations and ambitions and engage in education, employment and training.

Vocational education

Learning a trade or creative skill is indicative of key character capabilities as such talents are often only acquired through discipline, perception and a systematic approach to problems.¹³⁷ Academics like Richard Sennett suggest that learning and developing a distinctive craft can take up to 10,000 hours of practice; patience and application are paramount to such an endeavour.¹³⁸ But these efforts regularly result in rich rewards: those who have spent their lives practicing and perfecting a craft or trade, note such learning processes can foster an individual's sense of agency and competence.¹³⁹ This considered, practical and vocational education is believed by some to help young people discover their talents and develop their skills.¹⁴⁰ Many (but not all) young people who are NEET consider practical learning opportunities as valuable learning experiences that can help improve their skills on-the-job, while also boosting their employability and self-confidence.¹⁴¹

Practical learning has undergone a rise in popularity in recent years.¹⁴² A 2009 Edge/YouGov study in which over

1,000 young people aged 15 - 16 years old were surveyed, showed that more than half – 57 per cent – thought they should study at least one practical or vocational subject in addition to academic subjects.¹⁴³ In the same study, over 4,000 parents were also surveyed, almost half of which indicated they would like to see an increased mix of practical and vocational learning alongside academic provision.¹⁴⁴ However, despite the popularity and benefits of vocational learning, the UK education system currently depicts learning a craft or trade as something that is generally ‘low status’.¹⁴⁵ Trades are afforded little honour in schools and education systems and uptake of vocational learning subjects remains significantly lower than their academic equivalents.¹⁴⁶ There is a longstanding tension within the UK education system between vocational and academic pathways. In Britain’s secondary school system, most young people are allocated to a pathway depending on their suitability (or rather, unsuitability) to the academic route.¹⁴⁷ Young people who are expected to excel in academic pathways are believed to be actively discouraged from undertaking more vocational routes.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, this ‘damaging divide’ between academic and vocational learning has been openly acknowledged by the former New Labour Government itself.¹⁴⁹ The Skills Commission’s inquiry into Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG), published in 2008, pointed out: “there is a tendency for British schools to encourage pupils to stay on into sixth form despite the availability of other options that may be better suited for individual pupils”.¹⁵⁰

While engaging in vocational education may have particular benefits for skills and well-being, vocational qualifications are not especially lucrative undertakings. In fact, analysis of Labour Force Survey data shows that no vocational qualifications below Level 3 produce significant returns.¹⁵¹ Elsewhere, research by the Social Market Foundation revealed that, excluding some exceptions, individuals with low-level NVQs have statistically significantly lower wage levels than otherwise similar individuals who lack NVQs.¹⁵² However, it was recognised that the benefits of NVQs, particularly at Level 2, were notably greater for individuals with lower educational abilities and from lower socio-economic backgrounds.¹⁵³

Careers services: information, advice and guidance

Good advice and counsel can help young people make informed choices about future courses and careers, as well as their aspirations and ambitions. As noted by the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions: “high quality information, advice and guidance (IAG) is crucial in helping young people to develop ambitious but achievable plans, which are highly likely to lead to positive outcomes.”¹⁵⁴ The careers advice service Connexions – see Box below – is a key provider of such careers information and advice.

Box 3: Connexions

Established in 2000, Connexions is a service designed to provide young people with IAG on learning and careers, as well as to provide outreach support to young people with complex needs.¹⁵⁵ Connexions deliver a number of advisory services – including careers guidance – for young people aged 13 - 19.⁴ The advice provided by Connexions covers a number of different areas, such as careers and learning, free time, health, housing, rights, relationships and money. Working in partnerships with schools, Connexions’ services are offered to all young people but are specifically targeted towards young people at risk of becoming disengaged from education and training.¹⁵⁶ Connexions also operate several schemes aimed at expanding and enhancing young people’s life skills. The service provider’s ‘First Light’ project helps children and young people who are interested in film and media develop their creativity by making short films and being involved in media projects.¹⁵⁷ Young people can also work towards a ‘Youth Achievement Award’ by working within local institutions such as schools, colleges and youth offending teams to develop vital social skills like communication, teamwork and problem solving.¹⁵⁸

Services like Connexions have most likely helped many young people into jobs; the service is reported to have played “a major part” in increasing the number of 16 year-olds remaining in full-time education, work-based training and helping to reduce youth unemployment.¹⁵⁹ However, scrutiny shows there to be significant shortcomings in Connexions’s

service provision. The 2008 Skills Commission's inquiry found that much of the advice provided to young people was not impartial and the quality of its careers guidance had been declining since 2001 (when Connexions replaced the Careers Service).¹⁶⁰ The Commission found there to be "much concern" about the provision of Careers Education and Guidance (CEG) for young people.¹⁶¹ Such concerns have been echoed elsewhere. "IAG", the Association of Teachers and Lecturers claim, "is not independent, impartial nor informative to the needs of young people".¹⁶² The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions discovered much careers advice given out in schools is dispersed by teachers and not professional advisers, despite careers advice being a professional and specialist service.¹⁶³ Its criticism of Connexions in particular is strong: "throughout our work we have barely heard a good word about the careers work of the current Connexions service".¹⁶⁴ Other critiques have been equally tough: in a report published last year, the think tank Policy Exchange, lambasted the "appalling quality" of careers advice in the UK.¹⁶⁵ Such criticisms are of particular relevance here, as poor information, advice and guidance services have been recently highlighted by the Equality and Human Rights Council as one of the biggest failings and areas for improvement in helping to engage young people who are NEET.¹⁶⁶

