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Strengthening Precarity? A critical analysis of education and training programmes in the UK (Scotland)

Abstract

Purpose—The aim of this paper is to examine the provision of education and training programmes for young people in Scotland for work and lifelong learning within the context of the skills ecosystem approach adopted by the Scottish Government.

Design/methodology/approach—The research drew upon findings from a large EU-funded multi-country project which ran from 2016-2019 that comprised experiences and perspectives with young people who were affected by these programmes as well as the managers and practitioners tasked with delivering them. The work was conducted in Aberdeenshire and Glasgow and included in-depth interviews with young people and programme managers and practitioners.

Findings—The research showed that there is a gap between the rhetoric of the intentions of the policies, and how those involved at ground level experience the programmes enacted under policies which draw on a skill ecosystem approach. Whilst there was public funding for training, it was not clear from the enactment of the relevant policies where employers' responsibilities lie. Locating the findings in the skills ecosystem model highlights the weak engagement of employers in their pivotal role in the education and training system and the resulting increased precarity of the young people's futures.

Research implications—The paper sheds light on the shape of education and training provision in Scotland, the range of participants engaged in the provision, and the commitment of providers in comparison to policy language and intentions.

Originality—Through the skill ecosystem approach, this paper draws together policy narratives and the experiences of young people.

Keywords: young adults; skill ecosystem; Education and training programmes; Scotland

Introduction

In the academic literature there has been a strong focus on Scottish Government education and training and lifelong learning (LLL) policies (Warhurst and Findlay, 2012; Gallacher and Reeve, 2019; Valiente et al., 2020), including comparisons with EU member countries (Tikkanen et al., 2022). Apart from government reports (Scottish Government, 2017; 2022), there have been few studies of young people's experiences, following the enactment of education and training/LLL policies in Scotland, beyond the specific cases of *Care*

Experienced Young People (Howard and McQuarrie, 2022) and those (controversially) classified as NEETs (McPherson, 2021). What a number of these studies do have in common is reference to Scottish Government rhetoric (e.g. Valiente et al., 2020; McPherson, 2021) in respect of policy enactment. This paper fills a gap in the academic literature on the experiences of mainstream young people in Scotland engaged in education and training and related lifelong learning programmes and is particularly interested in how they relate to stated policy intentions which draw on the skill ecosystem approach. Scotland's engagement with the approach developed in Australia by Finegold (1999) and Buchanan et al. (2009) began more than a decade ago. The literature on skill ecosystems has tended to focus on three of the four key elements: policy, firms, education and training systems (Buchanan et al., 2009; 2017; Payne 2008), and there has been much less written about the fourth: the individuals who, within a successful skill ecosystem, are expected to invest in their skills according to the availability of rewarding jobs and career opportunities (see Figure 1 below from Windsor and Alcorso, 2008, p. 5). As Gallacher and Reeve (2019) explain, there has been little evaluation of the skill ecosystem approach or consideration of how it may have affected young people's experiences of the Scottish Government's intended move from a supply- to demand-led labour market.

This paper examines the provision of education and training programmes preparing young adults (aged 18-29) in the UK (specifically Scotland) for work and 'lifelong learning'. Through education and training strategies such as *Determined to Succeed* and *Skills for Work*, the Scottish Government has sought to present policy in terms of commitment to promoting vocational and lifelong learning as an opportunity for young people of all levels of academic ability (Edward et al., 2008, p. vi). The Scottish Government has policy which talks to better engaging employers and other key partners, improving apprenticeships, developing high quality vocational education in key sectors, and post-compulsory education reform (Scottish Government, 2014). This paper investigates the impact of these policies through the experiences and perspectives of young adults on the programmes, and the managers and practitioners tasked with delivering them. The data on which the paper is based was collected as part of a large EU-funded multi-country project which ran from 2016 to 2019.

Following this introduction, we begin with an explanation and then a critical discussion of the skill ecosystem approach, represented in Figure 1, which we use to structure the paper. Our findings from interviews with employment programme managers and practitioners, and the

young people on the programmes will be provided. In the final section of the paper, the discussion and conclusion are presented.

The skill ecosystem approach

Developed initially by Finegold in California (1999), the skill ecosystem approach is concerned with coordination failures (i.e., not just market and/or government failure) and seeks to understand ‘skills in context’, ‘the wider array of determinants associated with workforce development and how it is connected with particular trajectories of social and economic development’ (Buchanan et al., 2017). Applying Finegold’s notion of skill ecosystem to the Australian context, Buchanan and his colleagues examined the relationship between the development and deployment of labour (2001, 2009, 2017) and found a deep-seated fragmentation in flows of learning and labour (Buchanan et al., 2009). In Australia, three major programmes collectively supported around 100 different skill ecosystem initiatives between 2002 and 2011, aiming to address the problem of poor coordination (Buchanan et al., 2017, p. 448). These initiatives were intended to improve collaboration between vocational education organisations and industry, to increase workforce sustainability in tight labour markets and to better align training with industry development needs (Windsor and Alcorso, 2008, p. 7). Windsor and Alcorso (2008) highlighted the factors or levers that are associated with high skill ecosystems (see figure 1):

