



## Negotiating Uncertain Economic Times: Youth Employment Strategies in England

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## Negotiating Uncertain Economic Times: Youth Employment Strategies in England

### Abstract

Higher education is commonly understood as the gateway to better, higher-paying jobs. This article draws on longitudinal survey and interview data to explore how different groups of young people, those who left school at 18 and those graduating from higher education, negotiated pathways into employment or otherwise during the recent economic recessionary climate in England. While a mix of employment and unemployment featured in both groups, with temporary and unstable contracts more common than skilled and secure jobs, our evidence reveals that those with degrees were *less* likely to be in work at the ages of 22 to 23 than those who left school to enter employment at 18. In some contradistinction to popular discourses on the employability benefits of higher education therefore, entering paid work at 18 was a more effective strategy for being in employment five years later than proceeding into higher education.

Keywords: Employment, Transitions, Mixed methods, Higher Education

### Introduction

The economic uncertainty of the 2008-9 global recession and years of subsequent austerity served only to exacerbate the general trends in youth labour markets established at the end of the twentieth century (Harvey 2010; France 2016, Schoon and Bynner 2017). In the United Kingdom (UK), young people were particularly hard hit by the financial crisis, with high levels of youth unemployment and job insecurity being experienced by those from all educational backgrounds. In 2011-12, just after the economic recession, youth unemployment in the UK stood at about 21% for those aged 16-24, a factor 3.7 larger than the 25 and over unemployment rate<sup>i</sup>. By 2014, youth unemployment had reduced to about 17%. However, its ratio of 3.8 compared with the 25 and over unemployment rate remained large<sup>i</sup>.

Not only was the *proportion* of young people in employment hard hit, but so was the *quality* of the work they were involved in. For example, there was a significant reduction in numbers of young people in *full-time* employment: 68% females and 89% males were in full-time jobs in 2014, as compared to pre-recession rates (2004) of 74% females and 95% males<sup>ii</sup>. Levels of precariousness (measured by the combined indicator of underemployment, a temporary or zero hours contract) rose from previous low levels in 2004 of 8 % to 13% in 2014; while for young women, the increase stood slightly higher at 6 percentage points, from 10% in 2004 to 16% in 2014<sup>ii</sup>. The poor quality of opportunities for

1 young people attempting to transition from education to work during this period led them to be dubbed ‘the lost  
2 generation’ (Mortimer 2014: 97)

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4 How different groups of young people fared during this critical period of economic uncertainty is thus of real  
5 importance to future policy and practice (Crosnoe 2014). Who were the hardest hit and who were more successful in  
6 their strategies to find work or enter a desired career during this time? In this paper, we draw on a unique data set: the  
7 Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS), to examine these questions. Using both quantitative and qualitative  
8 data, we explore how young people from different social backgrounds and different levels of educational  
9 qualifications progressed in their attempts to secure employment during challenging economic times.  
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### 12 **Conceptualizing Youth and Work Transitions**

13 Several general trends are evident in the research undertaken on young people’s experience of Western labour markets  
14 over the last few decades. First, in line with other transitions such as housing and family formation (Berrington et al  
15 2015); youth employment has been characterised as increasingly ‘*precarious*’ (MacDonald 2009; Standing 2011),  
16 with significant challenges in finding sustainable employment. Second, young people’s transitions into the labour  
17 market are *delayed*, not only due to declining employment opportunities but also the mass expansion of higher  
18 education (Furlong and Cartmel 2009). Third, it is argued that while young people have more *choices* than previous  
19 generations, they also have more personal *responsibility* for job seeking, skill development and career trajectories  
20 (Mortimer 2009). As neo-liberal contexts weaken the normative force of social structural positions and lifescritps  
21 produced through, *inter alia*, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, place and community, impetus is increasingly placed on  
22 young people themselves to individually scout for opportunities and tailor their own life trajectories (Price et al 2011;  
23 Leonard et al 2016).  
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43 While these themes have gained a substantial place within both academic and policy literatures, it is also recognised  
44 that finer granularity is required for capturing the consequences of contemporary economic events (Mortimer 2014).  
45 For example, while jobs for young people are marked by precarity, the form of this has changed over the last thirty  
46 years. Youth unemployment in the UK, in terms of the proportion of young people in work, was in fact at a very  
47 similar level during the recent economic crisis as in the 1980s (in 1984 youth unemployment rate was also about  
48 20%), when many of the current cohort’s own parents were attempting to enter the labour market (Office for National  
49 Statistics 2014). As we demonstrate later in this paper, many young people in the UK *did* manage to get jobs between  
50 2008 and 2014. However, what has changed is the *quality* of the jobs now offered to young people and the terms of  
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1 their working conditions; regularly involving experiences of under-employment, over-qualification, short-term  
2 contract working, zero hours' contracts and low pay (Felstead et al 2015). These features were more pronounced  
3 within the youth labour market than the labour market as a whole, meaning that, increasingly, young people were  
4 'cycling' between jobs and spells of unemployment, facing multiple barriers to finding secure full-time jobs and  
5 sustainable career pathways (McCollum 2013; Tomaszewski and Cebulla 2014).  
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10 This also suggests that the linearity conveyed within the concept of 'delayed transitions' must also be understood with  
11 some caution (Furlong et al 2011). While it is undoubtedly the case that the increasing number of young people  
12 accessing higher education and the growing credentialism of work mean that the average age to enter the labour  
13 market has extended (Helve and Evans 2013; Quintin and Martin 2014), research also demonstrates that many young  
14 people's experiences reflect a 'set of movements which are less predictable and involve frequent breaks, backtracking  
15 and the blending of statuses' (Furlong et al 2003:24). 'Independent adulthood' may come and go: periods of relative  
16 stability in economic wealth and lifestyle intersected by the precarity endemic to neoliberal economies. Further, while  
17 theorists such as Bauman (1998) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, 2009) have argued that shifts towards  
18 individualised decision-making can weaken the impact of traditional class and gender-based lifescrpts to open up  
19 'choice biographies', recent evidence (Tholen 2013) confirms the ongoing traction of social background on labour  
20 market opportunities, even for those supposedly at its upper ends, such as graduates. Choice and individualism remain  
21 'bounded' by social background, as young people negotiate the labour market according to their capital and resources  
22 (Evans, 2002; Staff et al 2015).  
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38 In terms of responses to this complex rebus, interpretations frequently dichotomise young people's positions. On the  
39 one hand are more positive interpretations of young people's extended transitions, whereby late teens to mid- 20s are  
40 conceptualised as '*exploring*' (Krahn et al 2015); 'experimentally drifting' through alternative educational,  
41 employment and lifestyle roles, exhibiting considerable agency over their transition into adulthood (Nyhagen-Predelli  
42 and Cebulla 2011). In contrast, alternative explanations focus on the negative effects of employment instability, seeing  
43 young people as *floundering* (Krahn et al 2015) while trying to translate educational credentials into satisfactory jobs.  
44 Victims of the 'churning trap' (Worth 2005) of frequent spells of un/employment, their instability in the labour market  
45 portends adverse longer-term employment outcomes (Gregg and Tominey 2005). This may become further entrenched  
46 by gender, with additional employment gaps by young women having families often scarring long-term employment  
47 and earnings abilities (Loughran and Zissimopoulos 2009), as well as by other structural features such as social class,  
48 lack of educational qualifications and regional location (Brannen and Nilsen 2005; Roberts 2012). In contrast,  
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1 enhanced social capital such as higher education, family wealth and living in the Southeast may enable young people  
2 to negotiate transitions to adulthood more smoothly (Coffey and Farrugia 2014).  
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5 While this binaristic framework has been widely deployed to describe youth transitions more generally over the past  
6 fifteen years (Roberts 2011), how accurate a lens is this for understanding the most recent economic hardships? In this  
7 article, we examine a cohort of British young peoples' experiences as they negotiated access to the recession-hit youth  
8 labour market. Using both quantitative and qualitative data, we explore how young people from different social  
9 backgrounds and different levels of educational qualifications managed in their attempts to find work and/or enter  
10 desired careers as the financial crisis progressed. The complexity of our findings suggests that, conceptually, we need  
11 to move beyond 'unproductive ontological dualisms' (Coffey and Farrugia 2014: 469) to create a more nuanced  
12 conceptual framework by which to understand how young people fare in times of economic vulnerability.  
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### 21 **Quantitative Analysis Methodology**

