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Decent Work
and Productivity
Research Centre

The impact of Covid-19 on Young Workers in England

Young people navigating insecure work in
Greater Manchester during the Covid-19 pandemic

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About this Research

This briefing outlines initial findings from the British Academy-funded project: 'Young People and Work in an Age of Uncertainty'.

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Originally conceived in 2019 in response to existing concerns about young people in the labour market, the research itself was conducted in 2021, coinciding with the Covid-19 pandemic. Through qualitative, longitudinal methods, the research sought to capture in-depth insights into young people's experiences and perspectives of insecure work at this unique period of labour market disruption. It includes recommendations for many stakeholders about what can be done to support young people to move into and progress into Decent Work.

1. Young People and in/decent work

– setting the scene

Young people as new and recent entrants to the labour market are more likely to experience insecure work. Internationally, the International Labour Organisation (ILO)¹ has recognised this and reports upon the vulnerabilities of transitions from education into work and early labour market experiences, warning of the risks of long-lasting scarring for those who do not find a secure pathway. In the UK, public attention has been drawn to how work intersects with other aspects of young people's lives as they face multiple challenges including a less structured labour market, higher housing costs and greater debt for education participation.

Meanwhile, policymakers at international, national, and local levels want to address the risks of insecure work and both decent work and good work are aspirational goals for governments and employers^{2,3}. The UK government-commissioned Taylor Review of Good Work⁴ described various types of atypical work including 'gig economy' work and zero hours contracts, arguing that more action is needed to provide a safety net for workers in such insecure jobs.

The Greater Manchester Combined Authority's strategy⁵ (GMCA) is to support the growth of 'good work' in the city region and prior to the pandemic launched its aspirational Employment Charter and Young Person's Guarantee with stated priorities to 'equip young people for life', and to have 'good jobs' across the city. Greater Manchester where this project was based has many strengths as a labour market but is known to have contrasting experiences within it and access to good quality work is unequal^{6,7}. Unemployment in Greater Manchester has tended to be higher than both Northwest and national levels, and much job growth since the 2008 Financial Crash being in more casualised forms of labour⁸.

There has also been increasing interest in discussions about the psychological aspects of decent work that explore issues of job quality and the scope for meaningful work and the desirability of work offering self-determination and social connectedness, in addition to meeting material and survival needs⁹.

In research about young people (18-25) in the labour market, Furlong et al¹⁰ defined zones of (in)security as traditionality (e.g., full-time jobs in open-ended contracts), liminality (e.g., temporary contracts less than 30 hours a week) and marginality (e.g., unemployed, government schemes, students). In the 2010s, they estimated that 36% of young people were marginal, 15% liminal and 49% traditional and only those in the traditional category have secure work with relative certainty of trajectory. They argue that since the 1980s, there has been a growth of young people in the marginal and liminal zones.

2. Young Workers and Covid-19

Nationally, Covid-19 exacerbated existing concerns about young people's position in the labour market. Very early on it was clear that young people were more adversely affected than other generations by changes to employment and work caused by the pandemic^{11,12}.

The youth labour market shrank, largely because young people were more likely to work in sectors (e.g., hospitality and retail, entry level administration, leisure, arts, and entertainment) that were hard-hit by lockdowns. City centres such as Manchester witnessed a particular fall in active employment in such industries most affected by the pandemic. Writing in October 2021 and reviewing data about young people (ages 16-24) between February 2020 and August 2021, Williams et al¹³ report that young people accounted for nearly half (46%) of the total fall in employment during the crisis, with a total of 425,000 jobs lost. Many young people were in jobs in which they were furloughed, and research reports that 1.9 million young people were fully furloughed in the first national lockdown of 2020 (nearly half (47%) of all young employees)¹⁴. At the same time, the crisis has seen an unprecedented increase in education participation by young people (48%, compared with 43% before the crisis began). Young people also saw the highest growth in unemployment with long term unemployment (over six months) rising to 170,000 during the crisis. The TUC¹⁵ reported in March 2021 that the unemployment rate for 16–24-year-olds was over 14%, compared to just under 4% for those over 25.

