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Singing from the same hymn sheet? UK policy responses to the NEET agenda

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of government policy on young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) across the four UK nations. The paper argues that policy in England on this topic is less well-developed and coherent than in the other UK nations, and that the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic will serve to amplify the negative impacts of a set of underlying changes that have been taking place in the youth labour market and in employers' recruitment and selection practices. In addition, the paper notes that in much of the activity directed at reducing those with NEET status has been funded through the EU's European Social Fund and that uncertainty now clouds the continuance of these schemes, and that in England government has increasingly relied on the charities to help fill gaps in outreach and provision.

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Introduction

Internationally, the large number of young people who are defined as NEET (not in education, employment or training) and their increased propensity to churn between social and economic disengagement and any form of work, education and training continues to challenge many policymakers. While there has been a reduction in recent years in unemployment rates and a growth in the volume of jobs available both within the UK and across other advanced economies, the NEET 'problem' persists. There are basically two reasons for this. Firstly, since the inception of the term 'NEET' in the UK in the late 1990s, the age range included in the definition has progressively been extended from 16-to -18-year-olds to embrace a much wider age group, which, in some countries, includes younger adults up to the age of 35 years. Secondly, as well as the young unemployed who are actively seeking work, the NEET group has increasingly comprised growing numbers of young people who are economically inactive, i.e. those who are not actively seeking work due, predominantly, to illness or caring responsibilities. Moreover, in England the government's focus remains on tackling youth unemployment, while a 'policy silence' surrounds the issue of economic inactivity rates among young people in the NEET group (Maguire 2018).

Within the UK, the pattern of responsibility for the NEET agenda is complex, as it rests not only with the UK government, but also with the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to develop and implement policy initiatives. Therefore, there is no UK-wide NEET policy or strategy. It also cuts across a number of different policy arenas, including health, welfare, education and employment and skills, making ownership of the NEET agenda more difficult to establish within the auspices of different government departments. Furthermore, in a similar vein to other policy areas, the profile given to the NEET agenda has dissipated since 2010 in some parts of the UK, due to austerity measures, budget cuts and, more recently, the policy focus on Brexit, resulting in reduced and uneven interventions available to support young people.

This paper presents evidence from research in each of the four UK countries to investigate approaches to, and effective implementation of, initiatives to address the NEET agenda up to 2019. It begins by contextualising the NEET agenda within debates about protracted youth transitions, in order to highlight the difficulties faced by many young people, due to a lack of employers' demand for their skills and qualifications, and an increasingly precarious youth labour market, characterised by high levels of underemployment, insecure work, and lower than average wage rates. The paper concludes with some recommendations about how key messages from the study of the four UK nations may be applied in an international context. The value of devolved policy making is also highlighted.

The research was undertaken, and the findings were disseminated to policymakers prior to the onset of Covid-19 pandemic. It is now widely agreed that the economic impacts emanating from the pandemic means there will be a major rise in unemployment and that young people will be among those hardest hit (Wilson et al, 2020; Elliot Major, Eyles and Machin, 2020; Gregg, 2020; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2020; Youth Unemployment Group, 2020; Learning and Work Research Institute, 2020; IFS, 2020) and it is apparent that major challenges now lie ahead for those who deal with policy and practice on youth employment. This policy shock will be severe across the

four UK nations and will be coupled with the scheduled withdrawal of EU funding, which is discussed in this paper. The UK government's initial responses were contained in their *Plan for Jobs* (HMT, 2020), but in the medium term the pandemic and its effects are likely to lead to renewed concern about and experimentation around youth unemployment, NEETs and the structures of support that are available to enable effective transitions from learning to earning across the four UK nations.

Context

It is important to bear in mind that, in the UK, young people's transitions into the labour market and the consequences of these not working smoothly (youth unemployment) have been with us as a policy issue for a significant period of time. In many senses, policy makers and practitioners continue to grapple with difficulties that have been apparent to a greater or lesser degree since the recession of the early 1980s and the wave of mass youth unemployment that followed (West, 2021).