22 The Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS) data is unique in that it combines a panel study with a  
23 questionnaire tapping a wide range of youth attitudes and behaviours. The study includes data from a cohort of young  
24 people aged 11 and 12 (Year 7; first year of secondary school) surveyed for the first time in 2003; and then every two  
25 years until 2011 (Round 5), and finally in 2014 when the respondents were aged 22-23 (Round 6). The data was  
26 collected from a nationally representative sample of 112 state-maintained schools in England – representative in terms  
27 of region, GCSE attainment and percentage of students on free school meals (Keating and Benton 2013). The CELS  
28 data is no different from other longitudinal datasets in that it suffered from considerable attrition: from 18,583  
29 respondents in Round 1 to just 734 of the original cohort (4.2%) in Round 6. The database, however, includes top-ups  
30 for each data collection point to ensure a nationally representative sample and, for the longitudinal study, there are  
31 weights for the rounds following Round 1 to compensate for attrition on gender, educational attainment, ethnicity and  
32 social background, identified as the main drivers of non-response in longitudinal studies (Nathan 1999). Applying  
33 these weightings makes the data of later waves similar to Round 1 on these variables (Keating and Benton 2013).  
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50 In this article, we focus on the young people between the ages of 17-18 and 22-23 (Rounds 4 to 6 of the CELS  
51 dataset). This cross-sectional data includes: Round 4 (2009) N=1283 aged 17-18; Round 5 (2011) N= 1509 aged 19-  
52 20; and Round 6 (2014) N= 945 aged 22-23. For the longitudinal data analysis, we used Rounds 4-6 N=322 and  
53 Rounds 5-6 N =811.. We then conducted both quantitative analysis on the findings of the survey and qualitative  
54 analysis on the interviews which, for clarity, we discuss in turn.  
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*Quantitative Data Analysis*

To address our interest regarding the most effective strategies or pathway towards employment at 22-23, we used binary logistic regression using the following equation:

$$\log it = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 \dots$$

To calculate the absolute odds ratios, we used the following equation:

$$\text{Odds Ratio OR} = \exp(\beta_0 + \beta_1) = \exp(\beta_0) * \exp(\beta_1)$$

To calculate the probabilities from the odds ratios we used the following equation:

$$\pi = \exp(\beta_0) * \exp(\beta_1) / [1 + \exp(\beta_0) * \exp(\beta_1)]$$

To calculate the probabilities for the reference category we have used the constant and applied the following equations:

$$\text{Odds Ratio OR} = \exp(\beta_0)$$

$$\text{As OR} = \pi / (1 - \pi), \text{ probability } \pi = \text{OR} / (1 + \text{OR}) = \exp(\beta_0) / [1 + \exp(\beta_0)]$$

*Measures*

The independent variable for the quantitative logistic regression analysis is employment. In Rounds 4-6 all participants in the survey were asked what their main activity was and for the descriptive statistics we used the binary response categories of 'working', 'studying' and 'Not in Education or Employment' (NEET). For the logistic regression analysis, we used the outcome of employment and the binary response to the item on 'main activity' from round 6: 'working'. From Round 5 we used the same item and the binary response; 'working'; 'doing a degree'; 'at college' and 'Not in Education or Employment'. Thus, for the logistic regression, we have separated the education category into those undertaking degrees and college education (usually European Qualifications Levels 1-3) for more accurate evaluation of the learning experience undertaken. To control for social background, we added the measure of 'books at home', found to be strongly correlated to parental income (Schuetz et al., 2008; Baird, 2012), making it a good stand-in for parental income and other more obvious measures of social background that are unavailable in

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CELS (Keating and Benton, 2013). We also added the measure of 'gender'. Both these items are drawn from the first round that participants responded to this question in the survey.

