

# Supporting the Transitions of Vulnerable Youth: UK Perspectives

**Andy Furlong**

School of Business and Management, University of Glasgow

## 1. Introduction

As a result of changes in the UK youth labour market, policies relating to the support for youth transitions have become increasingly interventionist. Prior to the mid-1970s, with a relatively buoyant youth labour market, interventions were largely limited to the provision of guidance. With an increase in unemployment and the virtual collapse of the youth labour market in the recession of 1980-1983 a range of support structures were introduced, many of which were both ineffectual and unpopular with young people. During the 1980s and 1990s unemployment rates remained relatively high and many of the jobs traditionally sought by minimum aged school-leavers disappeared. In particular, the loss of jobs in the manufacturing industries removed many traditional apprenticeship opportunities and the range of unskilled occupations available to school-leavers declined. Partly in response to the decline of the youth labour market and the increased demand for skilled and educated workers, patterns of educational participation changed with post-compulsory participation becoming a majority experience.

In many respects, those with poor educational qualifications have seriously lost out as a consequence of the changes in the labour market. Nearly one in two young people now experience Higher Education and this has resulted in a process of qualification inflation with the poorly qualified finding it increasingly difficult to secure quality jobs. Moreover, the shift from manufacturing to service sector employment has resulted in demands for soft skills which employers often perceive as lacking in unqualified school-leavers. While levels of unemployment are currently low, it is recognised that unqualified young people face difficulties in the labour market and often fail to establish secure positions. Various interventions have been developed to try and improve their situation, although in the main they have had limited success. In this paper I provide an overview of changing school to work transitions in the UK, with a focus on the development of interventions aimed at vulnerable youth. I begin by outlining the UK education<sup>1</sup> system, looking at change and describing qualifications, patterns of participation, and at differentiated outcomes. In the following section I focus on changing labour market experiences, with an emphasis on unemployment and insecurity. Finally I outline a range of initiatives developed in the UK, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses.

---

<sup>1</sup> Within the UK there are some differences in the way education is organised and delivered in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. To avoid providing an unnecessarily complex picture, I only draw attention to key differences in qualifications.

## 2. Education and Change

Compulsory education in the UK takes place between the ages of 5 and 16 with consideration currently being given to extending to the age of 18. At 16 young people sit examinations in a range of subjects known as Ordinary Grade (or O Grade) in England and Wales and Standard Grade in Scotland and are graded on their performance. While each subject is graded from A-E, grades of A-C are considered to be ‘passes’ while D-E are often regarded as compensatory awards. Those without passes at A-C grades are often referred to as unqualified school-leavers. In general terms, those with 5 or more O Grades at A-C are deemed to have done well and are seen as having the potential to progress to the next stage which is typically a two year course leading to advanced qualifications (Advanced Level or A levels) in about three subjects<sup>2</sup>.

If they decide to remain in education, those who achieved poorer qualifications at age 16 tend to re-take O Grades, take a mixture of O Grades and A levels or move to further education colleges to take vocational subjects. Although there are some alternative routes, A level results are the main mechanism used to allocate university places, with individual institutions setting tariffs for entry into specific subjects. Typically an elite university may require three A grades at A level for entry into its most prestigious courses while a new university may accept a candidate with two passes at grade C.

For those who do not proceed to Higher Education, qualifications are an extremely good predictor of labour market experiences. In general, those who enter occupations providing quality training, either through a formal apprenticeship scheme or through a structured programme leading to a vocational qualification, tend to be those who leave school with reasonable qualifications<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, many of the most successful early leavers are young people who had the potential to progress in full-time education but who preferred to enter the labour market more directly.

Just twenty years ago, the majority of young people left full-time education at age 16 to enter full-time jobs. This was particularly true of those from working class families. In 1974, for example, around a third (33%) of 16 year-old males and less than four in ten (37%) females participated in some form of post-compulsory education, by 2004 67 per cent of males and 77% of females remained in education beyond the minimum leaving age (Hayward *et al.*, 2004).

Changes in patterns of participation have been triggered by curriculum reform and represent a response to the decline in opportunities for minimum aged school leavers. Qualification inflation also means that more young people now achieve grades that facilitate progression while there are a greater range of educational options available to those whose performance is weaker. In a sense, qualifications, as a marker of educational ‘success’, encourage progression. Hence changes in the curriculum and new forms of examination can be implemented in ways that lead to an increase in participation, even when there is no underlying boost in performance. As post-compulsory educational participation becomes the norm, as it has in the UK, cultural contexts are adapted and groups that once expected to leave education at the earliest opportunity incorporate educational attainment and progression into their frames of reference.

