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Author(s): Sue Maguire and Prue Huddleston

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Where do young people work?

Sue Maguire and Prue Huddleston*

Centre for Education and Industry, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Abstract

Keywords: young people in jobs without training; school work transitions; ‘employability’; youth labour market

The current policy intention, that all young people remain in some form of accredited education or training to the age of 18 by 2015, poses significant challenges. The jobs without training (JWT) group includes young people who are in full-time work and not in receipt of training leading to NVQ level 2 (or above) qualification; knowing more about them and meeting their needs will be crucial for the delivery of the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) agenda. This paper, presents findings from a study of the JWT group, from the perspective of employers, which formed part of wider research including policy makers, young people and their parents¹. It concludes that the label JWT fails to describe the heterogeneity of this group and the needs of those who employ them. If routes into the labour market remain open to 16 and 17 year olds, attention must be given to supporting young people’s transitions through a more active role in job placement and securing greater support for formalised training.

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The policy commitment to ensuring that all young people remain in some form of accredited education or training to the age of 17 by 2013 and to the age of 18 by 2015, brings with it the responsibility to recognise and to know more about young people in the labour market, in order that their education and training needs are recognised and met. In particular, strategies will need to be in place, which ensure that education and training options are available, accessible and attractive to young people who are classified as being in 'jobs without training' (JWT). In policy terms, the jobs without training (JWT) group includes young people who are in full-time work and not in receipt of training which reaches the standard of an NVQ level 2 (or above) qualification. Identifying and accrediting existing training activity, eradicating recognised barriers to learning, such as offering financial incentives and support, flexible, diverse and accessible learning options, assistance with transport and equipment costs, as well as offering adequate levels of mentoring and guidance to specific groups of learners underpin the successful delivery of the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) agenda. This paper, presents findings from a study of the JWT group, from the perspective of employers, which formed part of research that also included policy makers, young people and their parents².

In recent years, with an increasing emphasis within education and training policy on a strategy which encourages young people to remain in full-time learning beyond compulsory schooling, there has been limited research activity which explores the labour market experiences of young people. Thus, there is little research which has explored the ways in which 16-and 17-year olds find work, identified the types of work they do, or the levels of training that they receive. Studies of the youth labour market have become increasingly focused on policy evaluation, particularly on a raft of youth training initiatives. In contrast, studies conducted in the 1970s and the 1980s, when significant proportions of young people entered the labour market at the end of compulsory schooling and staying on rates were much lower, contributed more widely to academic debate about the composition of a distinct youth labour market.

² This project was funded by a grant awarded by the ESRC - Grant reference number: RES-000-22-1786. We should like to acknowledge the support and interest of the ESRC in this work.

For example, Ashton et al (1982) were able to identify that not only were there broad differences between the types of occupations that young people entered, but that there existed a youth labour market, which was distinct from that available to adults, and differed in terms of its entry patterns and in the selection criteria used by employers. The labour market which young people entered was characterised as being made up of a number of segments, each offering different levels of pay, security of employment, training and prospects (Ashton, Maguire and Garland, 1982). Evidence from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) 16-19 Initiative which included longitudinal surveys of 16-19 year olds in four contrasting local labour markets between 1987 and 1989, provided substantial weight to Ashton et al's finding that local labour market conditions also had considerable impact on the job and training opportunities available to young people (Ashton et al, 1982; Ashton and Maguire, 1988; Bynner, 1990; Roberts and Parsell, 1992). In addition, the Scottish Young People's Surveys were used to identify differing routes into the labour market, as well as a tool to explore the impact of education and training policies on the employment opportunities available to young people (Raffe, 1988; Furlong 1992).

