

---

## INCREASING PARTICIPATION: UNDERSTANDING YOUNG PEOPLE WHO DO NOT PARTICIPATE IN EDUCATION OR TRAINING AT 16 OR 17

---

*Thomas Spielhofer, Tom Benton, Kelly Evans, Gill Featherstone, Sarah Golden, Julie Nelson and Paula Smith*

*National Foundation for Educational Research*

### Background

This summary presents key findings from research commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families aimed at exploring the characteristics and experiences of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) or in jobs without training (JWT). This study combined three complementary research methods, including a literature review, statistical analysis of Youth Cohort Study data and interviews with 120 young people and 39 professionals. These methods were used to construct a segmentation of these 'groups' of young people, their characteristics and motivations, and the strategies that are likely to re-engage them in education or training.

### Key findings

- The statistical segmentation analysis confirmed that there are segments within the larger groups of young people who are NEET and in JWT and that there are distinct differences between these segments.
- The research suggests that more than two-fifths of young people who are NEET are generally positive about learning and are very likely to participate in education or training in the short-term. A similar proportion faces a lot of personal and structural barriers, and are likely to remain NEET in the medium-term. A fifth of young people were classified as 'undecided NEET' - they do not face significant personal barriers to participating in education or training, but are dissatisfied with the available opportunities.
- Within the JWT group, almost half are very content with their work and likely to remain in a JWT in the long-term. A third of young people in this group were found to be at risk of becoming NEET in the future, while 17 per cent had taken a JWT as a stop-gap solution before re-engaging in education or training.
- Interviews with 120 young people currently or previously NEET or in a JWT confirmed the validity of the segmentation analysis and showed that different policy solutions are needed to engage or re-engage the different segments of young people.
- The research suggested that in order to increase participation, young people need better information, advice and guidance before leaving learning or while in jobs without training to increase their awareness of the learning options available to them and enable them to make more informed choices.
- The study also identified a need for more flexible and appropriate post-16 provision suitable for all young people aged 16 and 17 in terms of content, delivery and timing.

## Aims and objectives

The main aim of this study was to achieve a better understanding of those who are either NEET or in JWT at 16 and 17 by providing a more detailed breakdown of the 'types' of young people within these two categories, the structural and personal issues they face and the likely routes into participation in learning for each of them. There were several objectives underlying this main aim of the study. The main ones included:

- Quantifying the segments of young people aged 16 and 17 categorised as being NEET or in JWT
- Exploring the main reasons why the different segments do not participate in learning and what strategies and support would be most likely to persuade or enable them to do so
- Examining how those currently NEET or in JWT would respond to being compelled to engage in education or training.

## Summary of research methods

In order to address the aims and objectives outlined above, a mixed methodology approach was adopted that incorporated three key strands as follows:

- Latent class analysis of Youth Cohort Study (YCS) data to segment young people who are NEET or in JWT
- Review of existing literature relating to young people who are NEET or in JWT
- Qualitative interviews in four Local Authorities with 120 young people who were NEET, in JWT or previously NEET or in JWT and now engaged in education or training, and 39 professionals who work with such young people.

## What does the statistical analysis of the YCS data reveal?

The statistical segmentation analysis confirmed that there are segments within the larger groups of young people who are NEET and in JWT and that there are distinct differences between these segments. Within the **NEET group**, the largest sub-group (about 41 per cent) included those who were '**open to learning NEET**'. These young people were most likely to re-engage in education or training in the short-term and tended to have higher levels of attainment and a more positive

attitude to school. The second largest sub-group within the NEET group (38 per cent) were those who were '**sustained NEET**'. They were characterised by their negative experience of school, higher levels of truancy and exclusion and lack of educational attainment. This group were most likely to remain NEET in the medium-term. The third sub-group, which represented 22 per cent of young people who were NEET, was the '**undecided NEET**' group. These young people were similar in some respects, such as their attainment levels, to those who were 'open to learning NEET'. However, they seemed to be dissatisfied with the available opportunities and their ability to access what they wanted to do.

Within the **JWT group**, the largest sub-group included those who were '**sustained in a JWT**' (48 per cent). These young people were most likely to continue to be in a JWT in the medium-term and appeared to be content with this. Young people who were in a JWT but were '**at risk of becoming NEET**' were the second largest sub-group (35 per cent). Young people in this sub-group were characterised by having a more negative experience of school and higher levels of truancy and exclusion. They tended to be less optimistic about the future and to feel that they did not have sufficient qualifications to make the progress they would like. The third sub-group included those who were '**transitional in a JWT**' (17 per cent). These young people were similar to the 'open to learning NEET' group in so far as they appeared to have made a transition at the end of Year 11 that was not right for them and had later re-engaged in education and training in the short-term.