Despite increasing levels of participation in post-compulsory education, there are still strong differentials associated with social class. Between 1989 and 2000, levels of educational participation among 16 year-olds increased among all social classes (Figure 1). Among the

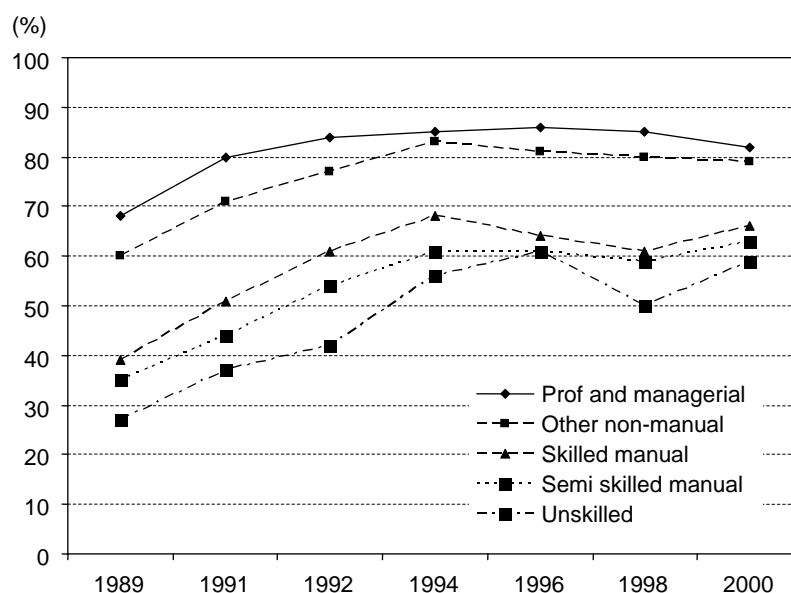
---

<sup>2</sup> In Scotland young people follow a slightly broader curriculum and sit ‘Highers’ in four or five subjects.

<sup>3</sup> Some of these will achieve the qualifications necessary to secure entry to an apprenticeship or further training at age 16, others will need to re-sit O Grades to improve grades. Employers vary enormously in the qualifications they require from recruits seeking training positions.

manual classes, participation grew by around 30 percentage points, doubling the rate of participation among the unskilled class in the course of a decade. By contrast, expansion among the non-manual classes was much weaker – just 14 percentage points among the professional and managerial classes. However, while the gap between the classes has narrowed, a relatively large gulf still exists.

Figure 1. 16 Year-olds in Full-time Education by Social Class: UK 1989-2000



Source: Hayward *et al.*, 2004.

The maintenance of class-based stratification in educational participation is particularly strongly pronounced in relation to Higher Educational and the recent growth of provision has done little to benefit the working classes. Indeed, between 1991 and 2001 the rate of expansion in the uptake of Higher Education among the non-manual classes was twice that of the lower working classes. In fact over the decade the gulf between the manual and non-manual classes actually increased by seven percentage points (Summerfield and Gill 2005).

Recognising the importance of providing more equitable access to educational opportunities, the UK has recently introduced an educational maintenance allowance for young people from low waged families in order to provide a financial incentive to continued educational involvement and to ensure that affordability does not represent a barrier to participation (Croxford *et al.* 2002). Here, so as to reduce the pressure to leave school and find work in order to contribute to family finances, the government introduced a system of payments to young people who remained at school or college beyond the age of 16. The benefit is means-tested with those from the poorest families receiving the highest payments.

Strong incentives to remain in education also stem from changes in patterns of demand within the labour market, particularly the increase in professional and technical positions and the decline in unskilled jobs in manufacturing. These changes have provided strong source of encouragement for young people to remain in education so as to maximize credentials. A lack of opportunities for early school-leavers has effectively resulted in a ‘discouraged worker’ effect whereby some young people remain in full-time education due to concerns about job availability (Raffe and Willms 1989). Indeed, in some areas the sharp decline in opportunities for minimum-aged school-leavers has produced an army of reluctant conscripts to post-

compulsory education (Biggart and Furlong, 1996).

Increasingly though, changing patterns of employment and the demands of employers for a better educated labour force are affecting educational aspirations and attainments. Subjective orientations towards educational participation were once seen in relatively simplistic terms, essentially as class-based rejections or acceptances of middle class educational cultures and related expectations regarding future patterns of participation in the labour market. Willis (1977), for example, explained the experiences of lower working class boys in terms of their resistance to middle class school cultures which were seen as largely irrelevant to their future lives in manual occupations.

Today the cultural dimensions of decisions about educational participation are recognised as being more complex and tend not to involve such strong cultural-based rejections of the value and benefits of extended education (Biggart and Furlong 1996, Ball *et al.* 2000). The increased emphasis placed on educational attainment in working class families stems, in part, from a growing awareness of the importance of credentials in the modern economy. It can also be linked to the breakdown of a visible dichotomy in the labour market between working class and middle class jobs that has accompanied the decline of manufacturing industry, as well as to a more educated parentage and a trend towards employment in smaller work units where social divisions are less visible. These factors have been linked to the so-called 'epistemological fallacy' of late modernity in which linkages between objective structures of opportunity and subjective interpretations of social position become increasingly tenuous (Furlong and Cartmel 1997).