Fears for young people prompted the UK Government's ambitious Plan for Jobs and Kickstart work experience scheme for young people, announced in the summer of 2020. In Greater Manchester, GMCA sought ways to use existing 'Youth Guarantee'¹⁶ policy as a vehicle to actively support young people's transition into the labour market.

Meanwhile various youth organisations have collaborated to argue for a far more extended package of support for young people¹⁷. To date, the more ambitious calls of this Group have had limited impact on policymakers, although politicians from all sides claim to want to support young people.

3. Project methods and participants

In brief, this was a qualitative longitudinal research project in which participants (aged 18-30) volunteered for two interviews (the first in Spring 2021, the second in Autumn 2021). There was an open call for participants that was shared widely.

21 young people participated all of whom lived and worked in the city region, and 40 interviews were undertaken. Most had a good level of education and associated skills. All the young people at the first stage of the project were in marginal and liminal zones of work (an exception was one who had full-time, permanent employment but was furloughed). We included a variety of young workers in our project, including students to capture varied perspectives on young people's working lives.

An earlier pilot project (2019) with 6 young delivery workers in the city also informed the research. Additional insights were gained from conversations with relevant professionals and organisations, including Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), Greater Manchester Council for Voluntary Organisations (GMCVO), Greater Manchester Youth Network (GMYN), Standguide and Oldham Step Up to the NHS. Further details of participants are in Appendix 1.

4. Key findings

All the young people in the project had work circumstances disrupted by Covid-19.

None had been in a secure working situation prior to the pandemic and for many the on-set of Covid-19 led to the loss or reduction of work. Ten of the twenty-one had benefited from some furlough payment and six had claimed Universal Credit. Covid-19 exacerbated existing insecurities.

The first round of interviews occurred in March 2021 at a time of national lockdown. Young people reflected on the consequences of the pandemic over the last year, as well as their current circumstances.

4.1 Consequences of insecure work

Adverse consequences related to economic status, mental health, temporal uncertainty, and work/career identity.

Economic issues:

- Economic instability was experienced by all in varied ways, and sixteen of twenty-one had received furlough or Universal Credit. The value of furlough was affected by contract status prior to pandemic, those on zero hours contracts gained much less.
- Newly self-employed were unable to benefit from government grants, so obliged to claim (often reluctantly) Universal credit.
- Those who continued to work generally had far fewer hours and incomes were lower.

Work/career identity:

- Disrupted dreams. Many reported that planned work opportunities, more in line with career aspirations had been cancelled/postponed
- Lives on hold. For all there was a reduced confidence in planning for the future
- Collapse of work for some creative workers, especially performers. Contributes to sense that being a creative is not a proper job.
- Limited work choices. Covid-19 led some to take any job available. Risk of unemployment leads to a willingness to take 'worse work'
- Collapse of student part-time work (hospitality, retail). Associated with a normalisation and acceptance of casualised work amongst students.

...your persona and your self is so tied into your creations that if that is, basically if you're told that that's worthless or that you can't do that anymore or it's valueless or like the situation, even worse if the situation around you renders it valueless, then you just, it's a very personal attack...It feels very, you know it's a very vulnerable place that you make art from so I think it's pretty difficult to go, to be told or to be in a situation where you can't make your art any more or you're told that that it is, you know it doesn't matter anymore.

Simone, Musician, and hospitality worker.
Interview 2.

Mental health and wellbeing:

- Mental health and wellbeing. Numerous examples of a sense of isolation and anxiety due to changes to life and work.
- Recognition and candour about the relationship between wellbeing and work.

...the pressure that I'm under has forced me to get mental health help which is a positive but of course all of these things take so long because of this Tory government underfunding, critically underfunding the NHS... The stress and pressure of not being able to see people as a single person... So it's completely changed my life really, this pandemic and completely changed my work circumstances. Now I'm not available for any kind of work unless it can be done from home because I can't, I still can't risk my mother's health.

