



## Young People in Jobs without Training in South West England: Not Just ‘Dead-end Kids in Dead-end Jobs’ Summary Report

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### 1. Introduction

Young people in jobs without training<sup>1</sup> (JWT) have been identified as a ‘problem’ group who need encouraging into formal education and training. Yet very little is known about their lives, jobs and priorities.

The policy aim, highlighted in the Government’s 14-19 Skills White Paper, is to provide this group of young people with training and educational opportunities to enhance and develop their skills so that they can compete more effectively in the job market. Following the Leitch Review (2006), which emphasised the skills ‘deficit’ amongst young people and the subsequent proposal (DfES, 2007) that *all* young people should be engaged in education and training up to age 18, it has become even more important to understand the needs and perceptions of those young people currently in jobs without training.

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<sup>1</sup> Training in this context is understood to mean employees’ engagement in a programme of nationally accredited Level 2<sup>1</sup> training/education. If young people are not engaged in formal training, they are defined as being in the JWT category, which has been identified by policy-makers as an area of priority concern.

Anticipating the importance of this issue, the South West Regional Skills Partnership established a Steering Group in February 2005 to advise and develop measures that regional partners could take to increase participation in education and training by young people in JWT. It proposed a research project that aimed to enhance academic and policy-makers' understandings of the ambitions and circumstances of young people in JWT and also to promote improved understanding and practice amongst Connexions' front-line delivery staff.

Commissioned by SLIM on behalf of the South West Regional Skills Partnership, this research is the first large scale longitudinal qualitative study completed on young people in JWT. It was funded by the European Social Fund, the Learning and Skills Council and Connexions and was conducted by researchers from the University of Exeter in collaboration with Connexions.

The work built upon an earlier report by SLIM in October 2005<sup>2</sup>, arising out of their policy and practitioner Learning Theme workshop on the issues around young people in employment without training in the South West.

## **2. Aims of the research**

The research aimed to address four key research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of young people in JWT? How can these be best understood?
2. What are the interests and enthusiasms of young people in JWT?
3. How can Connexions services best understand and respond to these diverse interests of young people in JWT?
4. At what points in their careers and in what ways are young people in JWT most receptive to moving into learning opportunities?

The questions were framed to enable the researchers to explore the relationship between policy interests and practices and the interests and concerns of young people.

The research involved a sample of young people, aged between 16 and 21 years, although most were 17-18 years old, who were in JWT in the South West from the counties of Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Gloucestershire, Dorset and Wiltshire. It was a qualitative longitudinal study involving 182 telephone and face-to-face interviews with 114 young people. The longitudinal dimension to the research was provided through a series of re-interviews. This sought to provide some sense of the transitional and transformative quality of the lives of these young people.

In order to 'find' the young people (who are often regarded as hard to reach), the decision was taken to work alongside Connexions PAs, whose jobs brought them into daily contact with young people, many of whom were in the JWT category.

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<sup>2</sup> Evans, C. & Pye, J. (2005) *Young People: Employment without Training, Learning Theme Report*, Exeter: SLIM.

Whilst young people who take a 'break' from study for a year between school and college or university are not engaging in Level 2 training/education (the baseline for determining JWT status), the research did not wish to over-represent them within the cohort. In order to circumvent this problem researchers focused upon young people who had been receiving Connexions advice for more than a year since leaving school. The diversity of the cohort was represented by the fairly even gender splits between males and females, although ethnic origins were almost wholly white, reflecting the often rural demographic.

The project was conducted by three researchers from Exeter University, with expertise in the field of post-compulsory education and training. This core research team worked closely with a group of Connexions Personal Advisers (PAs) who represented the six participating Connexions partnerships across the South West of England.

One important strand of the project was to build research capacity within the Connexions' sector, by directly involving PAs in the research process. The Connexions PAs conducted telephone interviews with the young people and took part in a participative stakeholder seminar. A quantitative dimension was also provided by an analysis of local and national data.