Employers' attitudes to recruiting school leavers were explored in a qualitative study of sixty firms in two contrasting local labour markets (Maguire, 2001). Fieldwork for this study was completed in 1998/9. The sample was stratified to reflect the distribution of employees by industrial sector in the two local labour markets and concluded that:

- the overwhelming majority of firms recruited school leavers (16-19 year olds) directly into jobs which were not supported by government funding;
- many employers did not understand or place much weight on many post-16 qualifications;
- employers were reluctant to recruit school leavers into part-time jobs;

- employers continued to recruit 16/17 year olds, in the light of an identifiable demand for both well-qualified young people, and for a *greater number* of young people with fewer academic qualifications to fill routine/low skilled jobs, and
- employers in both labour markets made little use of the Careers/Connexions Services to support their recruitment of young people.

This research confirmed a continuing trend amongst many employers to recruit young people into jobs which offered very little or no training. This was met by an available supply of school leavers to fulfil local needs.

Commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), this research provides a greater understanding of young people aged 16 or 17, who leave full-time education and who are characterised as having entered Jobs without Training (JWT) (Maguire and Huddleston, 2008). A central theme of the research was to determine the extent to which young people in the JWT category are in dead end jobs or do, on the contrary, access training activity (despite it falling below the level 2 required standard), to establish the nature and type of employment that young people are engaged in and to capture perceptions about early labour market entry. The results presented below focus primarily on findings from the employer sample, in order to throw light on the nature and type of employment in which young people are engaged, and to report on employers' perceptions of young workers.

Methods

The research design comprised a qualitative methodology in order to collect and analyse data which was able to provide an in-depth understanding of the background, motivations and attitudes of young people and their parents/carers, and, on the part of employers, their rationale and motivation for recruiting young people into jobs without training. In addition, policy makers from the former Department for Education

and Skills (DfES) now the Department for Schools and Families (DCSF), national and local Learning and Skills Councils, as well as managers and practitioners from local Connexions Partnerships were interviewed. In addition representatives from two voluntary organisations working with young people were interviewed.

Selecting fieldwork areas

Warwickshire (North and South) and Tees Valley (Middlesbrough) were selected as two case study areas. Case studies are widely used in many areas of research (Yin, 1994). Case study methodology is advantageous in social research when ‘a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control’ (Yin, 1994, p.9). In terms of conducting a comparative study, Middlesbrough is an urban area with high levels of adult unemployment, where in 2006 (the year the sample of young people included in the study had left compulsory education) the percentage of 16-18 - year olds in learning was 73.7 per cent, while 6.5 per cent were in JWT. Warwickshire provided an area with low levels of unemployment and a rural context with 67.1 per cent of 16-18 year olds in full-time learning in 2006 and 9.5 per cent of the cohort were in JWT.³

Fieldwork

A total of 36 in-depth interviews (target 40) with young people were achieved. The majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face during summer 2007. While in Warwickshire, there was an even split between the proportions of male and female participants in the sample, two thirds of the Middlesbrough sample was female. The sample was overwhelmingly composed of ethnically white young people who still lived at home with their parents. The respondents were young people who were willing to talk to us

³ Area/district level figures were not available in Warwickshire.

and fulfilled the criteria of 'being in the JWT group' and therefore could not be regarded as being statistically representative of young people as a whole. The majority of interviews were conducted in young people's homes or at Connexions offices. In total, nine interviews were conducted with parents (from a target sample of 10 achieved interviews). Parents' engagement in the research was secured through contact established with the young person. Eight face-to-face interviews were conducted independently with parents in their own homes.

A sample of employers was also included in the study (17 employers in total from a target sample of 20 achieved interviews). The majority of employers were interviewed by telephone in August/September 2007 and comprised seven companies in Warwickshire and ten companies in Tees Valley. The sample of employers was drawn from contacts given by local Connexions offices, who work on a regular basis with local employers (eleven interviews), as well as from young people who were willing to pass on their employer's details (six interviews). We had hoped to triangulate more of the findings i.e. interview the young person, their parent(s) and their employer. However, many young people were hesitant about passing on the details of their employer, because they were unsure about how their employer would react. Two of the employers interviewed were also parents of the young people in the sample.

Findings

In order to contextualise the findings from the employer sample, the following presents an overview of where young people in JWT were working, in terms of sector and type of employment, as well as details about their wage rates and hours of work.