Among those who are less successful academically (who are predominantly from the working classes) research has shown that many become seriously disillusioned with schooling at an early stage and either lose, or never develop, a motivation to engage with schooling (Ball *et al.*, 2000). In some cases disaffection is entrenched within the culture of the schools where it is almost expected that young people from particular areas or families will leave at an early stage with few qualifications (as is often the case).

It is not uncommon for young people to start to lose interest in school as a result of poor performance in exams and tests in the early stages of secondary schooling. They can lose confidence in their ability and may lack the motivation to learn. Frequently there is a gradual loss of motivation which can be linked to patterns of attainment as well as to the development of outside interests which began to take up more of their time and energy. Among the middle and low attainment groups, attitudes to school are often ambivalent. Young people may appreciate the need for qualifications in order to get decent jobs, but are never stimulated academically and tend to regard school as a chore. These young people often feel that teachers focus on the academic hi-flyers and see themselves as occupying the periphery of a system centred on the needs of the academic elite.

In schools in deprived areas there is often a culture of truancy to which young people have to subscribe in order to be accepted as part of the peer group; the strong pull of the social and cultural environment can be hard to resist (Williamson 2004). In fact those who stand out as being bright or hardworking are frequently seen as 'different' by the peer group, resulting in a cycle of bullying ultimately leading to truancy as the victim seeks to avoid regular contact with the perpetrators. As Williamson notes, in lower working class communities, it isn't 'cool to be clever' (2004: 26) and those who enjoy school have to keep quiet about it so as not to 'lose face' in their peer group (2004: 28).

Decisions at age 16 tend to be coloured by past experience. Young people whose early experiences were very negative often had such bad memories that they refuse to contemplate any form of employment or training that would involve having to return to a classroom situation. The resources that young people are able to access also have a powerful impact on decisions about continued participation. Educational attainments are a key resource: they open up a clear route for progression through the upper secondary school and on to Higher

Education. A good set of qualifications also generate an associated benefit: strong encouragement from teachers for them to remain in education. For middle class pupils this source of support tends to bolster the encouragement that they already enjoy from their families, while for some working class pupils teachers can be the sole source of explicit academic encouragement. However, while teachers often put great efforts into ensuring that educational hi-flyers (*especially* those from less advantaged families) remain in full-time education, there is very little evidence of teachers going out of their way to retain average and low attaining pupils (Furlong, 2005).

When young people's decisions to remain in education are positively encouraged by their families, few seriously contemplate early leaving. Indeed, young people from relatively affluent families often point out that their parents would not permit them to leave education at 16. Moreover, for more advantaged young people, parental encouragement to remain in education tends to be coupled with support from the school.

### 3. Changing Labour Market Experiences

Over the last couple of decades, young people's experiences in the labour market have changed quite radically. To put their labour market experiences into perspective, I will begin by describing experiences using data from a representative survey of 19 year-olds in Scotland<sup>4</sup> that was carried out in 2005 (Biggart *et al.* 2005). At age 19, 45 per cent were still in education, with 35 per cent in Higher Education and 10 per cent in Further Education. Around a quarter were in full-time employment (Table 1). Eight per cent were unemployed and 9 per cent were on government sponsored training schemes (which will be discussed in more detail in the next section).

Table 1. Main Activity of 19 Year-olds, by Gender (Scotland, 2005)

Main activity	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
Full-time job	28	25	26
Training scheme	12	5	9
Higher Education	32	38	35
Further Education	10	11	10
Part-time work	8	9	9
Unemployed	9	7	8
Looking after home	–	3	2
Other	1	2	1
Base (weighted)	1630	1598	3228
Base (unweighted)	1351	1880	3231

Activities at age 19 are powerfully affected by educational qualifications which themselves are strongly conditioned by social class. Of those with no qualifications, for example, 30 per cent were unemployed compared to just 3 per cent of those who had the equivalent of A level qualifications. Among those whose parents held higher managerial or professional occupations, 70 per cent were in full-time education at age 19, compared to 32

<sup>4</sup> Youth cohort surveys are completed separately for Scotland and England and Wales. For descriptive purposes, differences between Scotland and England are minimal.

per cent of those whose parents worked in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations.

With many managerial, professional and technical occupations largely reserved for those undertaking degree or other advanced courses, at age 19 those working full-time tended to be in routine occupations or training for skilled positions. Among the males, around half were working in craft and related occupations, while around a third were working as semi skilled operatives, in unskilled occupations or working in sales (Table 2). Almost three in four females were working in clerical and secretarial occupations, personal and protective services or in sales.