### **3. Young People in Jobs without Training**

One of challenges of understanding the scale of the JWT category is that the various agencies that compile the statistical data do so on the basis of very different criteria. There is not yet a national database which tracks all young people as they move through and beyond school. The databases that are used in different Connexions regions are not consistent with one another, raising an important issue of reliability of data in this area and thus the robustness of the evidence for policy making.

A review of the data found that in 2005 Connexions indicated that in excess of 30% of Year 11 leavers in the South West were in employment, but receiving no training. This is one of the lowest rates in the country, with only young people in London in a less advantageous position.

However, there are some significant differences at sub-regional level. So, for example, the problems facing young people in Cornwall are very different to those in Gloucestershire and Bournemouth.

Although the South West appears one of the more 'effective' regions in terms of providing employment to young people, the data also show that much of this employment is not the kind that provides training, particularly accredited training. Although employers in the South West region expressed some dissatisfaction with young recruits, very few employers mentioned lack of literacy, numeracy or of generic skills, focusing instead on lack of motivation and work ethic<sup>3</sup> which is hardly surprising given that the young people were often in their first period of sustained employment. Indeed, many of the same criticisms are often made of young graduates entering work for the first time.

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<sup>3</sup> BMG Research (2006) *The National Employer Skills Survey 2005 for the South West of England*, Exeter: SLIM, pp. 67-68.

The data also suggest that young women in the labour force continue to be employed in different sectors than their male counterparts and that systematic gender segregation persists. There is evidence also that they are more likely to be employed in part-time work, which in turn has implications for access to training.

Within the sample of young people interviewed for this research, there is a sense that young people in JWT in the South West are invisible. This reflects their marginal position within national debates - as provincial, rural and often sidelined. It is essential to acknowledge the power of locality: the life courses of the young people in this study were strongly shaped by local contexts and traditions in the South West.

The vast majority of those involved in the research did not live in large urban conurbations or the inner city but in small and medium-sized towns and in largely rural environments. As the quantitative data show, there are jobs available to them, but few 'good' ones. In accordance with the patterns of employment traced in the quantitative data, much of their work was located in the retail and service sector or in work that is not generally associated with a high degree of skill, and characterised by 'long hours and rubbish pay'. Their opportunities and choices were very different from those living in large metropolitan areas and essentially much more limited.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that being in a job without training is not a discrete or fixed category. Many of the young people in the study moved in and out of JWT over time: the group included some who were often 'not in education, employment, or training' (NEET) and only intermittently in work and some who had built up a strong work profile and were about to undertake Level 3 training. As one PA reflected in her journal: 'It's interesting to see how fluid the JWT population is'. For some young people in the study, taking a job without training was merely contingent, their choices were limited and they took what was available.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Class, race and gender**

Young people's ability to act is invariably constrained by their class, gender and race positions. Almost all of the young people interviewed were white and would be deemed working-class, using their parents' occupations as an indicator.

Most of the young people in the study had not had a successful experience at school and left with qualifications that were far below government targets of 5 A\*-C GCSEs. Their accounts of secondary education were of large impersonal schools where bullying was rife and where they were quickly labelled as low achieving and in need of advice and guidance, with several participants referring to problems related to dyslexia and learning difficulties.

The significance of 'whiteness' and the recognition that it itself is a raced category is increasingly acknowledged in the literature on young people<sup>4</sup>. Although their whiteness conveys certain privileges, their class potentially positions them in the category 'white trash'.

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<sup>4</sup> Quinn, J., Thomas, L., Slack, K., Casey, L., Thexton, W. and Noble, J. (2006) Lifting the hood: lifelong learning and young white provincial working class masculinities, *British Educational Research Journal*, 32 (5) pp. 735-751.

In their accounts anxieties about respectability shape the sorts of jobs they want or feel able to get.

Gender differences amongst the young people are also apparent, even though many themselves claimed not to make these distinctions. There was evidence of young women seeking to break out of traditional roles. However, it was much more common to find young women as shop assistants and clerical workers.