Problems with youth transitions to the labour market

It has been apparent for some time that underlying trends in the labour market mean that youth transitions have been becoming more complex, conditional and risky across much of the OECD. "Today, the journey from adolescence to adulthood is far more daunting. It takes much longer, and the roadway is filled with far more potholes, one-way streets and dead ends" (Symonds, Schwartz and Ferguson, 2011:11). The process is no longer linear and the task of finding a place in the labour market is now often prolonged and discontinuous (Quintini, Martin and Martin, 2007), characterised by what one researcher has termed 'pinball transitions' (Brozsely, 2017).

It is also apparent that while the global recession occasioned by the financial crash of 2008 worsened the situation, it did not cause it. Youth unemployment levels in the UK started rising several years before recession struck (Wolf, 2011; UKCES, 2011). It can be argued that the recession simply served to amplify the pre-existent effects of long-term structural shifts in the labour market and the employment relationship and these changes are evident once more within the economic fall-out emanating from the Covid-19 pandemic. In the UK, these trends are multiple and complex, and include, for instance, the need for more older workers to remain in employment for longer, in part due to the pensions crisis (Unwin et al, 2015). In overall terms, the youth labour market in the UK has been shrinking since the start of the 1980s. In 1976, more than three-quarters of 18-year olds were in employment. By 2009, this had fallen to 40 per cent (UKCES, 2011).

The nature of the employment relationship has also changed over time. Three pieces of research can deployed to illuminate the problems posed by new employment models and a changing employment relationship. The first is the UK Commission for Employment and Skills' (UKCES) Youth Inquiry, which was launched in 2011 in response to rising levels of youth unemployment and NEETs and which explored what employers could reasonably be asked to do to help combat this. It found that recruitment and selection processes were increasingly taking place via 'informal', word-of-mouth personal recommendation from existing employees (see Keep and James, 2010a), thereby often limiting access to opportunities for those from families and communities currently excluded from work. In addition, employers were often obsessed with candidates demonstrating 'experience' in a similar job as a proxy for their ability to perform the job opening that was being recruited to. This, coupled with a paradoxical reluctance to offer work experience to young people resulted in what the UKCES termed 'the experience trap' (UKCES, 2011).

The second set of insights from research comes from a large Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project, entitled Precarious Pathways and led by the Institute of Employment Research (IER), which explored the labour market for young people and graduates in the Midlands across a range of large to small employers (Purcell et al, 2017). Its preliminary findings confirmed the problems noted by UKCES in terms of access to employment increasingly occurring via word-of-mouth recruitment, and also employers' desire for experience - "prior experience…was required even for selection onto unpaid, short-term student work experience placements" (Purcell et al, 2017: 9). It also demonstrated how different forms of work trials (e.g. internships, agency work, and various aspects of the gig economy), were being deployed by organisations as a way of checking if individuals met their criteria and expectations before offering them any more permanent form of employment ('try before you buy') and that this approach to recruitment was displacing more traditional textbook models of R&S, such as reliance on interviews and CVs. The project observed that, "all employers saw different types of precarious labour as a better mechanism than interviews for identifying individuals to recruit as employees" (Purcell et al, 2017: 9). This approach rendered learning to earning transitions complex and hard for those with limited resources, and the research illustrated how demanding and pressurising insecure work was for young people as they tried to gain a firm foothold in the labour market. The other major finding was that, paradoxically, employers on the whole, "see themselves as having relatively little power in the labour markets in which they work – even when they are one of the largest employers with over 100 applicants for some jobs" (Purcell et al, 2017: 8).

The project's main conclusion was that:

> Many of the problems encountered by young job seekers derive from the sub-division of work. Even the most progressive and ethical employers we interviewed perceived themselves as constrained by market forces, often with little alternative but to concentrate their training and staff development on their core staff and control additional labour costs as tightly as possible, without consideration of the wider social impact and future costs to the community.
> (Purcell et al, 2017: 35)

In a sense, the Precarious Pathways project suggests that the problems are even more deep-seated and structural than the UKCES's Youth Inquiry had argued them to be. They extend beyond recruitment and selection practices that implicitly produce a playing field sloping against young candidates, and also embrace models of the employment relationship and of work organisation and job design that are producing insecure and precarious work within which it is hard for young people to sustain themselves. This problem of what Furlong and Cartmel (2004) dubbed 'fragile labour markets', has been visible for a relatively long time (see also Keep, 2012; and Shildrick et al, 2012), but the Precarious Pathways work suggests that it is infecting a larger proportion of employers and job openings than may hitherto have been the case.