Work experience

Work experience placements can have a positive effect on young people – their skills, experience of and attitudes to employment – and many will provide a valuable introduction to the working world. In this respect, studies suggest that secondary school pupils perceive work-related learning to be a useful activity.¹⁶⁷ A survey of 2,000 young people in the UK aged 14 - 19 year olds, showed work experience to be considered a 'must have' among adolescents.¹⁶⁸ Work experience coordinators suggest work experience increases young people's maturity, self-confidence and motivation.¹⁶⁹ According to the CBI: "work experience has a key role to play in preparing young people for the adult world".¹⁷⁰ Indeed, work experience is not a guarantee that young people at school will not become NEET in future, but it retains a valuable role at "a formative stage in the lives of young people."¹⁷¹ Such placements – if only for a week – are recognised as having a profoundly positive impact on young people's soft skills and employability.¹⁷²

In September 2004, work-related learning became a statutory requirement for all Key Stage 4 students.¹⁷³ Work experience placements – in which students, typically from Years 10 or 11, participate in a one or two week placement in a local company or organisation – are central to this initiative. In the UK, the vast majority of Key Stage 4 students undertake work experience: a 2009 survey on pre-16 work experience in England showed about 83 per cent of Year 11 students to have completed a week's work experience.¹⁷⁴ CBI data for the same year estimates around 95 per cent of young people undertake work experience placements during the run up to their GCSE exams.¹⁷⁵

Work experience placements are offered by a variety of companies and organisations in a range of sectors as shown by the data, obtained by a survey of approximately 1,000 Year 10 students from five schools in different areas, in Figure 3 (opposite page).

Around 59 per cent of CBI companies are involved with providing work experience placements for 14 - 16 year olds; over half provide placements for 17 - 18 year olds.¹⁷⁶ Some firms have sought to convert such placements into qualifications: in 2010, McDonalds became the first UK employer to provide a GCSE-style qualification for work experience as part of a scheme to bolster young people's employability.¹⁷⁷ In coordination with the examining body, Edexcel, the global fast food franchise offers young people a qualification equivalent to one B - C grade GCSE (or a Level 2 BTEC national diploma in work skills).¹⁷⁸ The ten day placement is designed to help build teamwork and communication skills, and includes a mock interview.¹⁷⁹ However, critics have questioned the value of such qualifications and raised doubts as to whether other employers would recognise them.¹⁸⁰

While the positive effects of work experience placements have been acknowledged by some, the scheme itself has also been the recipient of staunch criticism. The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions claims that the current set-up for Key Stage 4 work experience is "seen as having little value in terms of career-related learning and development".¹⁸¹ Evidence received by the Panel suggested placements to be of little relevance to aspirations and ambitions of many young people.¹⁸² Deputy Heads have described work experience as "the most pointless part of the school year", arguing that most placements have no noticeable effect on students, who,



Figure 3: Work experience placements
Source: Hatcher, R & Le Gallais, T *The Work Experience Placements of Secondary School Students: widening horizons or reproducing social inequality* (Birmingham City University, 2008)



as a result, are often left to do mostly menial work.¹⁸³ Others point out that placements are often limited to low-level retail work or assisting in hair salons.¹⁸⁴ The aforementioned survey of 2,000 young people between 14 - 19 year olds showed that, among this cohort, more than half believed there to be not enough quality placements available, while almost a quarter pointed out that their own work experience employer had failed to provide a useful or practical placement.¹⁸⁵ A joint Edge/YouGov survey of over 2,000 young people revealed over a third to have been stuck doing “the same thing all day”.¹⁸⁶

Elsewhere, an online quantitative survey by Edge of over 5,000 young people showed only a third of this cohort agreed they had the chance to sample enough work placements to inform their career choices.¹⁸⁷ The same study suggests that young people want work experience to be more relevant and for there to be more opportunities to undertake work experience.¹⁸⁸ As shown by qualitative peer research of more than 1,000 young people, 50 per cent believe there should be a wider variety work experience opportunities available and that these could be improved by being made more relevant to learning and career choices.¹⁸⁹ According to Will Norman of the Young Foundation: “a better variety and quality of work experience would raise the young people’s aspirations and ambitions. Teenagers would have a completely different understanding of work.”¹⁹⁰ Norman calls for a social enterprise-style model, in which an independent, not-for-profit organisation specialises in designing, developing and delivering high quality work experience placements, especially in areas with high levels of worklessness and unemployment.¹⁹¹

Mindful of such criticisms of there being a limited number of quality placements, recent evidence has emerged suggesting that some students may have greater difficulty in accessing high-quality, professional placements than others. Hatcher and Le Gallais, in their 2008 study, *The work experience placements of secondary school students: widening horizons or reproducing social inequality*, examined five secondary schools in five areas of the UK: Devon, Bedford, Cumbria, Essex and Avon, the last of which selected students according to their ability.¹⁹² Using Free School Meals (FSM) as a proxy with which to measure the socio-economic status of the schools’ student populations, the schools were categorised into three distinct groups: high socio-economic status (Avon), middle socio-economic status (Cumbria and Bedford) and low socio-economic status (Devon and

Essex).¹⁹³ They found that some employers preferred to take students from higher socio-economic schools for work experience placements; there was a “significant correlation” between the socio-economic status of schools and the social status of work places.¹⁹⁴ They note:

“The pattern of work placements at Avon, the selective school with a very low FSM index, was significantly different to Essex and Devon, with a wider range of work placements and a much higher proportion of students in professional or quasi-professional placements.”¹⁹⁵