The young people in the study cannot be seen as free agents totally able to shape their futures by motivation or good intentions. There were powerful structural forces in play and these had not generally worked to the advantages of this cohort in their lives so far. However, they made efforts to resist being fixed by their histories.

#### **4.2 Fragmented identities**

So how did the young people see themselves and how did they understand their lives? Many seemed unable and unwilling to give any coherent story of themselves and their lives. They are vague about their job histories and mystify their qualifications.

For the young people in the study the present itself was imaginary, little wonder therefore that formal transition points such as leaving school or interviews for jobs are slipped over and have little meaning. There was much instability and insecurity in the lives of many of the participants.

In a society where the onus is on gaining school level qualifications, continuing in education, getting a respectable job with training, or somehow circumventing the system and gaining celebrity, those who do not do any of these things are seen as losers, and no-one wants to hear their story. Being vague on the details enables the young people to slip some of these constraints and evade being fixed.

The consequence of this is that there is a real clash of realities between the young people themselves and those who are trying to help them.

#### **4.3 Imagination and risk**

Young people in JWT are commonly perceived as lacking in any of the skills and attributes necessary to make a mark in their worlds. This was not the picture that was presented during the research. The research observed young people who operated strategically, and made decisions that had an impact upon their own lives and those around them. Willingness to be imaginative and take risks marked some young people as more likely to be successful.

One of the issues that formed some of the deep background to the discussions with the young people was the issue of drugs and the drug culture and its impact on them, their communities and their friends. Whilst it is impossible to ignore the dangers associated with the drugs culture and the very real issues and dilemmas that young people face, these young people have resisted drug culture sufficiently to avoid criminalisation.

Rather than suggesting that young people are somehow victims, this shows that the young people made pragmatic decisions about their own activities and about what they were prepared to disclose to others. It is clear that a simple 'good/bad' typology is an

oversimplification of the complex situations which the young people in research were generally able to manage and negotiate.

#### **4.4 ‘Survivors not losers’**

Young people in JWT have tended to be portrayed as ‘dead-end kids’, simultaneously street wise and victimised. This view was reinforced by the Connexions PAs who worked with them and at the capacity-building sessions at the start of the research PAs described them as ‘drifting’ but also ‘trapped’.

The difference is that official accounts and the media portray young people as dangerous victims, because of their fundamental lack of the qualities necessary to be successful citizens. Despair at society’s inability to control gang culture amongst young people has been apparent in the tone of the media coverage of the recent spate of teenage murders across the UK.

Yet, whilst young people in JWT are perceived in the media as being to a degree marginalised from the rest of society, interviews with young people in the South West region suggest that they do not regard themselves in that way. Rather they were largely positive about their experiences, pleased to be in work rather than sitting around at home not working, and/or engaging in illegal and criminal activities. They were survivors and not losers and it is those survival skills which need to be picked up and worked with.

The research found the young people were building a store of life and work experiences and developing as independent young adults who were surviving difficult circumstances with good humour.

#### **4.5 Young people’s needs and formal education/training pathways**

The research also found that there is often a mismatch between young people’s needs and formal education and training. The formal education system emphasises linear pathways and progression and enforces them quite rigidly, backed up by career advice<sup>5</sup>.

Segregation starts way before 14 and the young people in the study have mainly been sorted into a struggling secondary school then steered into the vocational route at GCSE level. The current expectation that forms of education and training must continue post 16 was seen as a trap by many of the interviewees. They were highly resistant to returning to formal education. Only 4% of those re-interviewed wanted to go to FE college for training.

Information, advice and guidance (IAG) emphasises formal routes to employment which are strongly linked to accredited qualifications; young people are told that without the right qualifications they will never get a good job. In reality this becomes quite counterintuitive, since so many of the participants got their jobs, including jobs they liked, with prospects, through informal contacts of families and friends.