The third set of findings come from a J P Morgan Foundation-funded project and reinforce the impression that many employers, especially smaller ones, lack the capacity to manage the recruitment and selection process and the employment relationship more broadly in ways that are likely to be conducive to effective youth transitions. The project's aim was to offer free human resource management/personnel management consultancy support to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in three areas (Glasgow, Hackney and Stoke-on-Trent), with the ultimate objective of developing employers' understanding and capacity so that they could take on young

apprentices. Unfortunately, in majority of cases all the resource was consumed simply enabling the firms to become legally compliant employers so deficient was their understanding and practice of employment relations (Atkinson et al, 2017).

Finally, underlying much of the above is the argument, noted above, that the UK has too many 'bad jobs' – work that is poorly-paid; repetitive; casualised or insecure; requiring of few skills; offering little opportunity for discretion, enterprise and creativity, and which provides few opportunities for progression and development (Lloyd, Mason and Mayhew, 2008; Lawton, 2009; Gracey and Kelly, 2010; Keep, 2012; Shildrick et al, 2012; Keep and James, 2010b; UKCES, 2011; Clarke and D'Arcy, 2018). This situation provides the backdrop to the reality that young people not on the 'royal route' to A levels and HE face patchy and sometimes poor careers information advice and guidance (CIAG), and often complex and conditional pathways and progression routes that may have less obvious and powerful labour market payoffs (Lupton et al, 2021; City and Guilds/Research Base, 2021). A significant number of young people end up in low wage, dead end jobs and struggle to subsequently progress (Roberts, 2020), and the proportion of the youth cohort who suffer this fate has been rising (Blundell et al, 2020). Blundell et al report that there has been deterioration over time in the wage status of first occupations.

It can be argued that in the past UK policy on youth transitions and the labour market implicitly assumed that employers were competent to manage and facilitate labour market entry for young people in ways that would generally be rational, conform with legal requirements and which would also give at least some regard to wider societal and policy goals. The evidence adduced above suggests that this assumption may not always be well-founded, and that at a broader level the quality of a significant proportion of the job openings in the labour market may make the achievement of sustained and successful learning to earning transitions hard to achieve.

Research on transition systems

Given this problematic labour market backdrop, an important question is how well are the UK's transitions systems functioning? Raffe (2008; 2014) examined the significant body of research on transition systems over the last two decades and makes some pertinent observations about its empirical and theoretical underpinnings which are relevant within this context. The term 'transition system' encompasses a country's structures and arrangements to manage young people's education-work transitions. He asserts that research into transition systems needs to shift away from its focus on a description of individual institutional arrangements towards developing theoretical frameworks to explain changes and 'to move beyond a view of nation states as homogeneous and independent units of analysis.' (Raffe 2008:1). Crucially, this includes a recognition that within country divergence both exists and has increased in recent decades, in terms of 'regional, sectoral and cultural divisions', which are often overlooked in research on transition systems (Raffe 2014:187). He cites the four UK nations as a good example of where within-country differences exist within transition systems, specifically in relation to their education provision. The research evidence presented in this article on interventions to support young people classified as 'NEET' illustrates increasing policy divergence in another key area of youth transitions.

Methodology

The evidence presented here is derived from a three-year project (2016-2019), which was undertaken by the University of Oxford's Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE), with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It formed

part of a project funded from the Open Research Area (ORA) for the Social Sciences to undertake a comparative quantitative secondary data analysis study of young people not in education, employment or training in the UK, the Netherlands, Japan, Germany and France to understand the causes and consequences of NEET status. Alongside the quantitative analysis within the UK strand of the research, a review of NEET policy interventions across the four UK nations was undertaken, to explore the absence of a UK-wide strategy or common approach to address the issue.