Table 2. Occupation of 19-year-old Full-time Workers, by Gender (Scotland, 2005)

Occupation	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
Managers/administrators	0	1	1
Professional	2	2	2
Associate prof/technical	7	4	6
Clerical & secretarial	6	27	15
Craft and related	51	2	30
Personal and protective services	1	30	13
Sales occupations	9	17	13
Plant & machine operators	7	2	5
Other occupations	17	16	17
Base (weighted)	604	446	1050
Base (unweighted)	422	439	861

For both males and females, friends and family are of crucial importance when it comes to finding employment. Four in ten 19 year-olds found their current or last job through family or friends. External sources, such as newspaper advertisements, are also important with 15 per cent finding jobs in this way. One in five found their jobs through government funded agencies such as the Jobcentre or Careers Service; organisations that will be discussed in more detail later.

Table 3. Method of Finding Last Current or Last Job, 19 Year-olds, by Gender (Scotland, 2005)

Method	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
Job centre	9	10	9
Careers service/advisor	11	11	11
External advert (e.g. newspaper)	13	17	15
Internal advert	3	6	4
Employment agency	1	3	2
Training scheme	4	2	3
Friend or family	42	37	40
Recruitment fair	2	1	1
Internet	2	2	2
Direct approach to employer	5	4	4
Other	9	7	8
Base (weighted)	848	684	1532
Base (unweighted)	578	665	1243

Turning to look more closely at labour market changes, the first point to make is that at the moment levels of unemployment among young people are not particularly high, although there have been recent increases. While youth unemployment<sup>5</sup> reached 23 per cent in the UK in 1983, it currently stands at around 11 per cent. The reduction in youth unemployment is largely a reflection of overall patterns of demand, but also reflects the development of a range of policies introduced to address problematic transitions that will be discussed later.

Unemployment tends to be disproportionately experienced by those with poor qualifications, those with specific difficulties to contend with (such as health problems, a criminal record or with responsibility for the care of children) and those in weaker labour markets, including rural areas and regions affected by industrial decline. While both academic and vocational qualifications provide some protection against unemployment (especially long-term unemployment) a significant minority of young people face difficulties in finding secure jobs with many of these encountering short but regular periods of worklessness.

Another important trend is the increase in the numbers of young people working part-time, or working in insecure and in non-standard jobs (Furlong and Kelly, 2005). In part, this change can be explained by the increase in the number of students who are mixing work and study, but that's not the whole story. In Europe one in two temporary workers are under 25 and the numbers in insecure jobs are increasing. Some caution is needed here – job tenure is decreasing among young people, but existing research is not clear about the extent that this represents growing precarity in conditions of employment rather than an increased desire for flexibility on the part of younger workers.

In effect, decreasing job tenure is likely to represent a mixture of changing preferences and structural insecurity. Yet as job insecurity seems to be increasing more rapidly among those with low level qualifications, it is likely that the most vulnerable are experiencing the impact of structural change rather than presenting changed preferences. Indeed, some European research focusing on changing preferences found that it was the more educated and affluent young people who were adopting new approaches to working life (du Bois Reymond, 1998). Referred to as 'trendsetters', these young people attempted to combine work and leisure in new ways and were happy to trade security for greater control over lifestyles.

The increase in temporary and unstable work has effectively created a new stage in the transition. For many, first experiences of work are in the temporary or precarious sectors of the labour market. For some, these types of work represent a first step to the more stable sectors of the labour market, but in many cases the transition to stable employment can be a slow one, and for some secure employment will prove elusive. In the UK, MacDonald and Marsh (2005) looked at the experiences of young people surviving in the informal economy in an ex-industrial area. They highlight the normality of such conditions among less advantaged young people. Similarly in Scotland research has provided clear evidence that for many movement from a state of worklessness into regular, reasonably secure, employment is a long drawn out process and tends to involve young people being 'churned' between a series of insecure and temporary jobs, interspersed with further periods of unemployment (Furlong and Cartmel, 2004). From a policy perspective those in a constant state of churn who avoid protracted unemployment – and many of them do – will tend to be overlooked. In the UK very little effort has been directed at attempts to move people who are employed in poor quality or insecure jobs into the stronger sectors of the labour market or into occupations that are more in line with their aspirations.

---

<sup>5</sup> The youth unemployment rate here refers to 15-24 year-olds.