Many of the young people did recognise that if they wanted to progress or make radical changes, some form of training would be necessary, but it needed to be the right training at the right time.

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<sup>5</sup> Quinn, J., Thomas, L., Slack, K., Casey, L., Thexton, W. & Noble, J. (2005) From Life Crisis to Lifelong Learning: Rethinking working class ‘drop out’ from HE, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

For many of the young people there was a sense that just as they felt ready for training it became an avenue that seemed closed off to them: 'I realise now I'd like to be an engineer, but I'm too old to do it now'. The focus on young people 14-19 rather than upon training and education as a continuing lifelong activity with the concomitant support and other systems was an issue that many of the young people commented upon.

#### **4.6 A job without training, not a job without learning**

Some of the young people in JWT saw their jobs as boring, frustrating and pointless. However, this did not necessarily mean that they would not try to move on to something more rewarding. Having accredited training was rarely the factor that made for a sense of satisfaction and reward.

Again, a common perception of young people in JWT is that they have 'potential' but are wasting it through lack of 'motivation'. However, the young people themselves told a rather different story. Although to some extent they did position themselves as 'the thick bunch', who were channelled towards Connexions advice from school onwards, they were also able to recount many forms of informal ability and interests. They had skills with computing or mechanics, developed at home rather than school, skills looking after animals and creative skills. These skills and enthusiasms had legitimacy for them even without formal qualifications and many of the young people stressed that they did not want to learn in a classroom.

There was a sense, too, that being in the workplace rather than back in the classroom had made them more mature: 'because we've been out in the real world, we know more about what's going on.'

Although the young people seemed aware that training was generally considered desirable, they knew from experience that small employers did not necessarily encourage it and for many of them small firms characterised employment in the South West, as the quantitative data suggest.

Almost all of the young people interviewed recognised that the skills that they needed in their work roles were often not the hard 'how to do' skills associated with particular tasks but a skill set which was at least in part cultural and related to their particular situation. There was a recognition that in order to get on in their jobs, they needed not only to impress their immediate line managers and supervisors, but to identify and develop a social, collaborative and flexible skill set.

Training becomes a reality for these young people once it becomes essential to the skills they need for the job they want. Moreover a lot of the young people who were re-interviewed said they would take up accredited training if offered it by their employers.

#### **4.7 Readiness for Training**

One of the assumptions about training and work is that young people will have before them a trajectory or ladder of progression which they will traverse until they reach their goals. This

is a simplistic view of the career trajectories of young people who sometimes, but often do not, move in this way through their careers<sup>6</sup>.

All of the young people interviewed justified their actions as personal choices, when in fact much of their decision making was essentially prescribed by external factors, for example problems of schooling, of family or finance.

The importance of social networks cannot be underestimated. Despite the fact that the young people in the sample were locked into the JWT systems and structures with their Connexions PAs, many of them secured employment through their own social organisations, families and communities.

An important yet unsurprising finding in the research is that there is no particular moment that can be identified where it is possible to say that at that moment young people are ready to embrace learning. This does not mean that they do not wish to learn at all, rather that they are unprepared and unwilling to subject themselves to the formalised learning that they associate with schooling.

Even in the short space of time during which the research took place, the life circumstances of many of the young people became transformed, and life commitments and experiences, sometimes in work but also outside, led some of them to begin to reappraise their options and aspirations.

It was when they became oriented to the future and not the present that formal learning re-entered the picture. The problem was that post-19 guidance was no longer available, just at the point it might be more useful.

On the positive side, those who came back to formal learning often did so by finding something that they enjoyed or felt they could do well and then deciding at that point to pursue studies. This suggests that creating links between informal learning and formal work and training opportunities is a key factor in supporting these young people.

#### **4.8 Support Advice and Guidance**

In terms of formal IAG, the opportunity afforded by Connexions appeared variable. Some viewed the service positively, others felt it was restrictive. For some, Connexions was simply pushing a government agenda and failed to listen to the young people themselves.