Also, they note that certain placements have particular statuses attached to them.¹⁹⁶ Working in a shop was perceived to be a significant marker of class boundaries.¹⁹⁷ At Avon (a school with high socio-economic status) and Bedford (mid-socio-economic), “undesirable working class occupations were exemplified by working in shops”.¹⁹⁸

At present, there appears to be but a limited selection of studies on accessibility to high quality work experience placements. Hatcher and Le Gallais’s study, while perhaps not necessarily representative of trends nationwide, is nonetheless highly informative. This considered, incidences of wealthier parents paying – often thousands of pounds – for their children to undertake work experience placements at art galleries, public relations agencies and financial consultancies, among others, are well documented.¹⁹⁹ Indeed, parents’ financial capital as well as the professional connections and informal networks of family and friends, can be highly beneficial to their children’s ability to secure quality placements.²⁰⁰ Ultimately, while a dearth of in-depth research on accessibility to high quality work experience placements makes it difficult to draw comprehensive conclusions (but does provide much room for further work), such studies are informative.

Part 2: post-school programmes and pathways

As part of the Education and Skills Act, 2007 - 08, the participation age – in which young people must be undertaking some sort of education or training (providing they are not already in employment) – is to be raised to age 18 by 2015. Should a young person decide to leave mainstream education at 16 years old, undertaking an apprenticeship or internship could help them build their professional and soft skills and boost their employability.

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are a form of vocational training. Apprentices can earn a wage, while they learn set skills. For hundreds of years, young people the world over have undertaken apprenticeships in trades, crafts and manufacturing.²⁰¹ For professions such as journalism and engineering, apprenticeships were once perceived to be the typical, traditional route to establishing a career in that industry.²⁰² In 1960s Britain, there were approximately 240,000 apprentices.²⁰³ However, numbers of traditional apprenticeships declined dramatically in the latter part of the twentieth century – dropping from 171,000 in 1968 to 34,500 in 1990.²⁰⁴ This descent is largely attributed to wider socio-

economic changes at the time: the overall decline of Britain's manufacturing industry; the fall in membership and influence of trade unions; weakening contractual agreements and a drop in the demand for goods produced by trades with apprentices.²⁰⁵

Apprenticeships can greatly improve young people's well-being by building soft skills and boosting confidence.²⁰⁶ In *Opening Doors to Apprenticeships*, a report published earlier this year by the Young Foundation, Anderson notes: "it is clear that apprenticeships can play an important and pivotal role in developing the skills of young people as they make the transition to adulthood".²⁰⁷ Many young people perceive the salaries attached to apprenticeships as more 'adult' and this helps provide them a real sense of progression while increasing their own self-worth.²⁰⁸ That undertaking an

Box 4: Apprenticeships

Britain's apprenticeships system has been repeatedly reformed and remodelled over the last thirty years.²⁰⁹ The 1980s saw the introduction of a new qualifications framework and the formation of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) at Levels 1 - 5.²¹⁰ Modern Apprenticeships for 16 - 24 year olds were established in 1994, offering a Level 3 NVQ and were mostly undertaken by employees who had been afforded leave for off-the-job learning.²¹¹ In 1997 there were around 75,000 Modern Apprentices.²¹² However, NVQ Level 3 proved unattainable for many apprentices and in 2000 an existing programme – the National Traineeship – was rebranded as NVQ Level 2 apprenticeships.²¹³ In 2001, the Learning and Skills Council was put in charge of distributing funding for apprenticeships.²¹⁴ In 2004, apprenticeships were again rebranded: Modern Apprenticeships became Apprenticeships (Level 2) and Advanced Apprenticeships (Level 3); for young people aged 14 - 16, Young Apprenticeships were introduced.²¹⁵ More recently, the former Government's Department for Children, Schools and Families launched the Apprentice Grant for Employers: a £2,500 grant for businesses recruiting 16 - 17 year old apprentices.

The current apprenticeships system is divided into four streams. These are:

- ▶ Apprenticeships (Level 2): these make up the majority of overall numbers of apprenticeships;
- ▶ Advanced Apprenticeships (Level 3): these constitute around a third of all overall numbers;
- ▶ Programme-led Apprenticeships, which enable learners to train for an apprenticeship without having an employee status; and
- ▶ Higher Apprenticeships: (Level 4) these are limited to IT and Engineering industries.^{5, 216}

In 2009 the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills launched its 2009 Skills Strategy. Among its aims was to double the number of Advanced Apprenticeships for young people between 19 - 30 years old, the building of stronger pathways to higher education for apprentices, and creating 360,000 apprenticeship placements by 2020.²¹⁷ In April that year, responsibility for delivering government policy on apprenticeships was passed over to the National Apprenticeships Service (NAS).²¹⁸ The NAS is in charge of coordinating funding for apprenticeships; it also acts as a national information and marketing service and has ownership over the Apprenticeships 'blueprint'.²¹⁹ Ultimately, the NAS retains accountability for the achievement of national targets.²²⁰

apprenticeship can have a profoundly positive impact on a young person's character capabilities, work-readiness and well-being is apparent from our analysis of the 1970 British Cohort Study. One of the aims of this study was to compare the attitudes and feelings towards skills and success felt by those who had completed an apprenticeship and those who had not. Within the sample size of around 8,000 only a small number – 66 – had completed an apprenticeship, but the results of the study remain highly revealing. Among the cohorts surveyed, apprentices were more likely to feel they could run their life the way they wanted (98 per cent, as opposed to 95 per cent of the general population); more likely to have never felt hopeless (92 per cent compared with 75 per cent for non-apprentices); and notably more confident in their ability to solve problems, learn new skills and work in team. Ultimately, the majority of answers from those who had completed an apprenticeship indicated they were more confident, happy, and skilled than their non-apprentice contemporaries.