#### 4. Assisting Transitions

In the UK, changes in the transition from school to work, and particularly the decline in opportunities for minimum aged school leavers have prompted governments to move from a position that was largely non-interventionist to a situation where the state has become a major provider of training. Prior to the mid-1970s, aside from providing careers advisors and taking some responsibility for the training of those with various disabilities, state intervention in youth transitions was virtually non-existent. This changed as a result of a rapid increase in youth unemployment and public concern about the lack of opportunities for school-leavers. The governments' response to rising youth unemployment was to set up a programme to provide temporary work experience for school-leavers without jobs. In this context, the Job Creation Programme was introduced in 1975 to provide young people with some work experience, although not to provide any formal training. At this stage, a small minority of young people experienced schemes, but in 1978 with the introduction of a new programme, the Youth Opportunities Programme, providing six months of work experience for those who had been unemployed for six weeks, levels of participation grew.

In 1981, Youth Opportunities was succeeded by the year-long Youth Training Scheme (YTS) and in 1986 YTS became a two-year programme (subsequently renamed Youth Training (YT)) and, more recently, Skillseekers. Each of these later schemes aimed to provide a programme of training rather than just work experience. Whereas the first schemes had been underpinned by the idea that an inevitable fall in unemployment would automatically lead to the creation of new jobs for young people, later schemes were developed in the knowledge that changes in the labour market had led to demands for young workers with different types of skills.

The current programme, Skillseekers, is delivered by employers (who receive a training subsidy) as well as by specialist providers (who often train those rejected by employer-based schemes). In general, programmes offered by employers tend to be the best prospects for future employment, largely because some trainees will be absorbed into the employers' workforce at the end of the training period. Skillseekers typically provides training to level 2 vocational qualifications which is roughly equivalent to five O Grades. The scheme has been criticised for not being ambitious enough in terms of the qualification levels it provides, although some trainees have the option of progressing to Modern Apprenticeships which offer training to level 3, which is the equivalent of A level. Modern Apprenticeships are offered in 80 occupational sectors and offer training in crafts, technical skills and trainee management. They are in high demands from young people and typically provide good future job prospects.

Historically, training schemes always attracted a degree of hostility from young people, although the newer programmes have been received more favourably. Four factors explain much of the negativity. First, the compulsory nature of participation whereby those who had been unemployed more than six months had their benefits withdrawn if they refused to participate. This led to resentment about the lack of choice with many wanting to continue to search for 'proper' jobs. Second, the relatively poor training allowance that was set just slightly above the unemployment benefit rate leading young people to describe schemes as 'slave labour'. Third, there was often a lack of choice regarding placements and young people could be trained to work in occupations they had no interest in. Fourth, in areas of high unemployment trainees were aware that many participants experienced further periods of unemployment on completing their schemes. Research tended to support the pessimistic view about the effectiveness of training schemes with some going so far as to argue that youth training had 'virtually no impact' on young peoples employment chances (THES 1994) and others showing that those who fail to find a job immediately after leaving their schemes found it difficult to escape long-term unemployment (Furlong 1993).

In many respects, youth training schemes have formed a bridge between Fordist and post-Fordist labour markets. They were introduced at a time when significant numbers of young



people were leaving school at an early stage and were seeking unskilled positions or training in manual trades. At their peak in the 1980s they accounted for first destinations of the majority of minimum-aged school leavers. Their decline can be linked to a reconciliation between new opportunities in the service and knowledge economy and the emergence of new aspirations and expectations that are more in tune with modern contexts.

Although the increase in participation in education and the relatively buoyant labour market have significantly reduced the demand from 16 and 17 year-olds for places on training schemes, to an extent the changes have postponed rather than overcome the transitional problems of vulnerable youth. The new set of programmes, introduced in 1998 and referred to as the New Deal, provide opportunities for those over the age of 18 who are encountering difficulties in the labour market. The New Deal is different from earlier training schemes in a number of ways. First, it is not targeted specifically at young people. The main programme is designed for those who are 25 and over while the New Deal for Young People is reserved for those between 18 and 25. Second, although participation is obligatory for young people unemployed over six months, it provides participants with a range of choices. Participants can undertake work-based training in specific occupations (subject to availability), can undertake college-based training or can participate in environmental programmes. A more recent modification to the programme also provides opportunities for those who want to follow musical pursuits and provides participants with an introduction to the music industry.

Some of the opportunities provided under the New Deal are located within what is referred to as the 'intermediary labour market'. Intermediary labour markets operate alongside the core labour market and offer opportunities to develop employability skills in an environment that closely represents mainstream labour market experiences. The idea of an intermediate labour market is not to compete with the mainstream labour market or to replace traditional jobs, but to provide additional economic activities, often offering benefits to the community or aiding neighbourhood regeneration. Jobs typically include environmental work such as maintaining footpaths or community work such as decorating the houses of old people. The aim is to 'give those who are most removed from the labour market a bridge back to the world of work by improving participants' general employability' (Marshall and Macfarlane, 2000). With a focus on the long-term unemployed, intermediary labour markets have tended to provide opportunities for adults rather than young people. However, around seven in ten participants are in the 18 to 25 age range. Participants tend to be paid around the minimum wage and are typically offered 12 month contracts. They work full-time, although many programmes will allow time off to search for mainstream jobs, and are usually provided with some training. Childcare may also be provided.