Clearly, young people at this stage in their lives are in need of IAG. It is an immensely difficult task to construct and deliver IAG in a way that is going to help all young people, not just those in the JWT category, to engage with any future employment and training.

The Government acknowledges that good IAG is vital and that this needs to be linked to the creation of a 'universal careers service, working with Jobcentre Plus, ... to ensure that everyone is able to access the help they need to take stock of where they are in achieving their

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<sup>6</sup> Lawy, R. (2003). Transformation of person, identity and understanding: a case study, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 24 (3) pp. 331-345.

goals and ambitions, and to get the support they need’ (DIUS, 2007: 28). What remains to be seen is how 14-19 IAG can be integrated with the post-19 adult careers service.

In the light of all these changes, concerns about how and why young people in JWT are given both appropriate and consistent IAG are both timely and of great importance.

The findings also show, unsurprisingly, that frontline Connexions staff succeed when they build ongoing relationships with young people, rather than going through the motions of providing advice. Holistic guidance which links work and learning to advice on social and personal problems has most chance of making a difference.

## 5. Reflections

One of the dangers of this research was of presenting young people as having little or no agency or control over their own destinies. While the evidence from the research shows that this is far from the case, it is important at the same time not to romanticise the experiences of this group of young people, who have been targeted by the government as being ‘at risk’ or at least in need of help and support in their quest for ‘meaningful’ employment.

The research suggests that a nuanced picture of the ‘problem’ of young people’s engagement in JWT provides a more appropriate response. Indeed, this has served to highlight a set of issues that are commonly overlooked when the views and experiences of young people are discounted or where they are assumed to speak with one particular voice.

One of the ‘key lessons’ from the *Understanding Young People in JWT* report<sup>7</sup> produced by the DfES was that the Connexions staff interviewed ‘stressed that they knew less about this group [JWT] than other group of young people with whom they worked, especially those who moved from job to job’<sup>8</sup>. This research has now added to the sum of knowledge about this group of young people.

The reflections of the research fall under two broad headings:

- Conceptual issues that became evident during the course of the research; and
- Social and structural issues and constraints.

### 5.1 Conceptual issues

The category of ‘young person in a job without training’ is needlessly critical: these young people are being defined entirely in terms of what they ‘lack’ and thus the skills and knowledge they possess are overlooked. The findings suggest that JWT need not be a deficit category and that positioning such young people as ‘dead-end kids in dead-end jobs’ does not do justice to their complex lives.

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<sup>7</sup> Anderson, A., Brooke, B., Doyle, A., Finn, D. and Moley S. (2006) *Understanding Young People in Jobs without Training (Research Report 736)*, London: Department for Education and Skills.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p2.

JWT is also a very fluid category. Over the period of our study, 28% of our re-interview group had moved to other jobs, 17% had become NEET and 18% had taken up accredited training.

This category covers a diverse range of activities, from building a career to one-off day jobs. It is not the job without training that matters but the purpose it serves. Having this generic category is not particularly helpful in understanding the lives of young people.

The young people interviewed for this research see themselves as survivors not losers, and they differentiate themselves from those who seem beyond hope because they are involved in crime or drug use.

These young people *are* receiving training. 40% of those re-interviewed were involved in training, which was mostly work-related and perceived as valuable, however only 18% of this was accredited.

The emphasis on formal training and on bringing these young people back into the loop of schooling is misplaced. For the majority of the young people in the research, school was negative and they prefer to learn in other contexts such as work. Only 4% of those re-interviewed would consider going to FE college, whilst 28% would take up accredited training in the workplace.

Their life-paths are not neat trajectories and they actively resist being pinned down. Punishing them for not being linear, which the current highly structured and hierarchical educational system does, is outdated and counterproductive.

The skills that matter to them are those that enable them to do the jobs they want to do. They have a strong sense of what is legitimate learning and what is bogus. Many feel they are learning useful and credible skills in the workplace and much prefer this to accredited courses of dubious quality and relevance. Some of the skills that are seen as most valuable are soft interpersonal skills rather than hard mechanical ones.