Cherelle, worked as a care assistant, unemployed.
1st interview.

Temporal uncertainty

- Delayed transitions. A loss of income security had obliged some to return to family home and/or adjust living circumstances.
- Temporal uncertainty surrounding work limited ability to be active citizens, e.g., via volunteering and community participation

4.2 Resisting the consequences of insecure work

However, young people found ways to **resist adverse consequences**.

Individual adaptability (self-determination)

- New opportunities – for some new and unexpected opportunities arose, creatives making work at home, students studying more, taking unexpected key worker jobs, writing blogs.
- Improvisation. Optimism against the odds was evident and despite disruption many remain hopeful that circumstances will improve.
- Recognition of the importance of safety nets and back-up plans. Shared experience with peers of the pandemic's impact on work diminished risk of sense of failure surrounding disrupted work circumstances.

Social Support systems

- Buffering – the role of friends, family and support networks is crucial for young people's economic and personal sense of security.
- Those without the safety net of social support networks find it most hard to move into decent work.
- Managing welfare benefits systems. Young people who would not have anticipated claiming Universal Credit pre-pandemic have to do so. Job centre staff appear more flexible in their expectations of claimants, although in our sample, some had already experienced problems with processes.

Social Values and awareness

- Political awareness of structural reasons for insecure work. Less likely to blame selves for poor working circumstances and understanding of the limitations of individual control. Though not generally politically active.
- Strong values emerge in how young people view the importance of the key worker roles (e.g., in retail, hospitality and care that many of them do). In addition, critique of how society values creative workers.

And so, I think that should be a bit more regulated. I think if you're going to open a business and you're going to take responsibilities for employees, there should be safeguards there to make sure that you do look after the welfare of your employees. You must pass a driving licence test to get a car, but you don't have to get a business owner's licence to manage people.

Khaleel, 1st Interview - unemployed photographer.

4.3 Change over time: moving into Decent Work

The second wave of interviews happened six months later. At this point in time, lockdown had eased and albeit with restrictions, the economy and society were opening much more. How circumstances change over time is evident and the value of a longitudinal approach to capture change is illustrated.

Possibilities for movement and progression

- Considerable movement and change for participants in six months. For most, their situation had got better, e.g., the number in a distinctly marginal status had reduced from five to two.
- Move from temporary to permanent positions. Some young people who had secured temporary work in recent months, have been offered more permanent roles with employers. Four now had permanent, open-ended contract (increase from one at stage one).
- Both re-emerging and cancelled opportunities. Some previously postponed opportunities have re-emerged, although for others these openings have been cancelled.

Utilising social support systems

- Interventions have helped young people. Via job centre for the unemployed (KickStart, New Enterprise Allowance), via university careers and placements team for students (vacancies, enterprise funding).
- Importance of personal interaction with varied people in positions of support/power. E.g., for students, this includes lecturers, placements, and careers staff, for those who are claiming, sympathetic job centre advisers, for those who are working, supportive managers.

Responding to the labour market change

- Work famine to feast. Some young people were dealing with having too much work with anti-social hours (e.g., hospitality). In other fields, pent-up demands led to an intensification even in work they like (e.g., creatives).
- Willingness to criticise employers and poor work conditions. Some young people have strong opinions on how employers treat job applicants and workers, and others purposefully moved away from work they perceive as poor quality.

Meaning/lack of meaning in work

- The disruption of pandemic has not diminished a desire for meaningful work, which can provide progression, autonomy, and social connectedness.
- Pain and disengagement. Work remains a painful experience for some young people. Prolonged uncertainty risks leading to a disengagement with work possibilities.

It's kind of like the opposite situation with work now compared to back then in the sense of you know there was not many jobs, not many hours in this industry just after lockdown or during lockdown, compared to now where I'm doing like, I dunno sometimes 50-hour weeks. Yeah just because there's it's like, no-one like applying for a lot of the jobs. And I know it's not just at our place, I know it's like an industry wide thing.