An initial visit was made to policy-makers with responsibility for the NEET agenda in England (Department for Education), Wales (Welsh Government), Scotland (Skills Development Scotland/Scottish Government) and Northern Ireland (Department for the Economy) to discuss policy strategy and intervention, obtain policy background information and to secure their cooperation. This was followed by a two-or-three-day visit to each locality to conduct a series of face-to-face meetings (or follow-up telephone interviews) with key stakeholders, including representatives from government departments and agencies, charities, youth organisations and training providers. Between December 2016 and December 2017, a total of 62 participants were interviewed. The final stage of the fieldwork, undertaken from October to November 2018, comprised convening policy seminars in each of the four localities, in order to feedback initial findings and, crucially, to assess their accuracy as well as to identify shifts and changes in policy direction since the study visits.

Defining the NEET population – consistency and difference in the statistics

Before examining the contrasting national policies that exist between the four UK nations, it is important to explore the broader international context of defining those who are NEET, and also how each UK nation defines and counts those who are NEET. The NEET population is defined across the UK as young people between the ages of 16-24-years who are not in any form of education, employment or training. However, there is significant international divergence about both who is defined as NEET and the age categorisation included within the group. A recent report by the International Labour Office (ILO) argues that while there is an international standard measurement of unemployment and employment, no such measure exists for the NEET group (ILO 2015). Moreover, the age range covered by the NEET group has increasingly been elongated, with many counties and organisations adopting different age measures. For example, Eurostat provides breakdowns of the NEET population in the EU-28 between the ages of 15 and 34 (Eurostat 2018), while the OECD concentrates on the 15-29-year-old age group (OECD 2018).

NEET figures for the UK are derived from two sources. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) produces quarterly statistics, derived from Labour Force Survey (LFS) data, on an annual basis for the 16-24 age group. They include a breakdown of the NEET population in terms of the percentage and number of young people who are unemployed, i.e. actively seeking work, as well as those who are economically inactive (Office for National Statistics 2018). In addition, each of the four UK nations produces annual (and in some cases quarterly) statistical releases on NEET figures, which are compiled from administrative and survey data, with slight variations in the age range applied, and data sources and methodologies used.

Welfare Support

Apart from in Northern Ireland[1], the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has primary responsibility for managing welfare support for all groups (including 16-24-year-olds who are NEET). This would suggest that DWP would play a significant role in mapping, tracking and supporting the NEET group. However, research evidence suggests that many young people fail to register for welfare support within the UK. Cooke (2013) found that 43 per cent of young people were not claiming any type of out-of-work benefit in the UK and were, in effect, marginalised and disengaged from formal employment and support services. The divergence between the NEET population and claimant numbers is not peculiar to the UK. For example, analysis of the 2013 EU Labour Force Survey highlighted that 57 per cent of NEETs aged 15-24 years were not registered with public employment services (PES) (Eurofound 2016).

In addition, the 16-24-age claimant group has a much greater propensity to be sanctioned compared with other age categories. As a result, their payments are suspended for set periods of time. Eisenstadt (2017) reported that 'official statistics suggest that young people are disproportionately affected by the DWP sanctions regime: as of December 2016, people under the age of 25 made up 39% of the Universal Credit caseload that were eligible to receive a sanction; but the same group received 53% of all sanctions in the same month.' (Eisenstadt 2017: 21). These findings were reinforced by research by de Vries, Reeves and Geiger (2017), who also found that 18-24-year-old claimants were significantly more likely to be referred for, and to receive, a sanction, with young men being almost twice as likely as young women to be sanctioned (Ibid: 18).

The sole policy intervention targeted specifically at economically active young people within the NEET group, and delivered by the DWP, is The Youth Obligation Support Programme (YOSP), which was introduced across the UK (apart from Northern Ireland) from April 2017. It is focused on providing young people between the ages of 18 and 21 (not up to 24) with intensive support for a period of up to six months. However, it is partial in terms of its geographical and age coverage. Early criticism of the Youth Obligation came from the House of Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee, which queried why the programme was concentrated in areas operating the new welfare system of Universal Credit, rather than targeting areas of high youth unemployment (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee 2017: 25). Data about programme outcomes is reported to be vague and incomplete, with large numbers of young people leaving the programme with unrecorded destinations (Independent 16th June 2018).

