

Youth Employment, Education and Training: Written Response to the Work and Pensions Committee by Professor Michael Tomlinson and Professor Martin Dyke, Southampton Education School, University of Southampton

About the Authors

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[Professor Martin Dyke](#) is a Professor in Southampton Education School, University of Southampton, where he previously served as Head of School. His research focuses on policy, professional practice and innovation in post-compulsory education. At the heart of his work is a commitment to understanding the social and institutional contexts in which education takes place and using that understanding to develop interventions that demonstrably improve outcomes, particularly for those who might not otherwise engage with education or training.

Executive Summary

The issue of young people not in employment, education and training is multi-layered but significant. The focus of this submission is informed by our area of expertise around education and training, enablers and barriers in learners' progression and factors contributing to school-leavers' and graduates' employment outcomes. Factors relate to job opportunities and the labour market for young people, in addition to the constellations of skills, work, geographic mobilities and affordability of work for young people who may experience high travel and accommodation costs. [Southampton Education School](#) has a record of research in the liminal spaces that mark the transitions between educational sectors and education and work and the support for young people who are at risk of unemployment or are not in employment, education and training. This contribution represents our views, observations and recommendations about youth employment, education and training, and what can work best in supporting young people's transitions to the labour market.

Policy Recommendations

1. Establish a statutory duty for **independent** Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) in all secondary schools
2. Simplify the vocational education and training landscape
3. Ring-fence Growth and Skills Levy funding for young people and new entrants
4. Introduce personalised mentoring for at-risk learners at Key Stages 3 and 4
5. Fund a national network of Pre-Apprenticeship and Access to Apprenticeship bridging programmes
6. Strengthen employer accountability within the skills ecosystem, particularly in high-unemployment areas

Detailed Response

1. Independent Advice and Guidance:

There is a need for high quality independent Information Advice and Guidance about employment, education and training opportunities for those who are at risk or being NEET.

Research at Southampton Education School on what influences on the decision to participate in learning Post-16 (Fosket, Dyke, Maringe 2013) emphasised the need for schools to provide independent information advice and guidance (IAG) on Post-16 opportunities. Schools were pivotal in shaping post-16 decisions, but different schools sought to influence those decisions in different ways. Schools with their own Sixth Form tended to influence decision making in ways that retained the highest achieving pupils, thereby reproducing patterns of inequality. Other schools, such as those without their own Sixth Form, provided pupils with a greater choice and understanding of the post-16 opportunities. The nature and values of the leadership teams in schools either reinforced or counteracted the SES context. Those with a commitment to adapting to the needs of learners and local communities often minimised risk of exclusion and disengagement.

The study found that schools varied in support of learners: some operated in the interests of what they perceived to be the standing of the school and other schools focused more directly on the needs of their students. Some schools provided more Independent Information Advice and Guidance than other Schools. Students within schools had a keen awareness of the 'market' orientated nature of advice they received from schools and local colleges. Consequently, students did not always trust the IAG they received and tended to rely on their friends and family networks for IAG on post-school transitions. For some students the highest trust for Education and Training advice was from higher-risk sources of information such as their friends (Dyke, Foskett & Maringe 2009). One Head Teacher who was interviewed argued schools and colleges need to treat students 'not as funding units to have but as people they serve' (Dyke, Foskett & Maringe 2009). The need for Independent Advice and Guidance was also explored as an aspect of learner disengagement of people in the NEET category by Downey and Kelly (2010). The lack of access to Independent IAG for those not engaged in formal education and training in school, college or higher education was a theme that emerged in the non-participation in higher education projects (Dyke 2011).

Taken together, this evidence shows that independent IAG needs to be strongly embedded in school and college cultures, supported by senior leadership and educational professionals, so that learners are more easily aware of opportunities.

2. Reduce the complexity of vocational education and training system, including funding mechanisms so that funding is understood by all stakeholders.