An apprenticeship does not constitute a qualification in its own right; rather, it is a framework containing different qualifications, all of which must be passed to complete the framework. Programmes are designed by the relevant Skills Sector Council and must include several elements of the apprenticeships 'blueprint': NVQs, technical certificates, functional skills and a module on employment rights and responsibilities.²²¹ The majority of apprenticeships fall into 12 categories: construction, hairdressing, childcare and early years, business administration, hospitality, customer care, health and social care, engineering, plumbing, electro-technical, vehicle maintenance and retail.²²² Schemes run by well-respected employers like Rolls Royce, BT and Honda are consistently oversubscribed.²²³ Other apprenticeships frameworks include training in accounting, housing, travel and tourism and 'nail services'.²²⁴

In addition to soft skill benefits – shown in our analysis of the 1970 British Cohort Study – apprenticeships can also result in real economic benefits, especially for those who leave school with no qualifications. Studies show that for this cohort completing an apprenticeship can produce a wage return 13 per cent higher than that of individuals who enter the labour market with no qualifications or apprenticeship.⁶⁻²²⁵ Similarly, those who have GCSE grades D - F or grades A - C can earn between 4 - 9 per cent more with an apprenticeship qualification than those without²²⁶

Nevertheless, it is important to note that research suggests that, unfortunately, undertaking an apprenticeship does not bring about a significant return to women.²²⁷ For men, however, completing an apprenticeship-training scheme can increase wages by 7 per cent, keeping other factors constant.²²⁸ That undertaking an apprenticeship can produce a significant return for young males without any prior qualifications, suggests that this pathway can have a profoundly positive effect on the work-readiness and employability of many at risk and disadvantaged young people.

This considered – and mindful of the criticisms of the current education system's approach to vocational education, crafts and trades – there remains much tension between efforts to present apprenticeships as something of a 'solution' to the NEET issue and to position apprenticeships within mainstream education as an alternative, but equally valuable, pathway to the 'academic route'. As pointed out by Lucas et al, the 'mainstreaming' and 'inclusion' agendas are somewhat conflicting.²²⁹ However, there is not scope here for proper evaluation of this tension, and it remains apparent that apprenticeships produce particular benefits for disadvantaged young people and those vulnerable to becoming NEET.

Internships

For many professions, internships can be an essential route on the pathway to a career – a “rung on the ladder of success”.²³⁰ Internships can help give prospective employees “the edge that employers demand”.²³¹ Furthermore, as pointed out by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, internships can be vital for boosting employability and further developing soft skills like teamwork and communication.²³² In some instances securing an internship can significantly increase an individual's chances of employment.²³³ Evidence suggests students are now unlikely to progress in particular professions like veterinary sciences or journalism without a minimum amount of work experience.²³⁴ However, the majority of internships do appear to be aimed primarily at graduates – automatically excluding many young people without a degree or with low qualifications. Barriers to accessing opportunities that help boost employability and build soft skills, is the focus of the next section of this paper.



5. Equal opportunities: access for at risk groups

Problems with pathways part 1: apprenticeships

In recent times, both the former Labour Government and new Coalition administration has sought to revitalise apprenticeships as part of a new approach to education for 14 - 19 year olds. A central component of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act is the pledge of an 'Apprenticeship Offer' – the assurance that from 2013, all young people who wish to undertake an apprenticeship and meet the minimum entry requirements are guaranteed a placement.²³⁵ However, there are concerns that this 'offer' to 'suitably qualified' young people will have a negative effect on more disadvantaged young people – young people, like many Foyer residents, who lack the entry qualifications to access such opportunities.²³⁶ In addition to this problem, there are a range of other issues that can affect accessibility for at risk groups.

Low supply

While apprenticeships can be a valuable means of building soft skills and boosting employability, there are a variety of problems with current provision. There has been an apparent decline in provision for younger age groups. Numbers of apprenticeships have increased dramatically in recent years – from approximately 75,000 in 1997 to 224,000 in 2008.²³⁷ However, this is primarily due to an expansion in expenditure and provision for apprenticeships aged 25 years or older.²³⁸ This cohort aside, the number of 16 - 18 year olds on apprenticeships reportedly fell 16.1 per cent between 2007 - 08.²³⁹ During this same period, apprenticeships for 19 - 24 year olds dropped by 3.7 per cent.²⁴⁰ Higher skilled apprenticeships have also declined in availability; Level 3 apprenticeships have fallen in number every year between 1998 - 99 and 2005 - 06.²⁴¹

Low completion rates

Many of the available figures account for apprenticeships starts; yet, many of those who begin an apprenticeship never complete their training. In 2000 - 01, 77 per cent of apprentices failed to complete their framework.²⁴² For some industries, this was still the case in 2005 - 06. Level 2 apprenticeships – in health and social care, hospitality and catering, plumbing and retail – had completion rates of below 50 per cent.²⁴³ Less than one in ten vehicle maintenance and repair apprenticeships finished their training.²⁴⁴ Poor completion rates also plagued higher skilled apprenticeships:

an analysis of 15 large industry sectors revealed eight had Level 3 completion rates of less than 50 per cent.²⁴⁵ Among those explanations given for the failure to finish the course of the programme, is that many young people lack the necessary skills to do so – as pointed out by the Social Market Foundation, two thirds of those starting an advanced apprenticeship at Level 3 do not have a Level 2 qualification.²⁴⁶ A small-scale study by the think tank ippr, showed low levels of pay (see below) and poor quality training to be regular reasons for dropping out of an apprenticeship.²⁴⁷