The sample of young people worked in retail and distribution, business and administration, construction, engineering and in hospitality and catering (including cleaning). There was no significant variation

between the two localities in terms of the range of sectors or types of employment that young people entered, with one notable exception. In Tees Valley, a call centre was a large employer in the area and employed two young people in the sample. Young people working in retail and hospitality and catering were more likely to be working part-time, typically receiving minimum wage rates or lower. In contrast, young people employed in business and administration, which included call centre work, were earning between £11,500 and £12,500 per annum.

The companies ranged both in type and size and included sole traders, small private companies, large national and multi-nationals.

Employment of 16/17 year olds

All sample companies had employed 16/17 year olds at some time, if not at the time of the interview. None discounted that they would employ 16/17 year olds, although they would not necessarily target this age range. In fact, it was pointed out by some respondents, that it is illegal to target advertisements at a particular age group, or to exclude applicants on grounds of age. Employers noted that it was frequently young people who were turning up for the types of vacancies available.

‘We either put up a sign in the window or we have a website, people usually come in anyway and phone up and ask for a job.’ (Employer, restaurant and night club, Middlesbrough)

‘We use the Job Centre to advertise our vacancies and also advertise in store. So we’ll have in-store announcements and posters and stands up to actually advertise the positions.’ (Employer, large retailer, Middlesbrough)

Employers, in this study, frequently reported the pro-activity of this group of young people in terms of job searching; it was common for young people to ‘*drop in a CV*’, or ‘*to ask other staff if there’s a job going*’

or *'to put in a good word for them'*. In fact, for some employers this was a determining factor in whether or not to consider the young person.

'It's basically word of mouth, if someone's known to me I'm prepared to give them a go, on a temporary basis; if they shape up, I'll keep them on.' (Employer, small construction company, Warwickshire).

'The fact that somebody had come knocking at the door and offered their application form would probably count in their favour as well.' (Employer, manufacturing company, Warwickshire).

The findings confirm that informal recruitment practices are widespread, either through enquiries by friends or relatives, or by young people 'dropping off a CV' (*'I had 500 come in for Christmas work'*). They are often preferred by this group of employers. *'The best method I've used is advertising in the window – the best method, I've ever used, so that's all I use.'*

Most retailers and catering outlets post vacancies in the store; two respondents mentioned the Job Centre. The majority reported having no links with Connexions, even though the initial leads were given to the research team by Connexions.

An important distinction needs to be made between part-time and full-time employment of young people since the majority of those interviewed employed young people full-time. Part-time work, varying from 6 to 24 hours a week, was prevalent within retail and catering and hospitality where there are high proportions of part-time staff irrespective of age. Nevertheless, there is significant flexibility in the hours worked week by week so the distinction between full-time and part-time becomes blurred. The opportunity to work flexibly, with the hours suited to other commitments, made this type of work attractive to young people and also matched the business needs of their employers. Within the manufacturing, engineering and construction sectors, employment was full-time.

Within the retail sector, employment of the young people was frequently an extension of an existing Saturday job.

‘Obviously generally most people tend to start off as possibly a weekend kind of sales advisor. That’s where most of the youngsters come through, or possibly temporary advisors during sale time during the summer or at Christmas time.....you’ve got a lot of managers actually that started off as Saturday girls. So definitely, there is definitely room for progression if it’s wanted.’ (Employer, fashion retailer, Warwickshire).

Two employers had actively sought a ‘*young lad*’ in order to ‘*bring them on*’, in other words they were looking for someone to develop through the company. One respondent actually referred to this as an ‘apprenticeship’, although not as part of the government sponsored Apprenticeship programme. This employer ran a small family business and had no sons to continue the work but was keen for the company to survive: ‘*Well, basically I’m teaching him how to become a fishmonger. He wants to carry this tradition on basically.*’ Only one employer had an Apprentice, but he was outside the scope of the study’s target group.