In addition to the need for independent information advice and guidance, young people not in employment, education and training face the most bewildering and complex choices of vocational pathways. The spaghetti alphabet of vocational qualifications in the UK is well documented and continue to develop with new brands of vocational education qualifications (Winch, 2023). Funding mechanisms for vocational education and training qualifications also involve complex navigation of bursaries and student loans that present barriers to participation in education and training. Apprenticeship in England has been sliced and diced into different elements of 'apprenticeship monies' which were not integrated. For example, those receiving funding for apprentice placements were not necessarily involved in final outcomes and therefore less accountable for rates of drop out. Laurie (2013) revealed a range of new agencies and actors seeking different slices of funding and speaking in terms of securing 'apprentice monies' rather than focused on needs of employers and apprentices. The apprenticeship funding system in England became complex and atomistic, it risked losing sight of the overall purpose of apprenticeship; that is, the apprentice themselves. Simplifying and harmonising vocational education offerings in ways that learners can understand and supports their educational and employment interests is important to maintain engagement in further training. The complexity of the current landscape risks young people being unwilling or unprepared to make

meaningful investment decisions that better equip them for successful futures. This also aligns with our first recommendations on making clearer and in-depth guidance more available and accessible.

3. Support mechanism to raise young people's career horizons, confidence and skills foundation

There is a need for educationally disengaged and low attaining school pupils be incentivised to acquire job-relevant skills and competencies at early stages of their education, **certainly between Key Stage 3 and 4 as this is period where drop-out and disengagement set in**. Foundation Maths and English skills to provide a bedrock for employability, and additional life skills coaching can help better transfer skills and interests to job aspirations outcomes. Better integration of SEN, careers support and pastoral components of education will help bridge important provision and resources need in ways that support learners' awareness and understanding of their interests and opportunities.

We know that early educational scarring based on adverse educational experience can have significantly detrimental impacts on young people's initial aspirations and outcomes. Early unemployment or unfavourable experiences of the labour market also impedes prospects and increases the likelihood of later unemployment (Tomlinson & Tholen, 2023). Evidence indicates the positive role that personalised interventions has on young people as during Covid-19, particularly for minimising educational scarring (Pensiero et al, 2020). Interventions such as the National Tutoring Programme are effective in cases where additional support is lacking. Revisiting this approach and providing it wholesale for vulnerable learners (ideally via mentors/role models from first-generation backgrounds), would ensure they receive personalised and impactful educational and work-related support. This also provides valuable work experience of current HE student and early-stage graduates.

4. Broaden the horizons of opportunity for NEETs with bridging programmes into VET and Work

There is a need to understand the extent to which those in the category of NEET see themselves as having the capability to participate, whether that is seen as being materially or culturally within their bounds of possibility. Knowledge and understanding of work and job opportunities is a key element of careers support and independent IAG. The current demand for occupations related to Green Skills may not be within the horizon of possibilities for those who are NEET. There is a need for VET providers to have funding for creative VET interventions that bridge people to employment, education and training. Short bridging courses such as Pre-Apprenticeship courses have potential to provide at-risk learners with both employment-relevant skills and qualification and work. The Unite Union provides an example of a partnership between the Scottish Electrical Charitable Training Trust, local colleges and industry that has successfully provided a bridge to work for participants (Unite 2025). These Access to Apprenticeship initiatives have the potential to enable the transition from NEET to Employment with Education and Training.

The skills ecosystem between educational institutions and local labour market needs to be enhanced, especially in areas of high youth unemployment. At-risk learners need access to high-value and aligned work experience that is recognised by employers. Accessing valuable first-time work experience is vitally important in addressing the catch-22 work experience short-fall young people often describe - **not being able to get work experience because they do not have the experience**.

Employers are key actors in the skills and career development ecosystem and have a significant role to play in supporting at-risk learners through the design and demand signalling of skills within educational institutions. Working more closely with educational providers in the design, learning and assessment of

VET programmes and work-related learning will enable learners to acquire valued skills and broker better relationship building between actors on the supply and demand side of the labour market. Once in first-time employment, employer commitment to continued training and skills utilisation is essential so that learners can build up their skills and employment profile within a workplace, whilst also making them more attractive to external markets.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5258/SOTON/PP0169>