#### *Descriptive statistics*

In Round 6 in 2014, (ages 22-23), about three quarters of the young people were employed, about 15% were NEET, and about 10% were in some form of education (see Fig 1). When participants were aged 19-20 in 2011, almost 60% were still in education and 30% were employed; with slightly fewer than 15% not in education or work. Three quarters of those in education were studying for undergraduate degrees, with the next highest category (just under 20%) on a college course. From those in the NEET category, 68% were 'looking for a job'. At the youngest age, when the young people were 17-18 (in 2009), over 90% were in education, either school or college. 5 percent were in work and 5 percent were NEET. This compares with the national average for 2009 of about 80% of 17-18 years old in education or training and about 20% NEET (Department of Education 2010). The just over 10% difference with the national average can be attributed to the fact that CELS was a school-based study and, despite the best efforts of those conducting the research, many of those who dropped out of education were unfortunately lost at this stage.

[Figure 1 about here]

Following those who participated in Rounds 4-6, the most common trajectory, involving more than half of the young people, was to be in education at 17-18, then proceed into higher education and then, by age 22-23 (in 2014), to have found employment (Fig 1). We classify this group as *Graduates in work*. A similar group are the '*Graduates not in work*': a group who followed a similar trajectory, but at 22-23 were still without work. This is a small group, being 7% of cases. However, interestingly, most young people who were not in education or employment at 22-23 had followed this graduate pathway, critically questioning assumptions that higher education acts as a protection mechanism from unemployment (Ball 2016).

The next largest trajectory was the *School leavers in work* which included the 20% of students who progressed from school directly into work either after secondary or tertiary level education and were still in work aged 22-23. Finally, (slightly less than 8%) were the *School leavers not in work* group, who left education at 17-18 but were not in education or work at aged 19-20. Encouragingly, very few remained in this situation (slightly more than 1%), as most of the NEETS group at aged 19-20 *had* found their way into work by 22-23 in 2014 (slightly more than 5%).

#### *Logistic regression model*

1 The next step in the analysis was to evaluate, in the context of the economic crisis, how successful the young people's  
2 varying entry routes were for employment at the age of 22-23. To increase the sample size, we used the longitudinal  
3 data from Rounds 5 (aged 19-20) and 6 (aged 22-23) only N = 811<sup>iii</sup>. We then ran a binary logistic regression analysis  
4 using the longitudinal data for Rounds 5 (aged 19-20) and 6 (aged 22-23). As being in work in Round 5 had appeared  
5 as the most promising category in our previous analysis for being in work in Round 6, we applied this group as the  
6 reference category in order that all other groups are compared to this one. The model included 811 cases and the  
7 Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup> indicates that 12% of the variance in the model is explained, although effect sizes can differ due to the  
8 size of the dataset and the types of variables used (12% of variance explained is reasonable level for social science  
9 research (Fichman 1999)).

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20 [Table 1 about here]

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22 The results of the model in Table 1 show that being in work at age 19-20 in 2011 (the reference category) in Round 5  
23 is the most effective method for being in work in Round 6 at age 22-23 in 2014. The probabilities indicate that there is  
24 a 72% chance for this group to be in work. This is the group that we refer to as *School leavers in work*.  
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28 Doing a degree at 19-20 in 2011 is significantly *less* effective for being in work at age 22-23 in 2014 than being a  
29 *School leaver in work* in Round 5. However, it is still effective, with a 61% chance of becoming a *Graduate in work*  
30 and a 39% chance of becoming a *Graduate not in work*. Being a *School leaver not in work* and going to college at  
31 aged 19-20 was also significantly less effective for being in work at 22-23 compared with the *School leavers in work*  
32 group. The *School leavers not in work* had a 32% chance of being in work and the college group had a 46% chance of  
33 being in work in 2014.  
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42 The control variables show that, as the number of books in the home increases, so do the chances of being in work  
43 increase; suggesting an effect of parents' socioeconomic background. This becomes significant from 51-200 books at  
44 home. The largest number of books (over 200) is no longer significant and this could well be because there was a very  
45 small number of participants in this group. There is no significant gender difference for being in work in Round 6 at  
46 aged 22-23 in 2014.  
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53 Before discussing these findings, it is necessary to acknowledge (i) the levels of unemployment in the CELS dataset  
54 are lower than the national average; and (ii) fewer young people are represented as NEET. We also need to  
55 acknowledge that the situation regarding employment status is only for young people aged 22-23 in 2014, and does  
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not allow claims as to what will happen through their lifecourse. In addition, our groups of young people are likely to have had different experiences regarding the duration of their transition from fulltime education into fulltime employment. For both *School leavers* groups, this is likely to be 4-5 years' experience of the labour market (whether employed or not) whilst the two *Graduate* groups are likely to have had 1-2 years' experience of full time in the labour market (although they may well have had part time jobs while undertaking their degree). This difference may well be a factor contributing to the differences in employment levels in 2014. Building from this, a key issue for graduate employment is not only securing a first job, which is often described as 'temporary' and with the immediate aim of securing some income, but about the quality of work gained over time and whether this progresses into a graduate-level career (Connor et al 2004 p.97). While the qualitative analysis in the second section of this paper addresses this issue for the initial early years of entering the labour market, the type of longitudinal data needed for quantitative analysis regarding the longer-term employment experience after graduation (e.g. 6 years after graduation) is not yet available for this cohort. It must be acknowledged that, usually, by the time the data is available, the socioeconomic and education policy context regarding youth transitions may have changed— a limitation of quantitative analysis in this field (Smetherham 2005).