Two young people, employed within their family’s business, were working full-time; one of whom attended college on a day release basis. In the first case, there had always been the expectation for the young person to join the family firm. He had worked in the business in some form since the age of nine and his younger brother was also expected to join the firm as soon as he left school at 16. The father/employer expected to hand over his business to his sons when ‘*they have gained enough experience in the craft skills and in running a business.*’

Within the sample, employers’ responses generally reflect and confirm the diversity of this group of young people, which official statistics classify as simply ‘*young people in jobs without training.*’ They are

clearly not a homogeneous group. Employers seek to employ them for a variety of reasons, for example to reflect the product's target market (fashion retail), to develop potential future craftspeople (construction, engineering), or because they just turned up in response to an advert (manufacturing, general labourer, waiting and bar work).

Qualifications and skills requirements

There was no expectation on the part of the employers in this sample that, at this age, recruits would possess occupational skills, nor in many instances any qualifications. However, all respondents were very clear about the importance of a range of personal and social skills, particularly in the retail and catering sectors, and about work-readiness, 'stick ability', willingness to 'work hard', 'put in some graft'. Most expected what was described as a 'basic level in English and maths', but this was often interpreted as the ability to read, write and 'add up'.

'I think it's very important, at least (they've) got basic English and maths, I mean when they're coming out at 16, hopefully you know, they've got basic English and maths and we go from there'. (Employer, engineering company, Warwickshire)

Again the heterogeneity of employers' needs was emphasised in terms of what they might be looking for in a young person.

'I think companies look at it totally differently depending on what job you go in. You can go in with these government qualifications and the employer will say, yes, very nice, now we'll train you how we want to do it.' (Employer, manufacturing company, Warwickshire)

Enthusiasm for the product or service and for customers, above the possession of nationally recognised qualifications, was seen as crucial both in the retail sector, the hospitality, and within the call centre business.

‘Yes, it’s people that obviously have an enthusiasm for working with people; to have a massive enthusiasm for the company and the culture. We very much dedicate ourselves to fantastic customer service.’ (Employer, fashion retailer, Warwickshire)

‘A lot of it is down to personality. Obviously there’s going to be a general common sense and ability, but I wouldn’t necessarily discriminate if people haven’t got qualifications.’ (Employer, fashion retailer, Middlesbrough)

One deputy manager, reflecting on her own experience of joining the company some five years earlier, reported: *‘When I left school I was absolutely.....at maths, do you know what I mean? Obviously I’ve got to do figures and everything being a deputy, but that didn’t go against me when I first started and I’ve been here five years, so obviously I’m here.’*

Another restaurant manager put it thus: *‘I just go on experience, it doesn’t really matter as long as they’re hard working and they’re willing to try, and keen – that’ll do me.’*

For general labouring work within a manufacturing company: *‘Quite frankly for the sort of positions I’m offering, I don’t expect anything much at all.’* It is interesting to note that this employer was the only one who expressed real dissatisfaction with the standard of recruits. Perhaps a reflection of the quality of training and support that was being offered, which was described as: *‘all that can happen within the space of two to three working days.’*

A team leader with a major high street retailer in Middlesbrough emphasised the importance of workplace support in inducting the young person into the routines and culture of the workplace.

‘I’ve just took on a young man, D, and he is really shining, he’s doing really well and he’s 17 years old, so yes. It’s hit and miss really, sometimes they work and sometimes they don’t, so it depends how they’re sort of treated when they first start, you know the role models they have, the people they’re working with.’

Training

All respondents reported that they provided training, but further questioning revealed that this was, at its most basic, the necessary health and safety or food hygiene training required to fulfil statutory obligations.

‘They’d receive an induction process, make sure they know where all the fire extinguishers are and the first aid boxes, they would spend a period of time with somebody who’s been assessed as being in a position to give the training and the employee signs to say in his opinion the youth is capable, the youth signs that in his opinion he’s been shown adequately and that he’s safe and technically knows what he’s doing.’ (Employer, manufacturing company, Warwickshire)

However, there is substantial evidence that within the major retailers structured training programmes are available covering all aspects of retail operations, with plenty of opportunities for progression within companies, for example to supervisory and management roles. Traditionally, this has been the progression route for those seeking a career in retail, stories of *‘trolley boy to store manager’* abound, although this may be changing at the higher levels of the business now.