In recent years, a significant element of DWP's approach to policies targeted at NEET prevention and re-engagement of young people who had become NEET has been the introduction of alternative funding models. This may be a response to budget cuts and austerity measures. The most notable example is the use of Social Impact Bonds (SIBs) in England. SIBs comprise capital generated from social investors to fund delivery services which act on behalf of government to achieve social outcomes, using a payment-by-results funding model. The Innovation Fund Pilot (2012-15), and the Youth Engagement Fund (2014-17), were both funded using SIBs. The longitudinal evaluation of the Innovation Fund Pilot showed that programme participants, were less

[1] In Northern Ireland, the devolved executive and assembly have powers over welfare policy.

likely to be in EET and had acquired fewer qualifications (apart from at Level 1), compared to young people in the control group (Department for Work and Pensions 2018). Thus, the delivery of 'hard' EET outcomes was not achieved through a SIBs-funded programme.

Government policy overview

The purpose of the study visits was to establish the extent to which a UK-wide NEET strategy exists and to identify the degree to which there is divergence between the four UK nations, in terms of policy making and intervention to support the NEET group. This involved 'unpacking' the use and relevance of the term 'NEET' within policy making, ascertaining the extent to which NEET policies existed, as well as the age range covered, and, crucially, determining who was delivering programmes to support the NEET group and how they were funded. In each of the four UK nations, NEET policy was also detached and visibly separate from the system of welfare support and intervention offered by the DWP.

NEET interventions

A key finding was that while there was commonality across the UK about who is defined as NEET and the age group that it embraces, that is 16-24-year-olds, there were significant differences between the four nations with regard to the range and scope of interventions to support young people defined as NEET. This is a very important finding because the stark reality is that where a young person happens to live within the UK shapes the scale and type of support that they will receive. Moreover, while the impact of austerity since 2010 had taken its toll in all spheres of social policy, the four nations differed in terms of how interventions to support the NEET group were being sustained (if at all), the funding sources employed and the role and type of different delivery agents in programme implementation.

> Interviewer: '*So, you see differences in policies and interventions across the UK?*'
>
> Interviewee: *'Yes, absolutely, and Scotland is different, they're all different, they're all doing completely different things now in the employment support space, really. The one thing that's common is the Job Centre sits in the middle and that's not devolved, where I think it should be, actually. You've got some powers, which is to support young people, but you don't have the other levers devolved to those nations, so yes, it is a very different picture in each of these*.'
>
> Employers' Group Representative

The result is a scattergun approach to policy making. For example, the Welsh Government implements the *Youth Engagement and Progression Framework* (YEGF) as its main NEET intervention policy. This incorporates an early intervention programme to prevent young people becoming NEET, re-engagement programmes, and active labour market policies targeted largely at the under 18s group, building on co-working between statutory and voluntary service providers. (Welsh Government 2016).

'*….it's done what it needs to do (YEGF), so, in terms of establishing a partnership approach, which is embedded in terms of us having a focus on reducing and preventing young people from becoming NEET.*'

Local Authority Manager

In Northern Ireland, *Pathways to Success* comprises a number of targeted interventions to support the NEET group (Wilson et al 2015) and is similar in design to the model that exists in Wales. Independent evaluations of both initiatives point to the relative weaknesses within the employability strand of individual programmes, which are linked to difficulties with employer engagement and, critically, finding young people access to sustained employment as a route out of NEET status (Welsh Government 2016; Wilson et al 2015).

In Scotland, the *Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy* incorporated interventions to support vulnerable groups of young people make successful transitions into education, employment or training (Scottish Government 2014). The absence of the term 'NEET' in policy documents in Scotland was reported to represent a deliberate emphasis on achieving positive outcomes for all young people, while at the same time recognising that barriers to attaining successful transitions need to be addressed through targeted programme intervention. Eisenstadt reported that there were disparities between regions in Scotland in terms of the effectiveness of schools and colleges to work with local employers to identify job opportunities for young people and to identify future skill needs within the implementation of *Developing the Young Workforce* (DYW) (Eisenstadt 2017). The Scottish Government's '15-24 Learner Journey Review', which was published in 2018, pledged a commitment to addressing regional inconsistencies relating to DYW within a three-year period (Scottish Government 2018).