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Considering the limitations of the CELs data, we can suggest that, in the context of the economic crisis, in order to have a job at 22-23 in 2014, the most effective route was to have progressed straight into work from higher secondary level (*School leavers in work*). An initial descriptive exploration of the cross-sectional data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) for 2014 supports this analysis<sup>ii</sup>; also identifying that 22-23 year olds with A levels were more likely to be in employment, and more stable employment, than graduates. However, the LFS analysis also shows that if the aspiration was to acquire a more *highly-skilled* occupation with greater financial returns, a young person was wiser to undertake a degree. However, this said, the chance of achieving such jobs directly on graduation was severely limited: the types of employment undertaken by graduates remained more precarious. Only 30% of *Graduates in work* managed to progress directly into highly-skilled jobs. The 39% chance of being in the *Graduates not in work* group in 2014 may not have been clear to young people entering higher education in 2010 at aged 18 or 19! What is also evident from the LFS data, and building on the CELs analysis, is the importance of gaining a level 3 qualification. This is demonstrated to be crucial to job opportunities and stability, with level 2 qualifications and below resulting in lower employment levels, less job security and low occupational status.

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As noted above, one challenge with the quantitative data is that general trends may not fully represent the complexity and fluidity of young people's transitions, nor provide a holistic picture of their experiences (Helve and Evans 2013).

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However, a real advantage of the CELS data is that we can also draw on the interviews to give a richer account of the young people' strategies towards work and careers.

### **Qualitative Analysis: Methodology**

Interviews were conducted with a sample of the young people in the CELs dataset (n=50) topped up with interviewees recruited via snowballing, twitter and partnership with a youth organisation (N=51) across the four groups described above. Their social characteristics are detailed in Table 2. Capturing social class was complex, compounded by our mixed methods approach which produced differences in available information. The quantitative data, and the 50 interviews recruited via the survey, include indicators of social class: books in the home, parental education and occupation. However, the top-ups were not asked about books in the home, and 26 were unsure about parents' occupations or qualifications and/or were estranged from family. The aim of the top-up recruitment was to access 'harder to reach', disadvantaged young people and, though not a representative sample, the spread of social backgrounds in each group of our sample is evidenced in Table 2.

[Table 2: Social Characteristics of Interviewees about here]

Interviews were all recorded and transcribed, and initially coded using Nvivo into broad themes 'employment', 'unemployment' and 'entry routes and practices'. These three themes (over 300 pages of transcript extracts) were then read individually by the team and submitted to closer textual and thematic analysis via selective coding: how the young people described their routes into employment, the types of jobs they had undertaken over the course of their lives, paid and unpaid, and how they represented these in terms of choices, careers and future aspirations. As we now turn to discuss, we used the four categories established in the quantitative methodology to explore the similarities and differences between the young people according to trajectory taken.

### **School leavers in work: Securing the future**

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the quantitative analysis, it was those who left school at 16-18 and were now working who positioned themselves in the most secure terms. Interestingly, these also revealed themselves as the most risk-averse, uncompromisingly valuing security of employment over 'exploring' different lifestyle choices and careers. Nevertheless, these aspirations had clearly been affected by the contraction of youth labour market opportunities as, since leaving school, many had experienced a succession of short-term employment contracts. As a consequence, perhaps, the benefits of a stable job with a regular income were highly regarded and aspired to. Darren (White British,

22), currently doing casual labouring with a gardening firm, was dependent on good weather for a regular wage.

When asked what his hopes were for the future, sSecurity was top of his the agenda-for his future hopes:

...in a very secure job, obviously... Just a normal life really and hopefully secure job and secure home....

Charlotte (White British, 22), with a stream of different jobs behind her also aspires to a stable future:

I am thinking long term. I want like an office job where it's 9 to 5, get weekends off, I want it to be permanent, I want a pension, I've started to think that way.

In contrast to arguments that young people have a 'live for now' attitude, disconnected from future concerns such as pensions (Pettigrew et al 2007), within the current climate of uncertainty many within this group demonstrated a long term, forward-thinking economic strategy. There was a dominant assumption that '*working hard*' was the route into stable employment and, hence, financial security.

I've been in work since 2009 working at a care home, laundry and cleaning. ...I want more, because I'm growing up now, I want more hours, earn more money, more things. I'm young, I need to get out there, working hard and earning a good living (Louise, White British, 22).

I love to work. I LOVE to work. I do up to 96 hours in a row... We do 12 hour shifts, 8 til 8, so I can do up to 13 days in a row, maybe have a weekend off... We've got this house recently, two weeks ago, so I've got a mortgage – quite scary, bit creepy, so a lot more responsibility (Emma, White British, 22, Nursing Home Carer)

Rather than either exploring or floundering therefore, this group of school leavers can perhaps better be conceived as strategically '*securing*'; the content of their work appearing less important than earning potential, security and prospects for the future. While the uncertain economic climate meant that such security could not usually be accessed immediately on leaving school, members of this group sought to negotiate their economic stability through long hours and hard work, albeit in sometimes poor quality jobs.