Within this sample most of the managers within fashion retailing had come up through the business: *‘even myself who’ve been with the company 14 years every day you learn something new.’* Another deputy manager within a national, ‘high end’, fashion chain commented: *‘If they’ve got the drive and enthusiasm*

then that's basically all that we ask for. Literally they can go as far as they want and there's no kind of put off.'

Training programmes are always in-company designed and delivered, usually accompanied by a work book, or on-line, assessment process for signing off competences.

'They have three different parts to go through, then what they'll do, they'll work through the book, they'll bring it to me and T and then we can have a look through it. If we think they're up to scratch then we'll get them in for a quick briefing and just say "can you give me an example of this?" or "why?" They've got to tick off the boxes as they go. It is a good exercise to do, and it's good for the girls as well because every time they finish a section they get a pay rise.'

There was no evidence of any training leading to nationally recognised, externally validated, qualifications at level 2 (the crucial descriptor for the JWT group). All large retail employers provide training for their young recruits and there is usually an expectation that the associated assessment will be completed within a given timeframe. Completion of the training is often linked to pay rises.

One manufacturing employer reported that the young person was attending a course one day per week in order to gain a qualification in IT. This was a vendor qualification, not on the National Qualification Framework (NQF), but it was deemed by the employer to be the most suited to the young person's needs within the context of his role within the company. Another employer, who could not release the young person from the workplace to attend college, was in negotiation with a local FE college to investigate the possibility of the young man acquiring an NVQ through a workplace log book. The possibility of paying for the young person to attend evening class was also being considered.

The currency of work-based training and qualifications compared to 'traditional academic' qualifications was raised by one employer in the manufacturing sector:

‘So even if you leave school with absolutely no qualifications, if you’ve got the sort of ability and drive, you will make it. On the other hand, people that have left school, or haven’t left school they’ve gone on to college, university degree, (if you) say what are you going to do with it? Oh, I don’t know, but I’ve got a degree. So that’s the other end of the spectrum as well, they’ve got qualifications coming out of their arms, but then you put them into a job and they’re just totally useless.’

The findings reflect diverse practice depending upon the sector and job role. All respondents emphasised the importance of *‘learning on the job’*; *‘I think that they find it much easier once they go through training to really to actually understand the areas that they’re going into.’* It would be wrong to conclude from this sample that these young people were, to quote bureaucratic speak, *‘in jobs without training’*. In fact, all young people were receiving training, although the content and quality of some, but by no means all, might be questioned.

Additional training was given as new processes were introduced, that is on ‘a need to know’ basis. It could be argued that this enabled the young people to keep abreast of current workplace practices and processes, including the use of new equipment. This could be superior to that offered in an FE college or by a training provider in terms of its relevance and its reflection of current practice.

The majority of respondents had no knowledge of current training initiatives, including *‘Train to Gain’*, *‘E2E’*, and *Apprenticeships*. Where they were aware of them they did not align to company requirements, or the existing funding mechanisms for post-16 learners did not permit access to the type of qualification in which an employer, or young person, might be interested.

‘Unfortunately, we’re told that A can’t get the qualification because he’s come straight into work at his age and they put great emphasis on the life skills and going to college full-time two years. You can’t sort of, this is what I’m told, you can’t come on to these units unless you’ve been to college and done the life skills side. So unfortunately, we’re

running them both down the log book path where one can get a qualification at the end of it, and the other lad unfortunately can't.' (Employer, engineering, Warwickshire).

Opportunities for progression exist within large scale retail companies, and, to some extent, within small family firms. Contrary to public perception not all young people in this sample were in 'dead end jobs', nor were they in jobs without training.