In England, while the Department for Education has strategic responsibility for the 16-24 NEET group, there is no nationwide, government-led programme to address this policy area. Transitions beyond full-time academic or vocational education provision are managed within Apprenticeship programmes and a small-scale Traineeships programme (for young people who require bridging provision before entering apprenticeship programmes).

> '*I don't think there's anything specific in the way we've been brought together in one department that's changed policy. It's more that it's sort of facilitated closer working, but not in a terribly tangible sort of way.'*
>
> Civil Servant

Furthermore, England is the only country within the UK which implemented Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) legislation. This had the potential to eradicate the under-18s NEET population, through a statutory requirement to retain young people in learning or training to 17 years from 2013 and to their 18th birthday from 2015. However, while the 2010 White Paper 'The Importance of Teaching' confirmed government's commitment to the implementation of the RPA, it also specified that the enforcement process would not be introduced (Department for Education, 2010). Published RPA regulations and statutory guidance make clear that the duties on employers would not be enforced, although young people in full-time work would retain the responsibility to participate in some form of education or training (Department for Education 2012). In essence, the RPA legislation was watered down to such an extent that, while young people are expected to remain in education or training until their 18th birthday, there remains no legal enforcement of this requirement (Maguire 2013).

Post-2010, government changes, coupled with austerity measures in England, resulted in policies targeted at supporting disadvantaged groups of young people to remain in EET being withdrawn. Examples include:

a) the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), which was a financial incentive targeted at young people from lower-income families to encourage their participation in post-16 learning, and

b) Activity Agreement (AA) pilots, which offered financial support, intensive support and tailored learning packages to young people in the under 18s NEET group.

While the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland currently retain the EMA offer, the Scottish Government offers AAs as an incentive to young people under the age of 18 years, who are at risk of disengagement from learning.

Employability Programmes

Differences are also apparent in relation to employability programmes. Scottish and Welsh government policy makers identified the issue of poor job quality as one that is causing considerable social, economic and health problems. Both have started to address this through wide-ranging policy interventions linked to the overarching concept of 'fair work' (Scottish Government 2016a; Scottish Government 2016b; Dickens et al 2019). This provides a very different contextual backdrop to policies on youth transitions and those who are NEET to that which exists in England, where policy-makers have been much slower to accept that there is an issue of bad jobs and poor employment practices or to do much in a concerted way to address it.

Policy initiatives introduced by the Scottish and Welsh Governments are embedding responsibility for employment services in their own hands and away from the UK government, together with a much greater emphasis on voluntary participation on the part of individuals who are seeking access to, or re-engagement into, the labour market. In 2018, the Scottish Government launched *Fair Start Scotland*[2], which is an employment support initiative delivered to individuals who are furthest away from the labour market, in nine contract areas across Scotland. The move from a mandatory requirement for individuals to participate marks a significant shift away from the approach adopted by UK government-led programmes, where mandatory participation and a payment-by-results delivery model were centre stage (National Audit Office 2014). *Fair Start Scotland* sits alongside other interventions targeted at socially and economically excluded groups, including those targeted at young people.

In a similar vein, in 2019 the Welsh Government launched *Working Wales*, which is targeted at offering employment support to both economically active and economically inactive groups (Welsh Government 2018). Again, the policy design places an emphasis on individuals' voluntary participation in job-seeking and guidance services.

The advent of both *Fair Start Scotland* and *Working Wales* represents a significant departure from a UK-wide employment service strategy towards much greater devolution of responsibility for expenditure and policy implementation. Statistical and evaluation evidence should, in due course, be able to demonstrate the extent to which 'locally' devised policy making, with less emphasis on compulsory participation in employment services and movement towards an individualized approach, further reduces unemployment and economic inactivity rates, as well as creating high quality jobs in greater volumes within local labour markets.

[2] http://www.employabilityinscotland.com/fair-start-scotland/fair-start-scotland/-faq/

The role of EU funded initiatives and programmes

Another significant feature which the research highlighted was the strategic importance of EU funding and programmes to support the needs of young people in the NEET group. This has heightened since 2010, due to austerity measures and budget cuts that have impacted on the availability of other provision. While, in 2013, the UK government supported the EU's political commitment to a Youth Guarantee, it did not implement the programme, asserting that similar provision already existed, most notably through the Youth Contract. Subsequently, this programme, which offered a range of provision to young people in the NEET group, was wound up in 2015. There remains a Great Britain-wide offer available to young people who are NEET, in the Youth Obligation programme, which offers 18-21-year-olds who are new claimants intensive support for up to three months (ibid).