Matty, student, hospitality worker. 2nd interview.

4.4 Making meaning of insecure work circumstances

We were interested in how young people made sense of insecure work and the uncertainty surrounding this.

Cultural narratives surrounding careers emerge in their reflections. Young people move between these narratives as they reflect upon their circumstances.

- The elusive grand career narrative. A desire for work that offers progression through the life course.
- The allure of career calling. Many seeking work that fulfils intrinsic motivations.
- The endurance of toil. An acceptance that work can be unpleasant and arduous and that this must be tolerated (albeit temporarily).
- The disengagement with career and labour. Some evidence of disappointment and disenchantment with work.

Decent work emerged as a fertile way to explore what they wanted and imagined for the future.

Young people's responses suggested an awareness of the nuances of both objective and subjective measures of decent work and comments were made which addressed:

- Earning enough to get by; Happiness/satisfaction; Dignity/being valued; Opportunities for progression; Having rights and protection.

Their reflections align with the four pillars of decent work defined by the ILO:

- Social dialogue: although ambivalent about trade unions, they supported the importance of worker voice in organisations.
- Social protection: the pandemic had made them aware of the role of social safety nets, which many had benefitted from.

- Rights at work: many had strong instincts about discrimination but limited knowledge of how to challenge poor practices.
- Availability of Employment opportunities: they were aware of skills shortages in some career areas but were not inclined in the short term to pivot to new fields of work where jobs may be plentiful and were sometimes committed to staying on a career path however competitive or insecure.

Decent work for me, being happy in your job, having good interactions with people, not feeling depressed, having enough to feed and house yourself and have some leisure time and kind of getting pleasure from your work, you know, yeah. And feel like you're contributing to society and making people happy in some way, in whatever way it is. ...What you're doing, research, trying to help society, trying to help young workers. I think that's decent work.

Blake, self-employed artist. 1st interview.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Much attention in national policy about young people has been about those who are very marginal in the labour market (e.g., NEET). However, this project explored the experiences of young people who had consistently engaged with education and work prior to the pandemic, and many had resources to draw upon including educational credentials and support networks of family and friends.

Despite these advantages, their experiences of work insecurity and uncertainty had significant impact upon them and lead us to conclude that attention should be paid to wider generational challenges not just to those young people who meet narrow definitions of marginalisation. Although this research was conducted at a unique point of labour market uncertainty, it points to the wider impact of insecure work and makes recommendations for the future and recovery from the crisis.

We asked young people what had helped them most in developing their working lives and what they thought employers, educational institutions and politicians could do to help. Across the interviews, an ambitious Wishlist was generated. Many resonate with existing trends in society led by politicians, employers and youth organisations that remain under-developed. The following recommendations were just some of what emerged from what our participants said.

5.1 Careers advice

Available and timely careers advice and guidance is important for all young people. A stronger infrastructure needs to exist to make this happen and for it to be available to all young people, not just those who are unemployed or are in education. Current funding and provision in this space often via Third Sector and public organisations has been volatile. The Career Guidance Guarantee provides a way forward¹⁸.

- **Recommendation 1:** Design and creation of a freely available careers service for all young people that can help them with personalised advice, practical help (paying tax, completing forms), developing networks/connections etc.
- **Recommendation 2:** Careers provision should be designed with young people's preferences in mind (fostering peer support and being available virtually and in-person). This can grow from existing Youth hubs and National Careers Service provision and should support in tailored ways the diverse needs of young people.

5.2 Good employment

Young people appreciate and recognise employers who have good HR practices, including good policies around terms and conditions, employee wellbeing, employment contracts, good training options, diversity, and inclusion policies.

- **Recommendation 3:** Employers to strengthen good HR practices and engage with initiatives such as the Good Employment Charter in Manchester. The Youth Employment Charter and Youth Friendly Badge also provide a way to evidence employer commitment.