Poor progression rates

Few apprentices move into employment or further education. In 2007 - 08, only 0.2 per cent of apprentices advanced into further or higher education and few moved into the professions.²⁴⁸ Writing in their third report of the 2007 - 08 session, the House of Lord Economic Affairs Committee noted: "we were left with the strong impression that the Government is doing very little to establish a clear path from apprenticeships to higher levels of education".²⁴⁹

Qualifications as barriers to entry

Many professions – particularly in high-skill sectors – now require Level 4 qualifications (university degrees). For example, while it is possible to enter the engineering sector via vocational routes such as apprenticeships, a degree from university is now frequently requisite to progress to the top levels of the profession.²⁵⁰ Mindful that a third of Foyer residents have no qualifications whatsoever, and only 11 per cent have a qualification higher than Level 2, high skilled apprenticeships appear to be out of reach for many disadvantaged young people.

Low pay

Apprenticeships are poorly paid. In this respect, ippr's recent evidence to the Low Pay Commission is highly informative. The study points out that the majority of apprentices are exempt from the minimum wage legislation.²⁵¹ Apprentices under the age of 19 are not eligible for the minimum wage; apprentices older than 19 years are not eligible in their first year of being an apprentice.²⁵² ippr's study of 160 apprentices across various sectors showed many young people to be unhappy with their pay level, feeling that it failed to reflect the work they did and the contribution they made to the organisation.²⁵³ The study also showed rates of pay to be

“ The most creative, socially active occupations at the heart of the expanding social economy require a period of unpaid work, restricting access to those who can afford it. ”

Hannon, C & Timms, C *Anatomy of Youth (Demos, 2010)*

particularly low in the hairdressing industry, which tends to mostly employ female apprentices.²⁵⁴ Low pay, as well as its apparent connection with a lack of appreciation or value awarded to the work being done, may pose a significant barrier to disadvantaged young people accessing such opportunities.

Benefit issues

Complex rules and regulations regarding the benefits and tax credit system can also create barriers for young people who want to undertake an apprenticeship. Not only are young people under 19 years old not eligible for the minimum wage²⁵⁵ – as noted above – but most of those between 16 - 17 years old are also not eligible to receive Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), and so are heavily reliant on what pay they receive from their Work-Based Learning placement.²⁵⁶ Furthermore, many of those who are old enough to receive JSA can only do so if they are actively seeking and available for work and are working for less than 16 hours a week²⁵⁷ – regulations that may well rule out many young apprentices from receiving extra financial support. Interaction between apprentice pay and benefit entitlement is recognised as an area that requires reconsideration and further research.²⁵⁸ This considered, this report recommends that current JSA eligibility criteria be seriously reviewed.

Problems with pathways part 2: internships

Undertaking an internship can provide a young person with valuable work experience; build and develop a variety of skills and boost their employability; and enable them to acquire contacts and networks, which may help their chances to gain employment in the future. Opportunities to obtain such experience, however, are not fairly distributed; the costs of undertaking an internship can be prohibitive. According to the final report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, a person will be less able to undertake an internship if they

- ▶ lack the financial resources to work for free;
- ▶ lack the means to travel to or live near the place of work; and/or
- ▶ come from a background where such opportunities are never considered.²⁵⁹

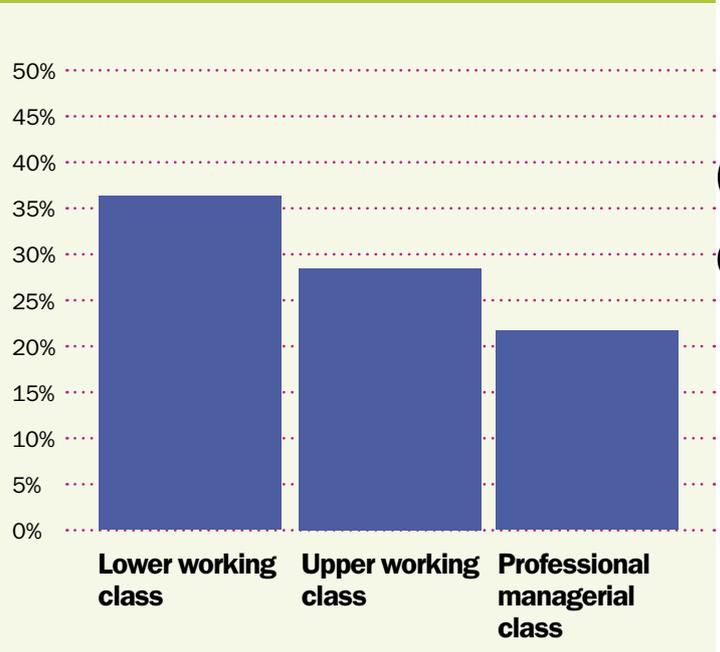
The Panel estimates a two-week internship to cost as much as £500 for food, travel and accommodation, before

taking into account the loss of earnings incurred as a result of undertaking a low or unpaid internship.²⁶⁰ Frequently, such opportunities are beyond the means of low - or even average – income families or individuals with sparse financial resources.²⁶¹ This is well outlined by the data presented in Figure 4 below.