However, while the UK failed to implement the EU's Youth Guarantee, it has benefited substantially from the huge investment in the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) and the European Social Fund (ESF), which are the key EU financial resources to support the implementation of the Youth Guarantee for the 2014-2020 programming period. For example, the YEI attracted overall funding of €8.8 billion in 2017 (European Commission 2018). YEI is targeted at regions with rates of youth unemployment which exceed 25 per cent and associated economic inactivity, and funds initiatives such as increasing apprenticeships, traineeships, job placements and qualification attainment. Across the UK, the research identified a large number of NEET projects, programmes and initiatives supported by YEI and ESF funding.

Three significant findings emerged in relation to EU funded NEET programmes:

1. The scale of funding available should not be underestimated. During 2014-2020, the ESF and European Regional Development Fund are investing around €11.8 billion across the UK. The ESF share of €4.9 billion is funding six operational programmes in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, England and Gibraltar, and includes €206 million for the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI)[3]. While the funding is tied to certain regions across the UK (and not allocated UK-wide), the availability of funds has enabled NEET provision to continue in some areas which have been affected by budget cuts. This stream of funding has been of particular importance to the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, in ensuring their continued commitment to recognising and supporting the needs of young people in the NEET group.
2. Identifying and mapping the scale of intervention across the UK that is currently underpinned by EU funded support can be problematic. For example, Traineeship programmes are marketed as individual government initiatives, yet are supported by EU funding. In Wales, although 'Jobs Growth Wales'[4] which offers financial incentives to employers to recruit young people, is promoted as a Welsh Government initiative, the programme is EU match-funded. Therefore, it was difficult to gauge the extent of EU-funded support for NEET policy development and implementation across the UK.

[3] http://www.creativeeuropeuk.eu/other-eu-funding/european-social-fund-esf

[4] https://gov.wales/jobs-growth-wales-september-2015-10-march-2019

3. Acute concern existed among most interviewees in our sample about the impact of Brexit on this policy arena. In the absence of UK wide initiatives to support young people in the NEET group, EU money was 'shoring up' policy intervention. The House of Lords EU select committee on youth unemployment (2014) concluded that:

> *'EU funding should not be used to subsidise national approaches but should be put towards establishing new initiatives and trying new methods, including those that have been successfully pioneered in other countries or regions worldwide.'* (House of Lords 2014: 48)

Notwithstanding these assertions, our evidence shows that EU-supported NEET interventions were, in fact, replacing national approaches, in particular in England, and that the devolved administrations were heavily reliant on EU funds, in order to sustain any support for young people in the NEET group. Of great concern to many in our sample, was how this current stream of funding would be sustained post-Brexit and what, if any, future provision would exist and be funded in the absence of a UK-wide commitment to sustained funding.

The role of charities and philanthropy in NEET provision

The research findings also pointed to the critical and expanding role of charities and philanthropy in supporting young people in the NEET group across the UK. Three primary components within this role were:

- Sponsoring interventions either locally and/or nationally;
- Managing and delivering programmes on behalf of government/EU;
- Acting as a sub-contractor to deliver programmes and initiatives.

For example, in England, government has rowed back from ownership of the delivery of interventions to young people in the NEET group, leaving the role of charities and philanthropy to be amplified in recent years, in terms of determining what is available and where. While this has enabled some organisations to take an active role in supporting their local communities, it raises very important questions about coverage, quality and availability of provision, as well as whether funding for interventions should be so heavily reliant on charity and philanthropy.

At the same time, it was apparent from the evidence that charities across the UK play a very important role in delivering EU/government led initiatives, particularly in identifying and supporting hard-to-help/hard-to-reach groups and by acting as a powerful lobby on government. This centres around the outreach work undertaken by local community-based charities, which enables programmes to engage with young people who fail to register or engage with statutory support or welfare services.