### **School leavers not in work: thwarted and unsupported**

The *School leavers not in work* left school between the ages of 15 and 18 and are not currently working. It must be noted here however that, because the number of young people within this category in the Round 6 CELs dataset was

1 very small, our sample was boosted in part by working with a charity working with vulnerable young people. As such,  
2 we do not make any claims for representativeness in our discussion of this group. Rather, we explore the trajectories  
3 of a particular subset within the larger cohort of *school leavers not in work*.  
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6  
7 Within this sample, while some have worked in the past, others have not, and many had experienced long periods of  
8 unemployment. While the prevailing economic downturn would in part account for their lack of work opportunities,  
9 this was rarely identified as a key causal factor by members of this group. Rather, ~~the fact that~~ other aspects of their  
10 lives were also characterised by precarity, as well as individual factors such as a lack of educational qualifications, and  
11 these were perceived to be at the root of their current positions:  
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15 I would like to get a good job but I don't have the education to get it ... obviously there isn't enough places so  
16 you have to go to your catchment school, which normally isn't the best one that you'd wish to go to. In a way  
17 it is discrimination because you can't go to that school because you can't afford to live in the posh area,  
18 so...(Jasmine, White British, 24)  
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27 Many had left the family home at a young age after relationship breakdowns, had experienced periods of  
28 homelessness or 'sofa surfing' or engaged in some criminal activity and/or been in prison. For example, Dean, a White  
29 British 24-year-old, left his family home at 15 and school at 16. He would have been keen to return to education or do  
30 an apprenticeship, but as this would lead to withdrawal of his housing benefits, this was not an option. Instead, the Job  
31 Centre advised spells of work experience but, perhaps because of the recession, these had never materialised into  
32 concrete work opportunities:  
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39 ...you were lied to... they said you would find employment from it if you stuck with it...I didn't though, all what  
40 happened was you work for 30 hours a week and if you didn't you were homeless.... People wouldn't have minded  
41 so much if they said "you do this for a month and then you're guaranteed a place"  
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47 At 23, JT (White British) has been unemployed for 7 years since dropping out of college. Initially he sold drugs and  
48 had a series of short term temporary contracts. He justifies his crimes saying:  
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52 I had no other means of getting money...so I had to do what I had to do. I've been in and out of jobs, like  
53 warehouse jobs, agencies but...Yeah I want a full time job, anything, a full time job, yes...  
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JT reflects the fact that, in spite of their circumstances, many displayed a fierce desire to work in 'good jobs' and, as with the *School leavers in work*, also sought stability and security. However, their expectations about the likelihood of this were low: themes of lacking choice, options and prospects pervaded many of the interviews:

...we all have less opportunity from people that live in these big fancy areas like Chelsea,... companies won't give you a job because you are from a certain area and think that you are a bad person (JT, 23),

It is harder if you're poorer to get out because you're surrounded by other poor people with similar mentalities... Well that's what they know and that's what they expect and want from life isn't it? (Dean, White British, 24)

For these young people, rather than identifying the recessionary climate as a key barrier to their work prospects, it was the broader package of structural and individual features which were highlighted as preventing them from accessing employment. Lacking the family support, networks and contacts needed to get by in poor neighbourhoods (MacDonald et al 2005), and any positive outcomes from the Job Centre, this group felt *thwarted* and *unsupported* in their quest for stable and secure working lives.

### Graduates in work: biding time

While many of the graduates in our cohort *were* engaged in some form of employment, often alongside their studies, none, bar one, were employed in their chosen careers. The paucity of work opportunities, the precarity of the labour market and a need to support themselves financially combined to mean that, after completing their studies, many felt they must take *any* job, even if this meant returning to the family home and putting future ambitions on hold:

There's a lot of people that work, have jobs, but it's plainly necessarily because they need the money. And that's what I do right now...(Imran, British Pakistani, 22)

...my position here at home is that I need to bring in a full time wage, .....as much as I'd like to have this time now to just be able to do internships and then find my way, my mum needs me to bring in a proper wage, so I'm willing to take anything- the plan now is work full time now, ...then leave to go to a grad scheme next year. (Sophia, Black Caribbean, 22)

1 The need to earn, combined with the strictures of the wider economic context, meant that some decided that  
2 continuing in the work they had secured while studying was the safest option, even if this made little use of their  
3 qualifications and skills. Indeed, some had lost confidence that a graduate level job might be a viable option:  
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7 The job, I started when I was in college, just Saturdays. As soon as I finished last year my job  
8 became a full-time post, so I thought until I get something in my field I might as well take this  
9 opportunity, and I don't regret it at all because I would have been without a job. (Parveen, 22)  
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14 It was clear therefore that many of the graduates did not see that *getting in* to the labour market at some level was a  
15 significant problem. What was more severely restricted was getting into the career of their *choice*:  
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18 The job search - I haven't struggled luckily. I mean I'm struggling for my career job, but just a  
19 general job I've not found it hard (Dalia, Black African, 22)  
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23 Many of the young people knew what sort of work they wanted to do, but recognised that their choices were  
24 'bounded' (Evans 2002), not only by family background but also by the constraints of the recession-hit labour market.  
25 The usual boundaries of class- and gender-based trajectories became blurred within the hardened economic context.  
26  
27 However, some found that once they had accepted a job, albeit not in their chosen field, they enjoyed working and  
28 relished earning their own money. Seeing the move into paid work as an important step in their lifecourse, financial  
29 independence was seen to deliver a sense of not only job satisfaction, but adulthood itself:  
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36 ...I feel brilliant that I finally have a salary, that's really exciting. ...having a permanent wage to  
37 feel like I've got a grown-up job. When I finally made it to £10 an hour I was "oh! This is a decent  
38 hourly rate now, I don't feel like I'm still a teenager" (Samantha, mixed, 26)  
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43 However, many of those who had undertaken a degree, and in some cases also a postgraduate qualification, had done  
44 so specifically in the hope of improving their jobs prospects. They were therefore disappointed to find, on graduating,  
45 that this was not the case:  
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49 ...it's been disheartening, because still it's hard to get a job, even though I may now have a  
50 Masters and much more experience, it's still really difficult to get a job in terms of what I want to  
51 do (Jamelia, Black African, 24)  
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56 Far from seeing youth as an exciting period of exploring alternative sets of lifestyle choices therefore (Beck 2000;  
57 Krahn et al 2015), this group are faced with the harsh reality of *biding time*, accepting low level work to survive  
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economically and putting higher level dreams and ambitions on hold. However, nor, on the other hand, can they be seen to be floundering: many demonstrated a clear-sighted strategy that work and CV building was ‘the way in’ to, eventually, securing a job in their chosen field. This said, the dilemma was whether to ‘get stuck’ in any job which pays, or attempt to survive a succession of unpaid work to gain experience in a chosen field.