The 'two years' experience' requirement which appears in many job ads is a barrier for many young people. Employers should review how they approach job requirements and the potential impact on new workers and consider how they might bring in a more diverse talent pool, not just those with time specific experience.

- **Recommendation 4:** Especially post-pandemic there have been reduced opportunities to secure work experience. This may affect young people's future careers. Work experience needs a re-boot.
- **Recommendation 5:** Employers to prioritise offering more work experience opportunities to young people as part of their commitment to the communities they operate in. Explore creative ways of doing this virtually and remotely too.

Employer recruitment and selection methods, if rigorous on their own terms can appear as 'hoops to jump' for young people especially those without connections. An enormous amount of time is spent by both employers and candidates in applying for jobs. Young people appreciate the use of methods that help ensure against discrimination.

- **Recommendation 6:** Employers to explore methods of recruitment and selection which do not create excessive work for young people as candidates who are applying for many jobs as they start out. There is a challenge to create systems that do not adversely affect candidate self-esteem when unsuccessful.
- **Recommendation 7:** Employers should not impose unfair demands on young people for costs that are required for an interview or as part of a job, e.g., the use of trial shifts to do routine work risk being exploitative if unpaid.

For many young people, having secure, regular hours with fair pay is crucial in planning their time and finances. Having confidence in the number and regularity of hours work that will be available on average is important even for students who are working alongside studies.

- **Recommendation 8:** Legislative reform of current minimum wage levels for young people to assist transparency and fairness is required. Employers should explore ways to extend universal minimum and living wage thresholds to all employees.
- **Recommendation 9:** The Living Hours campaign offers useful recommendations to adopt about how to move towards more secure hours. Irregular requests for both too few and too many hours are a problem.

5.3 Job centres

Young people need to be treated differently by Job Centres. Processes are off-putting to many young people especially those who do not know what they want to do and have limited skills/experience. Work coaches should have more discretion in identifying what is a positive outcome for a young person. The pandemic allowed for more flexible job centre/young person interactions that can be learned from. Quality of interaction with job centre staff appears very variable.

- **Recommendation 10:** A separate section of the Job Centre should be tasked with working with young people with their career planning and job seeking. The recent Youth hubs initiative can provide the basis for this. A robust framework of support is required that goes beyond time-limited initiatives and supports routes into employment and self-employment.
- **Recommendation 11:** Greater recognition that admin processes around Universal Credit (e.g., ID expectations, conditionality, and sanctions) and claiming benefits can act as a barrier for young people getting started especially those who may have variable and insecure incomes, not to mention limited money management skills.

5.4 Unions

Young people want to engage collectively in organisations and activities that can make a positive difference to worker conditions. However, few are members of a union. Trade unions can be an important source of advice and support for young workers. Cost can be a barrier for joining so Trade unions should adapt membership fees appropriately.

- **Recommendation 12:** Develop attractive membership levels for young people to join trade unions.
- **Recommendation 13:** Incorporate education about trade unions, worker rights and voice in careers education activities in educational institutions. Unions can help educators by designing and creating suitable educational materials.

Appendix 1

The following are details of education and employment status of research participants:

Education status of participants; Graduate (n8), Student (n9), Withdrawn from HE (n2), Never been to university (n2). Employment status: Employed (n14), Unemployed (n4), Self-employed (n2), More than one activity (n1).

Of those who said they were employed or self-employed, they worked in the following sectors; Hospitality (n7), Creative (n4), Retail (n2), Public sector admin (n3), Social care (n1), Science (n1), Delivery (n1), Events (n1).

The following are demographic details of participants:

Age; 19-21 (n7), 22-25 (n10), 26-30 (n4). Gender; Women (n15), Men (n6). Ethnicity; Asian/Asian British (n3), Mixed (n3), White (n15). Disability; None (n12), Learning difficulty (n2), Mental health issue (n4), Other (n3).

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The research was conducted within the Research Centre for Decent Work and Productivity and Manchester Metropolitan University, where the aim is to identify what causes – and who has – decent work and productivity, and what can be done to shape a bright future for the world of work.

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