Conclusions

From the employers' perspective, this study throws some light on the destinations in the labour market of young people who are classified as being in 'jobs without training' (JWT). It highlights the fact that the JWT 'tag' is not helpful in either defining or understanding the needs of young people who enter the labour market at 16/17, or indeed their employers.

The evidence from the research shows that young people in JWT are a diverse group in terms of the type of work they access, as well as the training and rewards that they receive. In addition, there remains a demand in the labour market for their skills. Most young people found their own route into the labour market and few employers appeared to make use of Connexions to recruit young people. This may be attributed to the fact that most young people were entering jobs, which were not exclusively open to their age group. This argues against the existence of a distinct youth labour market which was a prevalent debate within studies of youth employment that were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s.

Discussion surrounding 'employability skills' has never been more high profile; it forms a major theme within the wider policy debate surrounding skills, training and competitiveness (UKCES, 2009; LSC, 2008; CBI/Edexcel, 2008; Martin et al. 2008; Archer and Davison, 2008). The findings from this study highlight the way in which a range of different employers viewed 'employability skills' and reinforced the

need for these skills. Whilst not discounting academic qualifications, the acid test for employer satisfaction appears to be young people's '*work willingness*', a '*can do*' attitude, '*fitting in*', '*giving excellent customer service*', as well as some basic competence in literacy, numeracy and occasionally IT, dependent upon the work setting.

The harder question, and one outside the scope of this study, is where such skills might be acquired. If these are the necessary 'threshold' skills to enter and succeed in employment some foundation has to be made within compulsory schooling; the introduction of Functional Skills within the secondary curriculum is one step. But the type of skills required by this sample of employers goes beyond 'reading, writing and adding up'. Their emphasis, like those of a wide range of employers, was on what have now become known as 'soft skills'. Lauder (2009) has however, suggested that: '*it is not clear why educational institutions are uniquely fitted to educate for soft skills.*' (Lauder, 2009:158).

It has been argued (Billet, 2004) that 'employability' skills are highly context dependent and context specific, even companies within the same sector may have different skills requirements; opportunities to develop them vary between contexts. In routine types of employment, adherence to the manual, or in the case of retail the 'Planogram', leaves little opportunity for the development of 'independent thinking', 'creativity', 'using one's initiative'.

The current emphasis on 'employer engagement', a recurring theme since the 1980s, within the compulsory school curriculum is yet another manifestation of the desire to align the outputs of the education system more closely with the needs of employers (DCSF/DIUS, 2008; DCSF, 2009). However, this is no easy task since this research has shown that employers are a diverse group with a variety of different needs reflecting their product market, workforce profile, local conditions as well as their attitudes to recruitment, training and development.

For this sample of employers their views about formal qualifications reflect the findings of the earlier study (Maguire, 2001); they did not necessarily understand or place much weight on them. Also, amongst the majority of respondents, there was little familiarity with other government initiatives such as *Train to Gain*, *E2E*, or *Apprenticeships*. Employers were happy to recruit young people if they presented themselves as willing and able to perform the job and if they appeared to possess the necessary ‘employability’ skills, however construed, to function within the specific workplace. The demands of different workplaces were diverse in terms of their skill requirements.

These findings present a challenge to the RPA agenda. They point to a segment of the labour market where little is known about the recruitment and training of young people and where employers operate ‘below the radar’ in terms of demanding or recognising formal qualifications or engaging in government supported training programmes which offer accreditation for training activity. Change will need to include a much greater recognition of varying degrees of training activity, which is happening in many workplaces and suggests an expansion of recognised and accredited in-house training provision.

Findings from the research also indicated that some employers fail to see the relevance of existing workplace qualifications, which demands a review of the applicability and flexibility of the existing qualification framework and of associated funding regimes. Finally, if employers continue to demand young workers and routes into the labour market do remain open to 16 and 17 year olds post 2013, far more attention needs to be given to supporting young people’s transitions into employment, through a more active role in job placement. This would lead to a proactive engagement with employers and young people, where a greater understanding of their needs could be achieved and could form the basis for securing greater support in participation in formalised training activity.

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