In addition to economic barriers, there are also significant network-related barriers to undertaking internships. As pointed out by the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions: “securing an internship all too often depends on who you know not what you know”.²⁶² Indeed, people who come from a background in which internships are more commonplace are: (a) more likely to know about such opportunities, and (b) more likely to know what skills and qualities are sought after by such schemes.²⁶³ Finally, as a work experience opportunity, internships are frequently aimed at graduates as something

Figure 4: Percentage of respondents stating that available finances impacted on their educational decisions

The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions *Unleashing Aspiration: The Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions* (Cabinet Office, 2009)



to strengthen the merits of the degree. Former government ministers have described them as a good way for graduates to ‘kick-start’ their careers.²⁶⁴ This positioning is reinforced by others in the private sector: according to Michael Cox, a careers consultant: “the one thing graduates need is experience and an internship would give them that to add to their degree”. Indeed, that the National Internship Scheme was last year renamed by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills as ‘The Graduate Talent Pool’ serves to stress this point even further.²⁶⁶

All this considered, despite being a valuable opportunity to gain vital work experience, build professional skills and develop a network of useful contacts; internships appear to remain an exclusive and expensive experience that few non-graduates from low-income backgrounds – let alone those with complex multiple needs who are currently NEET – can easily access.

Access and at risk groups

Overview

Many young people who can be considered ‘at risk’, face greater disadvantages in accessing and benefiting from apprenticeships. For some, simple but significant practical problems can restrict accessing information about such opportunities and their benefits – problems such as lack of access to a computer and low confidence in navigating the Internet can result in some young people not being able to gain the benefits of initiatives like the Apprenticeship Vacancies service and find out about local apprenticeship opportunities available to them.²⁶⁷

Young homeless people

Many young people who are homeless (and indeed their older counterparts) will be further disadvantaged by:

- ▶ lack of access to appropriate, work-related clothing;
- ▶ not having a current mailing address;
- ▶ costly public transport; and
- ▶ lack of confidence or competence with job searching and tasks like filling out a job application.²⁶⁸

Qualification and education trends among both Foyer residents and the wider homeless population appear

strikingly similar. As aforementioned, a third of young people entering Foyers do so without any recognised qualifications; less than a third have qualifications at Level 1; just over a fifth have qualifications at a Level 3 or above.²⁶⁹ Elsewhere, a survey of 1,400 homeless people revealed just over a third to have no qualifications at all and only 13 per cent had qualifications at Level 3.²⁷⁰ That so many internship and high-skilled apprenticeship placements now require high qualifications – if not undergraduate degrees – leaves this cohort with significant barriers to accessing such opportunities.

Young offenders

For offenders young and old alike, achieving stable employment is considered critical to successful rehabilitation.²⁷¹ According to the Howard League for Penal Reform, the majority of male young offenders believe gaining employment would help prevent them reoffending.²⁷² However, many young offenders lose their jobs while inside. In their 2007 report *Getting Out to Work: employing young adults with convictions*, Business in the Community estimate two thirds of young offenders lose their jobs in prison; three quarters of young offenders have no job following their release.²⁷³

For a cohort that, generally, suffers from multiple problems – some of which may be compounded by having a criminal conviction or having spent time in prison – engaging in education, employment or training while inside could help build their skills and improve their employment prospects when they are released. Yet, many young offenders suffer from a scarcity of adequate provision: research by the Youth Justice Board reveals between only 35 - 45 per cent of young people in the youth justice system receives full-time education, training or employment.²⁷⁴ More than a quarter of young people in the youth justice system have no education, employment or training provision arranged for them at all.²⁷⁵

For those that do have access to education or training programmes in custody, these are often limited in provision. Studies by the Transition to Adulthood Alliance (T2AA) show that young offenders spent an average of just eight hours per week on educational activities in 2007.²⁷⁶ Some young offenders will go on to undertake education or training and attain qualifications while in prison. However, according to the T2AA, that these young people acquired their qualifications

in prison can then be held against them by employers.²⁷⁷ Mindful of this, T2AA's recommendation of partnering young offenders institutes with local further education colleges, so that young offenders' qualifications are properly recognised outside of prison, may well be worth considering.²⁷⁸ Finally, with respect to those who serve sentences of six months or longer, this period of time is not allowed to be considered as a period of unemployment, which leaves many young offenders ineligible for recruitment subsidies designed to incentivise employers in hiring the long term unemployed.²⁷⁹

Disadvantaged young people – young people not in education, employment or training, former young offenders, young people leaving care, those with no qualifications; many will fall into multiple categories – face serious barriers to opportunities to gain valuable work experience, broaden and build their soft skills base, and secure a foothold on the path to meaningful employment. Apprenticeships and internships may be out of reach for some, but there are a variety of programmes – like the Foyer Federation's Working Assets programme (see the next chapter) – which can help young people gain valuable experience, develop their soft skills and significantly improve their work-readiness. This considered, the Foyer Federation and schemes like Working Assets, were the subject of the research for this report and form the focus of the next section.