## What does the review of the research literature suggest?

The review of previous research confirmed the finding of the segmentation analysis that young people who are not in education or training are not a homogeneous group. However, few research studies suggest how best to 'deconstruct' or understand this 'group', choosing to illustrate common characteristics of such young people, in order to make sense of their circumstances and choices. Research studies relating to young people who were **NEET** were often designed to investigate the issues affecting those in the most disadvantaged of circumstances, and so tended to present a rather narrow perspective. Thus, many of the studies reviewed explored issues affecting those who would be closely aligned to the 'sustained NEET' sub-group identified in our segmentation analysis, rather than those affecting young people who

were NEET as a whole. Although fewer research studies relating to young people in **JWT** were identified, there was an interesting divergence of opinion about the characteristics of such young people. This hinged upon the sampling strategies adopted by different research studies, with some focusing upon young people who were in **JWT** and in very disadvantaged circumstances, and others identifying young people in **JWT** whose situations were relatively comfortable, and who felt they were in charge of their personal destinies.

Key themes emerging through the literature, especially in relation to young people who were **NEET** included having education or learning disadvantages, being in difficult personal circumstances and being affected by external structural factors. However, some authors suggest that some young people make a conscious 'choice' not to participate (for example, by adopting an 'anti-learning culture' as a means of gaining credibility and status with peers). Young people in **JWT** were generally felt to be affected less (although still to a certain extent) by the issues outlined above. Their primary motivation was often reported to be financial reward, with a certain willingness to re-engage with training, but not at the expense of foregoing earnings.

#### **What do the interviews with young people who were NEET indicate?**

Interviews with 40 young people who were **NEET** confirmed that this 'group' is not homogenous and that it is possible to identify segments of young people with distinct experiences, motivations and probabilities of re-engaging. Many interviewees had negative experiences of school and faced issues such as bullying, exclusion, behavioural difficulties, learning difficulties and stress. However those who were categorised as 'sustained **NEET**' were more likely than any other group to have experienced more than one of these issues whilst at school. Young people in the 'sustained **NEET**' group were most likely to have no qualifications or to have achieved below Level 1, while most of those 'open to learning **NEET**' had attained Level 2 at the end of Year 11. Young people classified as 'sustained **NEET**' tended not to have had any thoughts about what to do when leaving school and were least likely to have spoken to anyone other than their parents about their choices. In comparison, young people in the other two groups had much more definite plans. However, those categorised 'undecided **NEET**' often did not stay on their chosen pathway for very long.

Several young people thought that they had received incomplete or biased advice and guidance. Those who were classified as 'undecided **NEET**' or 'sustained **NEET**' were more likely to feel they lacked knowledge about the range of options open to them, and the financial support available, compared to those who were 'open to learning **NEET**'. Young people classified as 'open to learning **NEET**' were also the ones most likely to believe that qualifications were important. Whilst they felt GCSEs were generally important, they also rated work-related qualifications very highly. Most of the other interviewees did not value qualifications so highly.

The majority of young people who were **NEET** wanted to work in order to earn money. However, one of the main barriers young people came across when looking for work was their lack of experience. They were unable to get a job until they had experience, but could not get a job to get that experience in the first place. Similarly, most of those interviewed were not averse to the idea of finding a job with training, but few were willing to actively seek out jobs with training.

#### **What do the interviews with young people who were JWT indicate?**

Interviews with 41 young people in **JWT** also confirmed the findings of the statistical segmentation that they do not represent a homogenous group. Interviews were conducted with those who had chosen this route as a stop-gap before moving onto further learning, those who were likely to remain in a **JWT** in the long-term and others at risk of becoming **NEET**. Most of the interviewees in **JWT** had achieved fewer than five GCSEs at grades A\*-C. They were most likely to be working in retail, hospitality and catering or in cleaning occupations. Most were earning above the minimum wage for their age group and almost two-thirds of those interviewed said they liked their work. Young people and professionals identified a variety of 'push' and 'pull' factors which led some school-leavers to choose a **JWT** at 16. The main push factors were negative experiences of schooling, low self-confidence and lack of opportunities for work-based learning. Earning money was seen to be the main pull factor for starting a **JWT**.

Interviewees who were judged to be 'at risk of becoming **NEET**' and several of those 'sustained in a **JWT**' were very likely to report negative experiences of schooling. These experiences had put them off participating in further learning. Those young people sustained in a **JWT** were also most likely to cite financial reasons for not

engaging in learning. Some of them had considered education or training options, particularly apprenticeships, but were put off by lack of placement opportunities or lower financial rewards. More than half of those interviewed could be broadly categorised as sharing the characteristics of the 'transitional in a JWT' segment identified in the analysis of YCS. It included some who had achieved Level 2 at GCSE and started, but dropped out of, a post-16 course. They saw their current job only as a short-term 'stop-gap' to enable them to earn some money or get some experience before commencing their courses. There was a sub-group of some young people who, even though open to education or training, could not decide what to do. Many of them had drifted into a **JWT**, often via family networks, which offered them easy access to such jobs. Even though they were considering various training options, there was a danger that the financial rewards of working could prevent them from engaging in education or training in the future.