### Graduates not in work: trying to find a balance

When I was 16 I thought I’d finish my degree, get a good job just like that and start earning. But now I’ve actually got out there and started looking for a job, it’s a lot harder than I expected  
(Athula, Asian other, 21)

A minority of graduates had been unable to find any sort of paid work, the current economic climate contributing to a lack of success in securing work or because they were sticking out for a ‘career job’, a category which declined during the recession. As a response, most within this group were attempting to use this period strategically by gaining *unpaid* work experience, increasingly required by many professions (Leonard et al 2016):

It’s a huge part of journalism. I’ve already done two months of work experience, unpaid. It’s just expected for journalists to do unpaid work experience, and there’s just never any talk about getting paid for it, you just naturally assume it’s unpaid (Ailsa, White British, 21)

These opportunities were difficult to find however, causing frustration that:

It’s not even about whether you’ve got a degree now, or like how hard you’ve done this. If you know the right people and if you get that opportunity where you know you can get it, then you just kind of do. (Humera, British Pakistani, 21) However, while some were willing to work unpaid, others found the idea exploitative, restricting it to those with greater economic means: :

Loads of employers are just expecting to have loads of unpaid interns... people from working-class backgrounds can’t afford to go in... There was a notion that unpaid internships should be banned- I supported that. (Daniel, White British, 22)

In addition to the young people’s recognition of the enduring salience of ‘class specific socialisation structures’ (Baethge 1989: 28), this group of young people, like the *School leavers in work*, also expressed resistance to flexible and impermanent futures. Far from seeing this period as ‘exploring’ a range of alternative employment opportunities

and lifestyle options (Krahn et al 2012), a steady career in an occupational sector of choice was the primary aim for most. Yet, in common with the graduates in work, neither could they be described as 'floundering'; rather, their negotiations with the complex economic terrain were strategies to find a 'balance' between the need to support themselves financially and accessing their work of choice. This is aptly summed up by Julia, a 22-year-old White British postgraduate:

The problem is I have no money, so I'm stuck between getting a part-time job in somewhere like Sainsburys and then doing something else to try and get into publishing at the same time, or to stick with unpaid work experience. I'm on Jobseeker's Allowance at the moment, I'm kind of torn between the two at the moment, I'm *trying to find a balance*, because obviously I need the money but I want to do what I want to do...

## Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings provide an interesting contribution to existing understandings of young people and work in late modernity. First, the results of both the quantitative and qualitative analysis demonstrate that, for many of the young people in our sample, from a range of social backgrounds, finding a job was not that difficult, even within the restricted labour market and economic climate. This provides further support to a more nuanced understanding of the nature of contemporary youth precarity: while some form of paid work may be relatively accessible, finding a job with a career pathway in an occupation of choice and with long term security is far less easy. This is a significant change in the youth labour market in the UK as compared to a generation ago (Green 2017).

Second, our research confirms that most young people are delaying their transition into the labour market by pursuing higher educational qualifications and, in the main, the young people across our sample explained that these are undertaken with the specific aspiration of improving their job prospects. However, both the quantitative and qualitative findings show that the process of finding a job, especially one which met their expected career pathways and skills levels, was sometimes ~~often~~ harder for young people with degrees, regardless of social background, compared to those who went straight into work after upper secondary education. Clearly, we cannot be certain about the long-term effects of the challenges of finding work for young people with degrees. Current research regarding the prospective careers of graduates is somewhat outdated and contradictory (Smetherham 2005), making it difficult to establish whether their relative struggle can be attributed to differences in the duration of the transition period from full-time education into work for this cohort of young people (4-5 years for school leavers compared to 1-2 years for



1 graduates). However, it must be acknowledged that the long-term employment opportunities for graduates are likely to  
2 mean that they will still fare better economically over the whole of their lifecourse (Avery and Turner 2012). Future  
3 research is urgently needed to address these questions.  
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7 Nevertheless, our research does, pose some challenge to dominant understandings about the economic value of higher  
8 education, specifically in the immediate term and in the context of recession. The qualitative analysis provides some  
9 explanation of why this may be the case. With the contraction in the numbers of graduate-entry careers available,  
10 those young people who lacked the vital work experience required to enter more desirable careers, or the social and  
11 economic capital needed to access the unpaid work experience demanded by employers, found it hard to access work,  
12 or at least the kind of work they aspired to. While some chose to remain unemployed, others opted for work outside  
13 their chosen field or below their skills levels. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these experiences had left many of the young  
14 people with degrees rather disheartened.  
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18 Alternatively, those young people who did not delay their transition into the labour market, going straight into work  
19 from school, often seemed to enjoy having a wage and working, viewing this as the transition to becoming an adult.  
20 From the quantitative analysis, this was the most successful strategy for being in work at the age of 22-23 in 2014. In  
21 sharp contrast, however, were those who left school but did not find work, often from more vulnerable social groups  
22 coping with multiple disadvantages in terms of lack of family support, housing hardship and mental health issues.  
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26 Third, the article contributes to our understandings of how young people are negotiating the risks and choices of  
27 neoliberal economies, and the UK in particular. In some contestation to earlier theorisations of young people  
28 polarising into two oppositional groups of either 'exploring' or 'floundering', a more nuanced picture has emerged.  
29 For many, both those school leavers and those recently graduated, 'securing' the future was a priority. If the cost was  
30 to work in a 'dead-end job', this was accepted in return for a steady income and the hope of more rewarding work  
31 down the line. For those whose ambitions to work in a particular niche were supported by parental income or job  
32 seekers' allowance, 'strategizing' with a period of unpaid work was often undertaken, regarded as an inevitable route  
33 in. Many in the graduate group were just 'balancing': juggling career aspirations with daily economic realities. For  
34 those who lack social capital, dreams and prospects continue to be 'thwarted' by the structures of opportunities in their  
35 neighbourhoods.  
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### 38 **Acknowledgements**

39 This research was funded by the ESRC as part of the ESRC LLAKES centre (grant number ES/J019135/1)  
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#### Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> This contextual descriptive data analysis was conducted by one of the authors using Eurostat unemployment data.