Intermediate labour markets are effectively contexts in which some centrally funded programmes are located and tend to rely on additional funds. Opportunities under the New Deal, for example, are offered within both the mainstream and intermediate labour markets. Intermediate labour markets tend to be developed by local authorities or voluntary organisations and typically need to access funding that is additional to that provided by centrally funded programmes. These additional funds are often secured through the European Structural Fund or through other regeneration programmes.

It is difficult to evaluate the impact of intermediary labour markets as they tend to operate within areas that have suffered from long-term decline and within these areas may recruit individuals who are hardest to place, many of whom will have a history of unemployment and some of whom will face other obstacles such as criminal records. It is recognised though, that intermediate labour markets are expensive and have tended to lack secure sources of funding. The drop out rate is quite high (20 to 30 per cent)<sup>6</sup>, with the rate of

---

<sup>6</sup> This is not higher than other labour market programmes.

job placement among those who complete the programme being around 50 per cent (Marshall and Macfarlane, 2000).

Recognising that many potential recruits needed to overcome specific problems or lack the soft skills required to undergo a successful training experience, the New Deal has a linked programme known as Gateway. The Gateway programme aims to prepare potential participants for New Deal participation and to move them closer to the labour market by addressing specific deficits. Gateway is tailored to individual needs and where necessary may try to address drug or alcohol problems or provide basic literacy or numeracy skills. The introduction of a gateway programme arose due to the recognition that many of those experiencing long-term unemployment at this time (when the labour market was relatively buoyant) were not always ready for direct entry to jobs but needed some intermediary preparation. The type of preparation needed tends to be highly variable and extends from the development of soft skills such as self presentation or timekeeping up to major drug issues or mental health problems that might require referral to specialist services.

The ability to offer solutions that are tailored to individual needs requires in depth knowledge of young people, their aspirations and the nature of the barriers they face. Traditionally knowledge of young people had come from two sources. First, the Careers Service whose primary job was to help school-leavers find suitable opportunities in employment, education or training. This tended to be a 'light touch' intervention in which, aside from a short interview prior to leaving school, the onus was largely with the young person to approach the Careers Service in order to seek help and advice. Second, the Social Security office that made payments to young people who were unemployed. Registered unemployment and the receipt of benefits placed a requirement on the young person to put themselves forward for help and advice by presenting regularly (usually fortnightly) at the Careers Office (or the Jobcentre for those over the age of 18).

Effectively the payment of unemployment benefits to young people without work meant that they were known to the system. In turn, they could be targeted for assistance and 'persuaded' to join training schemes or to return to education. However, partly due to a concern to reduce the numbers in receipt of benefits but also due to concerns about 'abuse' of the system of payments by 'workshy' youth, the system of benefits for young people was changed. Prior to the late 1980s, those 16 or over were able to claim unemployment benefits, although there were benefit sanctions in place for those who refused the offer of employment or training. This was changed in 1988 when unemployment benefits were withdrawn from 16 and 17 year-olds while those between 18 and 25 had their benefit levels reduced. The overall aim was to remove the 'option' of unemployment from young people and drive 'workshy' youth into productive activities. The action also had political benefits in that 'abolishing' youth unemployment benefits removed the need to publish a, politically sensitive, youth unemployment count.

These changes were accompanied by the introduction of new terminology. Rather than referring to workless youth as unemployed, the term NEET (not in education, employment or training) was introduced. While they overlap, NEET and unemployment are terms that have different focuses. NEET, as used in the UK, is quite different from its interpretation in Japan. NEET in the UK is a broad, heterogeneous, category while unemployment is a term that has traditionally been used to refer to a much more tightly defined group. Like unemployment, NEET includes young people who are available for work and are actively seeking employment, but unlike unemployment also covers those who are not available or not seeking work. Groups such as the long term sick or disabled or those with responsibilities for the care of children or relatives who may not be available for work are covered by the term NEET, as are those those who are not seeking work but pursuing other interests, resting, developing skills in an unpaid capacity through voluntary work or taking time to travel. Effectively NEET combines those with little control over their situation with those exercising choice, thereby

promoting a state of confusion about the factors associated with an apparent state of disadvantage (Furlong, 2006). The sub-groups contained within the NEET category have very different experiences, characteristics and needs. Groups of vulnerable young people who require distinct forms of policy intervention in terms of welfare or training provision are grouped with the privileged who may not require any assistance to move back into education or employment.