Many of the young people got their employment via informal contacts and social networks and not through formal agencies. They have good local knowledge and employ it to get jobs.

They do have informal skills and interests and sometimes they are able to develop them into career paths, but mostly they do not have the confidence or encouragement to do this.

They are often ready to take up training after a few years in employment, rather than immediately after school. The emphasis on 16-19 and the concentration of guidance at this time is far too narrow a window for them.

To support these young people effectively, it is important for those engaged in policy and practice to be willing to have their assumptions about what is a worthwhile job and a worthwhile life course challenged.

The research concluded that the way young people in JWT are thought about and discussed needs to be re-conceptualised in order to take account of these very different meanings that attach to their lives.

## 5.2 Structural issues

Although the positive elements in the lives of young people in JWT are often neglected, it is important to acknowledge the problems they face too. These transitional periods can all too easily solidify into low-waged and insecure futures.

These young people are the products of a hierarchical and unequal education system and have had limited opportunities to gain good qualifications at school level.

The quantitative and qualitative data show that the young people in the study do have work opportunities, but they are mostly reluctant to leave their home area. The data also shows that in the South West the jobs available to them are mainly low status with little job security. The job market is also highly gendered, and whilst it is possible to take up non-traditional roles, it is often very difficult.

Problems such as lack of transport and housing difficulties restrict the ability of young people to take up the jobs they want. In some cases they face a range of personal problems related to poverty, family difficulties, accidents and ill-health which make sustaining a job very hard.

They are aware that they are positioned negatively in our society and mask and hide themselves when faced with those in authority. At the same time, they value those who are prepared to take a genuine and holistic interest in them, but resist those who appear to see them as targets to be delivered.

They do need support and guidance, even though providing it can be frustrating and difficult. They are confused as to where to get such guidance, particularly post 19.

The research shows that the ‘problem’ of young people in jobs without training is not a problem of the young people themselves, but a problem of inequality. Only a restructuring of schooling, a major investment in local economies, adequate infrastructures of transport and housing and a shift in cultural narratives about what constitutes a successful and valid life will really improve opportunities for them.

## 6. Recommendations

Whilst conceptual and structural changes are the key factors in supporting young people in jobs without training, the research found that practical recommendations can make a difference. A number of recommendations are therefore set out below:

- The systems and structures of support for young people in the post-16 sector should be re-badged as separate to those that pertain to young people in school, for example as ‘Teenstart’.
- These systems should be unified and follow the same protocols across different regions.
- There should be a multi-agency approach which combines advice on education and training with support on personal and social problems and which makes explicit links with leisure and informal learning opportunities.

- Opportunities for young people to sample different work experiences and the skills associated with them need to be made more accessible. These opportunities need to be resourced and funded in a way that does not further stigmatise them.
- The validity of good work-based learning should be endorsed and supported.
- There needs to be a recognition that the work and learning trajectories of young people do not follow linear patterns and that the systems of support advice and guidance need to be flexible and available at a point when they decide to lock into them.
- There should be an information campaign alerting young people over 19 to opportunities for training and for advice and guidance.
- The funding mechanisms and structures that operate through the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to support young people in JWT should not penalise providers simply because there is not a measurable outcome.
- Funding mechanisms for young people in the Learning and Skills (further education) sector need to be structured so that young people can access education and training post age 19 and so that neither they nor the providers are financially disadvantaged.
- The broad remit of the PAs needs to be recognised with appropriate training to support the pastoral work they need to do with this client group.
- IAG specialist knowledge should be better resourced and supported from pre-14 onwards.
- CPD for PAs should include opportunities for reflection and sharing of knowledge with others, such as PAs from other areas, practitioners from related fields and researchers in post-compulsory education and training.

## 7. Full Report

Copies of the full report can be downloaded from the SLIM website:

<http://www.swslim.org.uk/downloads/2565.pdf>



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