<sup>ii</sup> This descriptive data analysis was conducted on data from the UK Labour Force study (LFS) by Golo Henseke as part of the ESRC LLAKES research project.

<sup>iii</sup> Having removed round 4 data from the analysis the data becomes more representative of the population as the dataset now also includes people who left school before the age of 18.

Table

|                                                  | Logit co-<br>efficient | S.E. | Absolute odds<br>ratio | Probability in<br>work | Probability out of<br>work |
|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------|------|------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Books 1-10</b>                                | 0.610                  | 0.64 | 4.75                   | 83%                    | 17%                        |
| <b>Books 11-50</b>                               | 0.963                  | 0.62 | 6.77                   | 87%                    | 13%                        |
| <b>Books 51-100</b>                              | 1.468**                | 0.63 | 11.22                  | 92%                    | 8%                         |
| <b>Books101-200</b>                              | 1.498*                 | 0.64 | 11.56                  | 92%                    | 8%                         |
| <b>Books &gt;200</b>                             | 0.950                  | 0.62 | 6.68                   | 87%                    | 13%                        |
| <b>Female</b>                                    | -0.119                 | 0.18 | 2.29                   | 70%                    | 30%                        |
| <b>R5Degree</b>                                  | -0.519*                | 0.25 | 1.54                   | 61%                    | 39%                        |
| <b>R5NEET</b>                                    | -1.709***              | 0.28 | 0.47                   | 32%                    | 68%                        |
| <b>R5College</b>                                 | -1.09***               | 0.29 | 0.87                   | 46%                    | 54%                        |
| <b>Constant</b><br><b>(R5work/male/no books)</b> | 0.949                  | 0.62 |                        | 72%                    | 28%                        |

Table 1: Results of the logistic regression for predicting employment in round 6 age 22/23 in 2014 by experiences in round 5 19/20 in 2011. The results note the logits, the significant levels \*P<0.05, \*\*P<0.01: \*\*\*P<0.001, the absolute odds ratios and probabilities for being in work.

Table 2.

|                                  |                                          | Graduate<br>in work | Graduates<br>not in work | School<br>leavers in<br>work | School<br>leaver not<br>in work | Total |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------|
| <b>N.</b>                        |                                          | 23                  | 21                       | 24                           | 33                              | 101   |
| <b>Gender</b>                    | Male                                     | 9                   | 7                        | 16                           | 19                              | 51    |
|                                  | Female                                   | 14                  | 14                       | 8                            | 14                              | 50    |
| <b>Ethnicity</b>                 | Asian other                              | 1                   | 1                        | 0                            | 1                               | 3     |
|                                  | Black African                            | 7                   | 1                        | 2                            | 4                               | 14    |
|                                  | Black British                            | 0                   | 0                        | 0                            | 1                               | 1     |
|                                  | Black Caribbean                          | 1                   | 0                        | 0                            | 3                               | 4     |
|                                  | British Indian                           | 0                   | 2                        | 0                            | 0                               | 2     |
|                                  | British Pakistani                        | 2                   | 4                        | 3                            | 5                               | 14    |
|                                  | Kurdish                                  | 0                   | 0                        | 0                            | 1                               | 1     |
|                                  | Mixed                                    | 2                   | 1                        | 0                            | 0                               | 3     |
|                                  | White British                            | 10                  | 12                       | 19                           | 18                              | 59    |
| <b>Age</b>                       | 18                                       | 0                   | 0                        | 0                            | 1                               | 1     |
|                                  | 19                                       | 0                   | 0                        | 0                            | 2                               | 2     |
|                                  | 20                                       | 0                   | 0                        | 1                            | 3                               | 4     |
|                                  | 21                                       | 1                   | 3                        | 0                            | 4                               | 8     |
|                                  | 22                                       | 13                  | 12                       | 10                           | 10                              | 45    |
|                                  | 23                                       | 4                   | 4                        | 9                            | 8                               | 25    |
|                                  | 24                                       | 3                   | 1                        | 1                            | 5                               | 10    |
|                                  | 25                                       | 1                   | 0                        | 0                            | 0                               | 1     |
|                                  | 26                                       | 1                   | 1                        | 3                            | 0                               | 5     |
| <b>Highest<br/>Qualification</b> | GCSE/Left at 16                          | 0                   | 0                        | 2                            | 11                              | 13    |
|                                  | FE/HND                                   | 0                   | 0                        | 17                           | 14                              | 31    |
|                                  | A levels                                 |                     | 0                        | 5                            | 8                               | 13    |
|                                  | Degree                                   | 21                  | 17                       | 0                            | 0                               | 38    |
|                                  | Postgraduate                             | 2                   | 4                        | 0                            | 0                               | 6     |
| <b>Status</b>                    | Employed                                 | 20                  | 0                        | 17                           | 0                               | 37    |
|                                  | Employed part-time                       | 2                   | 0                        | 2                            | 0                               | 4     |
|                                  | Apprenticeship                           | 1                   | 0                        | 1                            | 0                               | 2     |
|                                  | Study and work                           | 0                   | 0                        | 4                            | 0                               | 4     |
|                                  | Studying                                 | 0                   | 11                       | 0                            | 16                              | 27    |
|                                  | Unemployed                               | 0                   | 10                       | 0                            | 15                              | 25    |
|                                  | Homeless                                 | 0                   | 0                        | 0                            | 2                               | 2     |
| <b>Father's<br/>Education</b>    | Left full time education at 15<br>or 16  | 8                   | 7                        | 10                           | 10                              | 35    |
|                                  | Left after college or sixth<br>form      | 5                   | 7                        | 5                            | 3                               | 20    |
|                                  | Studied at university                    | 6                   | 7                        | 3                            | 2                               | 18    |
|                                  | Missing                                  | 4                   | 0                        | 6                            | 18                              | 28    |
| <b>Mother's<br/>Education</b>    | Left full time education at 15<br>or 16  | 10                  | 9                        | 10                           | 9                               | 38    |
|                                  | Left after college or sixth<br>form      | 6                   | 8                        | 4                            | 3                               | 21    |
|                                  | Studied at university                    | 6                   | 4                        | 2                            | 3                               | 15    |
|                                  | Missing                                  | 1                   | 0                        | 8                            | 18                              | 27    |
| <b>Father's<br/>Occupation</b>   | Professional or higher<br>technical work | 7                   | 6                        | 2                            | 3                               | 18    |
|                                  | Manager or Senior<br>Administrator       | 2                   | 2                        | 2                            | 2                               | 8     |