Most of the young people interviewed were happy with the information, advice and guidance received before leaving school. However, some young people said they had ignored this advice after leaving school in favour of finding a job. Interviewees who had achieved more than five GCSEs at grades A\*-C were also likely to complain about not having received information on all the options open to them. Almost all the young people interviewed said that they were at least considering engaging in education or training in the future. Some interviewees said they were planning to do so through their current jobs, while others said that the experience of working had persuaded them to achieve more qualifications. Professionals argued that experience of such jobs could lead young people to this realisation.

### **What do the interviews with young people who had re-engaged tell us about how best to engage all young people in education or training?**

Interviews with 39 young people who had re-engaged showed that their reasons for being **NEET** or in **JWT** were often complex and that they had followed various routes back into learning. Some of the young people who had re-engaged had previously been **NEET** or in a **JWT** because they were waiting for a course to start, were taking some time out or wanted to earn money when they left school. There were also some who were **NEET** or in a **JWT** because they had complex lives, were disillusioned with

learning, or had experienced bullying and social isolation. Some young people had re-engaged in learning because they had always intended to do so and were **NEET** or in a **JWT** while they waited for a course to start. Others had realised that learning was worthwhile, or wanted to improve their circumstances. Some continued to be undecided and were engaged in learning to explore options.

The evidence from the journeys of these young people shows that, in order for young people to re-engage and for the policy of raising the participation age to be a success, there is a need for provision to be appropriate in terms of content, delivery and timing. Young people also need to receive good quality guidance and support from the Connexions Service and schools to pre-empt disengagement. In addition, awareness of, and access to, financial support is necessary for some young people.

### **What were young people's and professionals' views of raising the participation age to 18?**

Most of the 120 young people interviewed as part of this study responded positively to the notion of raising the participation age to 18. While they recognised that they might have resented it when they were 16, they appreciated the value of continued engagement in learning post-16. They also thought it would encourage providers to give them 'a second chance' and compel providers to offer courses suitable to all young people's needs, levels of learning and preferred learning styles.

Where interviewees did not welcome the policy of raising the participation age to 18 this was because they did not like being compelled to participate. In addition, some did not appreciate the value of education and training in terms of longer-term financial and employment gains and considered that the opportunity to learn by experience would be lost.

Young people and professionals thought that the success of the policy depended on various factors, including employers being encouraged to provide sufficient placement opportunities to allow more young people to engage in work-based learning; schools, colleges and providers providing more practical and non-classroom based learning provision; and the offer of better financial support for those staying in education or training, including universal provision of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), regardless of parental income, and raising the level of EMA payments.

## **What are the main policy implications of the research?**

The main conclusions of the research are that young people in **JWT** and **NEET** can be broadly segmented into six sub-groups, each with different experiences, achievements and motivations and that different pre-16 and post-16 policy solutions are needed to engage or re-engage such young people. This includes meeting the needs of each of the following sub-groups.

### ***Young people who drop out of learning post-16 and become NEET or get a JWT need:***

- Better information, advice and guidance pre-16, and more information about the range of options available to them, to ensure that they make a more appropriate choice at 16
- More flexible provision in terms of start dates in order to accommodate young people who want to change direction.

### ***Young people who are sustained in JWT need:***

- More information, advice and guidance from Connexions or other agencies while in work to make them aware of the learning options available to them - this support should be specifically targeted at young people around 18 years old, when, as the research suggests, young people often start to explore alternatives and to consider re-engaging in education or training
- Help to make sure that they choose appropriate courses that provide development and progression opportunities, when offered the opportunity to engage in training by their employers
- More work-based provision below, and at, Level 2 to reflect their preferred learning styles and lower levels of achievement.

### ***Young people who are averse to education or training due to negative experiences at school need:***

- Schools to provide more opportunities for applied teaching and learning, engender a more respectful relationship between teachers and learners and implement more effective anti-bullying strategies to minimise the impact of disruptive pupils on their peers' learning opportunities
- More informal learning opportunities (with clear progression pathways to more structured learning) to help them to appreciate the value of learning in a non-threatening way and progress onto positive learning outcomes.

### ***Young people in JWT or NEET who lack a clear direction need:***

- More post-16 provision to reflect the indecisive nature of this sub-group, such as taster courses and opportunities to sample a range of employment opportunities
- More information about the opportunity to 'bank' any elements of a qualification that they achieve through the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) to ensure that any achievements by those who change options can be built up over time.

## **Additional Information**

This research brief and the full report (DCSF-RR072) can also be accessed at [www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/)

Further information about this research can be obtained from Susanna Greenwood, N611, DCSF, Moorfoot, Sheffield S1 4PQ.

Email: [susanna.greenwood@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:susanna.greenwood@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk)

*The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.*