6. Case study: the Foyer Federation

Background

First established in 1992, the Foyer Federation develops and encourages new approaches to supporting young people at risk as they make their transition to adulthood.²⁸⁰ The Foyer Federation works mainly through a network of over 100 accredited Foyers across the country, where disadvantaged young people between 16 - 25 years old are offered opportunities to develop their skills for independence, foster resilience and self-confidence and, for many, re-build relationships with family.²⁸¹ At the heart of the Foyer approach is a formal commitment between the young person and the Foyer: young people are provided with support services specific to their needs but are expected in return to engage in their own development. The Foyer Federation help to develop and pilot accredited learning programmes; initiatives such as health and well-being and early intervention, as well as developing and implementing quality assurance systems. Many of the programmes the Foyer Federation pilot and develop are designed to help young people reconnect with education, employment or training.²⁸²

Residents

Each year, around 10,000 young people in Foyers across the country, are re-connected with personal development opportunities.²⁸³ The vast majority of residents are under 21 years of age.²⁸⁴ Most need help with basic lifestyle skills such as personal health and hygiene, budgeting and cooking.²⁸⁵⁻²⁸⁶ Some have past criminal convictions.²⁸⁷ Many Foyer residents are disconnected from the labour market; large proportions of this cohort are NEET. A 2007 survey of over 2,500 residents showed that at the time of entering Foyers, only 17 per cent were in employment.²⁸⁸ Almost a third of young people entering Foyers have no qualifications and at the time of entry only 13.8 per cent were undertaking government training programmes.²⁸⁹ The same study showed there to be even lower levels of engagement with education: at time of entry, less than a quarter were in further education; only 2 per cent had enrolled in higher education.²⁹⁰

The impact of the economic crisis has been particularly severe for young people and has had a profound effect on services provided for young people by organisations like the Foyer Federation and The Prince's Trust.²⁹¹ By March 2009, over a third of Foyers had witnessed an increase in referrals to their services; more than half saw a rise in referrals of

young people who were NEET.²⁹² Around 74 per cent of Foyers witnessed an increase in the number of young people who were 'work ready' but unable to find employment.²⁹³ During the downturn, Foyers across the country reported a rise in the number of residents who had lost their jobs while living at a Foyer or had been forced to discontinue their studies for economic reasons.²⁹⁴ As noted by Foyer Federation staff, the recession resulted in fewer job opportunities, greater competition for the jobs that are available and a growing demand for training programmes.²⁹⁵

Activities

The Foyer Federation develops a range of projects and programmes designed to help young people build life skills and boost employability:

The Foyer Federation Resettlement and Rehabilitation Strategy²⁹⁶

Drafted in early 2010, the Foyer Federation Resettlement and Rehabilitation Strategy aims to help young offenders rehabilitate back into the community and to break the cycle of recidivism. The approach adopted by the strategy advocates progressive interventions designed to develop skills and resilience and change behaviour. The scheme is to be delivered using existing Foyers and other youth projects to help coordinate the accommodation and support services that young offenders need. The strategy itself comprises several components:

- ▶ establishing effective, formal partnerships with Youth Offending Teams;
- ▶ helping deliver Intensive Support and Supervision Programmes and community sentences;
- ▶ developing 'encounter' programmes in which Foyer Federation residents can meet with prisoners as part of a coherent crime prevention programme. The programme also promotes the use of former offenders as mentors;
- ▶ creating family reconciliation services for offenders excluded from their families;
- ▶ establishing Foyers as a platform for the delivery of the Youth Crime Action Plan.



Social Care Programme²⁹⁷

The Foyer Federation also provides a social care programme, in partnership with Skills for Care, throughout the Foyer network. The programme, which was first scoped in 2004, was rapidly taken up by Foyers across the country and by 2007 - 08, 50 per cent of Foyers offered placements to social work students. By September 2008 over 65 Foyers were taking on social work students. Funded by the Skills for Care Practice Learning Taskforce, placements are largely self-sustaining and bring a variety of benefits to individual Foyers. Practical learning is integral to the scheme: students participating in the programme must spend a minimum of 200 days of their training on work placements and are assessed on their performance throughout this period. Practitioners and staff alike all have access to opportunities for professional development and 39 per cent of students take up positions in organisations where they undertook their practice-learning placement.

MyNav²⁹⁸

Funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, MyNav aims to utilise informal learning and new media technology to help young people navigate their journey to adulthood. Many of the young people in Foyers who engage in informal learning programmes are NEET and schemes like MyNav are believed to help them develop their skills and resources. MyNav uses Web 2.0 technology to help young people engage in learning (as well as help staff work in more creative and exciting ways). The scheme helps young participants to bolster confidence, build their skills and boost emotional well-being by setting them new goals and challenges. Young people on the MyNav scheme are encouraged to become 'active producers and consumers of learning'; it encourages peer-to-peer learning. Participants use daily activities and informal learning experiences to acquire knowledge and skills, and to share these with others. For example, one participant who wanted to be a designer was allowed to design a wall pattern for his friend and experiment using different shapes to create different designs. The navigation process itself begins with a key worker working on a one-to-one basis with young people, making them aware of the support services available to them. Young people then set and track their needs and goals, developing a support plan that becomes the main driver of

achievement throughout the process and helps develop their goals and aspirations, while giving them ownership of the support plan itself.

Working Assets

Funded by the Tenants Services Authority through the innovation and best practice programme established under the Housing Corporation in 2008, the Foyer Federation's Working Assets project is designed to examine employability issues faced by young people.²⁹⁹ Established in 2008, the programme seeks to adopt a new response to young people's experience of disadvantage.³⁰⁰ The underlying premise of the programme is the idea of an aspirational 'deal' between young people and their communities: young people must express the way in which they can find an employable role in their community; the community must enable access for young people to contribute their talents, efforts and energies.³⁰¹ The first Working Assets project was piloted in partnership with Axiom Housing Association in Peterborough Foyer – see Box 5 on the next page – but is now being offered to other Foyers.³⁰²

Box 5: Working Assets and the Peterborough Foyer Community Garden Project ³⁰³

Funded by the Foyer Federation and Tenant Services Authority, this pilot involved a 'Dragon's Den'-style selection process in which young people were invited to pitch to a panel their ideas for projects that they believed could help improve their local communities. Young people were encouraged to draw upon their own experiences and to identify ideas that would impact upon the skills, resources and opportunities available to them. Among the pitches included ideas for a community arts project and a bicycle recycling initiative. Peterborough Foyer's community garden project was chosen as the pilot.