Effectively by grouping these various categories of experience, it becomes very difficult to identify those in need of specific interventions and this can tempt observers to use the characteristics of a sub-group to refer to members of the broader group. This problem is exacerbated by process of disconnection that potentially arises when young people are no longer required to register to claim benefits and are therefore not automatically channelled to sources of advice. On the positive side, the political construction of the NEET group brought social exclusion firmly onto the policy agenda. It forced policy makers to think of new ways to engage with a group of vulnerable young people who had become disconnected from sources of potential assistance.

In England, the solution that was introduced was referred to as 'Connexions' which aimed to provide 13-19 year-olds with access to a package of opportunities and advice relating to education and employment, with a particular emphasis on helping young people fulfil their potential by overcoming any barriers they faced. Setting out to provide a holistic service, it resulted in some merging of what once had been separate functions: the Careers Service which was focused on providing advice relating to jobs and education and the Youth Service who were mainly concerned with social and emotional support and informal education.

'Connexions is about helping young people navigate their way through decisions about studying, jobs and careers. Through youth work it's about helping young people get the personal development opportunities they need to fulfil their potential and become the active citizens of tomorrow. It's also about helping those who have problems with drugs, alcohol, depression, are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.' Connexions Service (2002).

Under Connexions, all young people are allocated a personal advisor, with those who are most vulnerable or who face the greatest hurdles tending to receive the most support, including access to specialist services if appropriate. Groups who would be provided with intense or specialist support include ex-offenders and those with chaotic lifestyles, those with learning difficulties and those with mental health issues all of whom would be identified by the personal advisor. Personal advisors also deal with issues such as lack of confidence, low motivation or poor self presentation and are required to work with young people to help them identify and overcome any barriers they may face in the course of their transitions. Although acute social withdrawal (referred to in Japan as the *Hikikomori* phenomenon) is extremely uncommon in the UK, personal advisors would be in a position to identify young people who had withdrawn or were in danger of social isolation and would be responsible for exploring methods of reintegration.

'One of the cornerstones of the service is its staff, known as Personal Advisors. Their role is to really get to know the young person and offer appropriate information and guidance. Personal Advisors keep in close contact with the young people they are supporting. They help smooth a young person's path through difficult choices and understand what's on offer.' Connexions Service (2002).

From a youth perspective, a survey of over 16,000 young people (Connexions 2003) showed that 91 per cent were satisfied or very satisfied with the service, 90 per cent thought that Connexions has a lot to offer and 86 per cent said that it had helped them to identify all of

the options that were open to them. Qualitative research has also provided rich evidence relating to the ways in which Connexions has helped vulnerable groups and been able to provide very intensive support to those facing severe barriers. However, many young people lose contact with their personal advisors at an early stage and advisors may remain unaware that an advisee is encountering difficulties unless they come forward asking for help or advice.

## 5. Conclusion

To summarise changing transitions and to highlight implications for policy, I want to highlight five points. First, modern youth transitions take much longer to accomplish. The smooth, rapid transitions from school to work which were once made by the majority of young people are a thing of the past. Whereas many young people once occupied fairly settled labour market positions at the age of 16 or 17, today many young people fail to get established in the labour market by their mid-20s.

Second, linked to this greater protraction and to the development of new routes between school and work, transitions have become much more complex. Routes can be mixed and overlap and backtracking has become more common as people move between education, training, unemployment and jobs. In this context the term 'yo-yo' has been used to describe modern youth transitions (EGRIS, 2001). The greater complexity of transitions also makes it more difficult for young people to predict outcomes or to develop an accurate sense of where various pathways are leading – and this can make it difficult for them to make plans or assess their progress towards goals.

Third, this complexity and unpredictability leads to a situation where young people can feel that they are constantly confronted by risk. In fact social theorists such as Ulrich Beck (1992) have described modern society as a 'risk society' in which life's predictability has begun to break down. For young people it's important to stress that subjective perceptions of risk don't necessarily reflect underlying objective risks. Even those whom outside observers might regard as following fairly safe and predictable routes can feel that they are at risk. In one study of high achieving girls from privileged families (Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001), for example, it was found that constant worry about failure and uncertainty about future life events was common.

Fourth, the breakdown of mass transitions combined with the fact that routes tend to be so complex that few young people can identify others who follow exactly the same routes as themselves has meant that transitions can be described as individualised. The individualisation of transitions has important implications as it means that young people are less likely to learn through the experience of others, but also means that risks become internalised leading to self-blame and stress.

Fifth, it's important to be aware that while youth transitions have changed quite radically and while young people feel that outcomes are unpredictable, in a macro sense, patterns of inequality have been maintained. What might appear to be an increase in opportunities for many young people have actually provided little in the way of new routes to advancement nor have they resulted in a dilution of existing cycles of inequality.

On a policy level, each of these themes has implications. Increased protraction means that interventions have to be holistic and not confined to people of certain ages. Increased complexity means that it is difficult to identify meaningful endpoints and young people who at one stage might have seemed to have achieved some degree of intervention may later encounter significant obstacles to progression. Young people themselves are experiencing a heightened sense of risk, they need new support structures because they lack effective route maps to navigate the modern labour market and can find that parents and relatives have little knowledge of contemporary contexts.