One manager of a charity described how it was 'their intelligence in the local community' which enabled the sector to be more able to reach young people who are often hidden from statutory services and who consequently experience 'benign neglect'.

Their frustrations in this role surrounded the challenges of working on initiatives that were often time-limited, required shifts in staffing requirements and programme targets, and, crucially, offered little security in terms of sustainability of funding.

'*…we're bound by trying to wash our own faces for finance that we have very little time to celebrate or to even, sort of evaluate.*'

Charity Manager

Conclusions and recommendations

The purpose of this article is to highlight, through recent research, the disparities that exist across the UK, in relation to policy intervention to support young people who are defined as NEET. While there is commonality in an agreed definition about the age group who are defined as the NEET group (i.e.16-24-year olds), there is an absence of a UK-wide strategy or equivalent levels and types of interventions. Indeed, the disparities appear to be growing. The devolved administrations of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have sustained and developed new policy interventions, which, despite austerity measures and budget cuts in recent years, have, to a great extent, been supported or supplemented by EU funding. Some of these are focused on issues of poor job quality and insecurity in the youth labour market, yet these issues are absent in the English policy discourse. At the same time, reduced funding, coupled with a retraction of state involvement in managing policy interventions, have significantly scaled down government-led initiatives in England.

As in other EU /OECD countries, the fact that the UK has large numbers of young people who fail to register for welfare support raises questions about the suitability of the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) /public employment services (PES) to meet the needs of young people. While the DWP is the only UK government department to have responsibilities beyond the boundaries of England (although not in Northern Ireland), the research highlighted that its level of support and reach to those young people in the NEET group who are entitled to, or in receipt of, welfare support was limited.

While government-led policy interventions targeted at the NEET group in terms of prevention, reintegration measures and active labour market policies were operational in the devolved UK administrations (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland), this was not the case in England. Here, government-led initiatives had largely been replaced with funded initiatives delivered by third sector organisations, supported by an array of different programmes which were led (and often supported financially) by charities and philanthropy.

The research findings also highlight a number of contradictions that run through the UK's answer to tackling the NEET agenda, which may exist in other national contexts. Firstly, although there is an array of policy interventions, there remains a paucity of evidence about what works, and when and where to support young people who are defined as 'NEET'. The implementation of all-age employability services with a much greater emphasis on voluntary participation in Wales and Scotland are examples of innovative practice which should be carefully monitored for wider implementation. Secondly, the sustainability of most existing programmes and initiatives is questionable, due to a lack of strategic overview and their funding being time limited. This also raises issues about value for money, when programmes and their expected outcomes are subject to constant change and review.

Finally, within the UK, where a young person lives determines variations in the level, length and type of support that they will receive if they are 'NEET'. Our evidence supports the work of Raffe (2008; 2014), who argued that studies of transition systems need to dig deeper than surveying nationwide policies and interventions, in order to capture trends towards within-country divergence.

It is abundantly clear that significant differences exist and continue to grow across the four UK nations with regard to identifying and supporting young people who are defined as 'NEET'. In addition, our findings illustrate that each of the four UK nations increasingly operates on its own, as it attempts to resolve a shared issue, with little ongoing knowledge or policy exchange operating at a UK-wide level. This raises very important questions about devolution and where responsibility and ownership should rest. While there is a strong argument that local areas are better placed to understand and develop policy initiatives that are attuned to meeting the needs of their local communities, disparity in funding regimes and policy priorities currently results in an uneven spread of intervention. Sharing intelligence and good practice at UK level would ensure that a strategic overview existed in this policy arena and that a common standard of intervention existed for young people, regardless of their geographical location. Our evidence points to quite the reverse happening.

Moreover, a disproportionate amount of 'NEET' provision is currently underpinned by EU funding which is time-limited due to Brexit. Ominously, the risk remains that, without EU funding, this agenda becomes further displaced and localised across the UK and the trajectories of young people become more precarious in an ever more fraught UK youth labour market. This change is set to occur as the UK as a whole, and each of the UK nations, faces the onset of escalating levels of youth unemployment and economic inactivity that are predicted to result from the economic effects of Covid-19 pandemic. The impact is set to be profound on the trajectories of young people and presents policymakers with a major and long-term challenge.

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