Following the selection, a project team was chosen and Foyer residents were invited to help put together an action plan. The project was overseen by a support worker who adopted a life coaching approach – developed by the Foyer Federation – to help empower young people participating in the project. Team building and mentoring sessions were then introduced to help Foyer residents build their confidence and sustain their levels of motivation. The Foyer Federation worked with staff at Peterborough Foyer, developing the support and training services that the Foyer offers so as to ensure that residents on the project had the requisite documentation, knowledge and job searching skills needed to prepare for future employment. The young people participating in the pilot were asked to keep a pilot diary – reflecting on their own learning and skills development. A work-readiness template was then developed in collaboration with residents involved in the project and a training session was undertaken to enable the Foyer to incorporate a positive, asset-building (an asset training model was designed and developed by the Foyer Federation) focus into its work and services.

Residents involved in the project gave a variety of reasons for the motivation behind their involvement: some were interested in gardening; others wanted to start their own business. One resident said she felt pressured to take jobs she was not interested in and that participating in the project could help her learn transferable skills that she could then take to a job.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

There is strong and solid evidence that undertaking high-skill, meaningful work experience, internships and apprenticeships can have a profoundly positive effect on young people's employability, life skills and life chances. Making such opportunities more accessible to young people, and particularly those who are disadvantaged and at risk of becoming, or remaining, NEET is therefore a priority for policy aimed at creating a fairer society. Recommendations, therefore, focus on seven key areas:

Establish a code of best practice

The evidence shows that quality makes a huge difference to the experience of an apprentice or intern. We support the recommendation of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, that a Code of Best Practice be established, inviting employers and providers of apprenticeships and internships to sign-up and be assessed by an independent body.

While we support the findings of the Panel, if we are to combat the structural drivers of long term unemployment and NEETs, policy needs to go further and target the most deprived and vulnerable groups.

Targeted support for young offenders and care leavers

There is a serious need to improve the opportunities for vulnerable young people – particularly those leaving care and former young offenders who lack access to social networks. Employers should be encouraged to link up to educational, care and young offenders' institutions in order to help facilitate access to work experience and training opportunities, and also so as to ensure that any training undertaken or qualifications achieved are fully recognised by prospective employers.

Government has a role in providing a meaningful incentive structure – one which both encourages employers to offer placements and encourages high quality and useful experience, which supports the development of social and life skills. Our research suggests that this requires structured placements in which meaningful tasks are allocated and there are clear reporting lines with mentoring/coaching provided in-house.

Incentivising opportunities

The Government should offer performance-based, financial incentives in the form of a 'pay-back' scheme to employers that provide work experience opportunities for disadvantaged and at risk young people. Employers should receive a payment if their intern has found stable employment within a year after completing the placement. This scheme would help encourage employers to take on and train young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and help to change the culture around high quality placements.

This scheme would also ensure that incentivising internships is not an additional cost to the Government since the cost of paying host companies is balanced by the saving of a structurally unemployed young person coming off out of work benefits.

Establish a network for employers to share experiences

There is space for a nationwide internship network, allowing companies and businesses to share experiences of working with former young offenders and at risk young people and draw awareness to the wider socio-economic benefits of offering high-skill work experience opportunities to this cohort.

In order that young people are ready to benefit from work experience opportunities, more needs to be done to improve their skills and capabilities. The charity sector has a vital role to play in delivering work-readiness programmes, and there are already examples of very successful albeit small-scale schemes in operation.

Ensure VCS organisations have the resources for work-readiness schemes

The election of the Liberal-Conservative Coalition Government and the introduction of the 'Big Society' agenda presents a real opportunity to empower VCS organisations to deliver work-readiness programmes and employability schemes. The Foyer Federation's Working Assets programme is a good example of this but there are several similar schemes being offered elsewhere. Currently, there is little opportunity for charities to build upon such programmes and serve a wider client base. Given that there are around 85,000 NEETs in England, there is a clear demand for programmes which focus on developing life skills and employability.

The new Government should ensure that VCS organisations have the upfront financial resources they need to develop, improve, provide and replicate such services. In addition there is a need to evaluate and audit the efficacy of work-readiness schemes to ensure we are offering disadvantaged young people the best chance of success. Allowing accredited organisations better access to funding streams such as those provided by the Big Society Bank would be fundamental to achieving this aim.

Fast-track at risk young people to specialist service providers

We recommend a redesign of the current welfare-to-work system with special regards to young people who are considered to be severely disadvantaged and lacking life

skills. When coming into contact with state support services like Job Centre Plus, young people who are considered to be severely disadvantaged and lacking life skills should undergo a basic 'capabilities test', in which they are assessed for social and work-readiness skills. Those young people who are found to be lacking such skills should be fast-tracked to specialist service providers like Foyers, so that they may benefit from work-readiness programmes and employability schemes like the Working Assets programme.

Review JSA eligibility

The JSA system should be reviewed to ensure that it does not disincentivise young people – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds from undertaking work experience and internships. There is some suggestion that the technical difficulty of organising a 'break' from JSA to undertake short stints of paid or unpaid work experience may impact on take-up by the most deprived young people.

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