In the UK, despite the positive interventions that have been developed, an issue that is becoming central to the provision of an effective service to young people relates to the increasing precarity of employment and the fragmentation of experiences. There is still a tendency to think of the labour market in terms of a dichotomy between the employed and the unemployed or between participants and non-participants. In reality the complexity of the modern labour market means that we have to be able to see behind categories of experience that were once clearly understood. In particular, many early school-leavers will enter jobs that lack long-term security and which tend to be characterised by poor training and low wages. Young people may move into temporary and insecure sectors of the labour force without experiencing a period of worklessness and they may move rapidly from school to poor quality training programmes.

A move into work or training or continued participation in education does not necessarily signify a lack of vulnerability or the absence of a need for quality training to sustain future career development. Yet modern interventions are largely triggered by periods of worklessness and advisors are not likely to be aware of those who require assistance to move into new areas of employment or who are seeking ways to build on earlier training. An effective modern programme must focus not just on worklessness, but on insecurity, underemployment and poor quality work. There needs to be a greater emphasis on progression and fulfilment and ensuring young workers have the skills to shape their careers and mobilise capacities in contexts that can appear hostile and unpredictable.

## References

- Ball, S. J., Maguire, M. and Macrae, S. (2000). *Choice, Pathways and Transitions Post-16: New youth, new economies in the global city*, London: Routledge-Falmer.
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Biggart, A. and Furlong, A. (1996). 'Educating 'discouraged workers'. Cultural diversity in the upper secondary school', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 17: 253-66.
- Biggart, A., Dobbie, F., Furlong, A., Given, L. and Jones, L. (2005). *19 in 2005 – Scotland's Young People: Findings from the Scottish School Leavers Surveys*, Edinburgh, Scottish Executive.
- Connexions Service (2002). *Connexions at a Glance*, Nottingham, Department for Education and Skills.
- Connexions Service (2003). *Modernising Youth Support: Changing Lives*, Nottingham, Department for Education and Skills.
- Croxford, L., Howieson, C., Lanneli, C. and Ozga, J. (2002). *Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMAs) Evaluation of the East Ayrshire Pilot*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.
- du Bois Reymond, M. (1998a). 'I don't want to commit myself yet: young people's life concepts', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 1: 63-79.
- European Group for Integrated Social Research (EGRIS) (2001). 'Misleading trajectories: Transition dilemmas of young adults in Europe', *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 4, pp. 101-118.
- Furlong, A. (2006). 'Not a very NEET solution: Representing problematic labour market transitions among early school-leavers', *Work, Employment and Society*, 20, pp.553-569.
- Furlong, A. (2005). 'Cultural determinants of decisions about educational participation among 14-19 year-olds: The parts Tomlinson doesn't reach', *Journal of Educational Policy*, 20: 379-389.
- Furlong, A. (1993). 'The Youth Transition, Unemployment and Labour Market Disadvantage: Gambling on YTS', *Youth and Policy*, Vol.41 (2) pp.24-35.
- Furlong, A. and Cartmel, F. (1997). *Young people and Social Change*, Buckingham, Open University Press.
- Furlong, A. and Cartmel, F. (2004). *Vulnerable Young Men in Fragile Labour Markets*. York: York Publishing.
- Furlong, A. and Kelly, P. (2005). 'The Brazilianization of youth transitions in Australia and the UK?', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 40: 207-225.

- Hayward, G., Hodgson, A., Johnson, J., Keep, E., Oancea, A., Pring, R., Spours, K. and Wright, S. (2004). *The Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training: Annual Report 2003-04*. Oxford: Department of Educational Studies, University of Oxford.
- MacDonald, R. and Marsh, J. (2005). *Disconnected Youth? Growing Up in Britain's Poor Neighbourhoods*. London: Palgrave.
- Marshall, B. and Macfarlane, R. (2000). *The Intermediate Labour Market: A Tool for Tackling Long-Term Unemployment*. York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Raffe, D. and Willms, J. D. (1989). 'Schooling the discouraged worker. Local labour-market effects on educational participation', *Sociology*, 23: 559-81.
- Summerfield, C. and Gill, B. (eds.) (2005). *Social Trends, No.35*. London: Office for National Statistics.
- Times Higher Educational Supplement (THES) (1994). Youth Training Fails the Grade, (2nd September).
- Walkerdine, V., Lucey, H. and Melody, J. (2001). *Growing Up Girl: Psychosocial Explorations of Gender and Class*. London: Palgrave.
- Williamson, H. (2004). *The Milltown Boys Revisited*, Oxford: Berg.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to Labour*, Farnborough: Saxon House.