|    |                   |                           |   |   |   |    |    |
|----|-------------------|---------------------------|---|---|---|----|----|
| 1  |                   |                           |   |   |   |    |    |
| 2  |                   |                           |   |   |   |    |    |
| 3  |                   | Clerical                  | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0  | 3  |
| 4  |                   | Sales or Services         | 1 | 0 | 3 | 1  | 5  |
| 5  |                   | Small business owner      | 2 | 6 | 1 | 1  | 10 |
| 6  |                   | Foreman or Supervisor of  |   |   |   |    |    |
| 7  |                   | Other Workers             | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0  | 0  |
| 8  |                   | Skilled manual work       | 4 | 1 | 5 | 4  | 14 |
| 9  |                   | Semi-Skilled or Unskilled | 1 | 4 | 3 | 5  | 13 |
| 10 |                   | Manual Work               |   |   |   |    |    |
| 11 |                   | Homemaker/carer in the    | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0  | 0  |
| 12 |                   | home                      |   |   |   |    |    |
| 13 |                   | Never worked              | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0  | 1  |
| 14 |                   | Other                     | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1  | 3  |
| 15 |                   | Missing                   | 5 | 1 | 4 | 16 | 26 |
| 16 | <b>Mother's</b>   | Professional or higher    | 4 | 5 | 1 | 4  | 14 |
| 17 | <b>Occupation</b> | technical work            |   |   |   |    |    |
| 18 |                   | Manager or Senior         | 3 | 0 | 2 | 0  | 5  |
| 19 |                   | Administrator             |   |   |   |    |    |
| 20 |                   | Clerical                  | 4 | 4 | 2 | 3  | 13 |
| 21 |                   | Sales or Services         | 4 | 2 | 3 | 3  | 12 |
| 22 |                   | Small business owner      | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0  | 3  |
| 23 |                   | Foreman or Supervisor of  |   |   |   |    |    |
| 24 |                   | Other Workers             | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0  | 1  |
| 25 |                   | Skilled manual work       | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0  | 4  |
| 26 |                   | Semi-Skilled or Unskilled | 1 | 0 | 3 | 4  | 8  |
| 27 |                   | Manual Work               |   |   |   |    |    |
| 28 |                   | Homemaker/carer in the    | 3 | 4 | 6 | 2  | 15 |
| 29 |                   | home                      |   |   |   |    |    |
| 30 |                   | Never worked              | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1  | 1  |
| 31 |                   | Other                     | 0 | 3 | 0 | 1  | 4  |
| 32 |                   | Missing                   | 2 | 0 | 4 | 15 | 21 |

Table 2 The Social Characteristics of Interviewees by the four groups of Graduates in work, Graduates not in work, School leavers in work, and School leavers not in work.



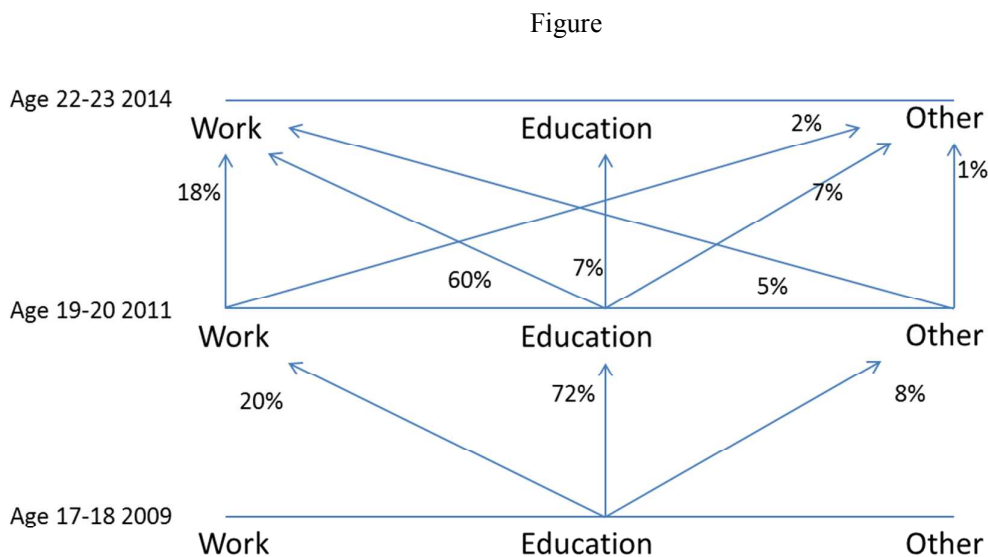


Fig 1. Education trajectories of young people from the CELS dataset. This is based on 284 cases i.e. selecting only those cases who were in education in 2009 and then participated in Rounds 5 (2011) and 6 (2014).