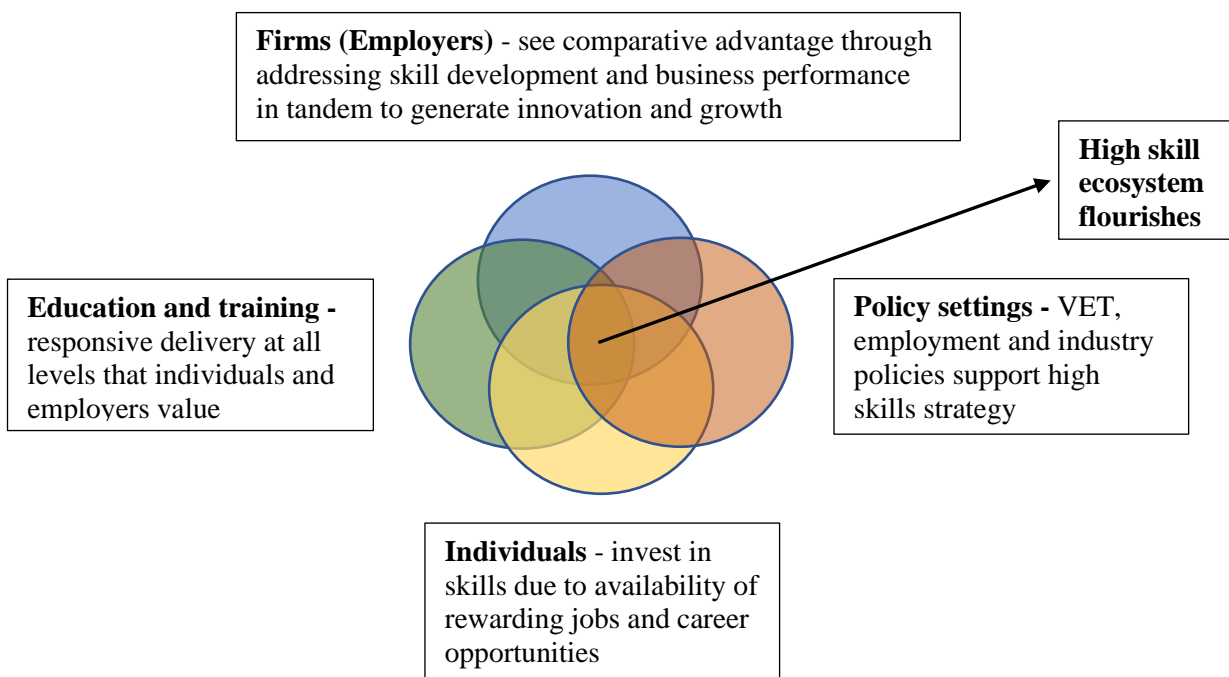


Figure 1—high skill ecosystem (Windsor and Alcorso, 2008, p. 5)

The following sections critically elaborate on the four key elements of the skill ecosystem approach: policy settings, education and training, employers, and individuals, within the Scottish context.

Policy settings: Scottish training policy reform

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, as with the rest of the UK, Scotland devoted considerable resources to the supply side of skills provision through boosting education levels as the primary policy response to the challenges of ‘globalisation’ and the ‘new economy’ (Anderson and Warhurst, 2012). Whilst the education system in Scotland was successful in increasing the qualification level of the economically active population, that success did not keep pace with the demands of the economy but rather, as evidenced by the over-supply of over-skilled and under-employed workers (Felstead, 2007; Warhurst and Findlay, 2012), perhaps created further problems. Payne (2008) suggested that Scotland could learn from emerging Australian experiences with reform based on a skill ecosystem approach to address these problems.

The appetite for creating and sustaining better skill ecosystems had been growing in Scotland, with policy makers drawn to the reports of successful ecosystem projects in Australia (Payne, 2008; SFC, 2009). Wishing to emphasise the importance of developing a strong and vibrant economy, the new Scottish Government, led by the Scottish National Party (SNP), decided to embrace skill ecosystem thinking by attempting to move beyond supply-side policies (Warhurst and Findlay, 2012). The framework for skills development was laid out in *Skills for Scotland* (Scottish Government, 2010) which focused on skills utilisation and strengthening partnerships. The Scottish Government sought to steer skills development and coordinate key elements and institutions within the system using an increasingly ‘managed’ approach (Gallacher and Reeve, 2019). Keep (2018) argues that this is in contrast to the more marketised approach which has emerged in England. By following skill ecosystem thinking, the Scottish Government has policy which talks to better engaging employers and other key partners, improving apprenticeships, developing high quality vocational education in key sectors, and post-compulsory education reform (Scottish Government, 2014).

Education and training programmes: Connecting education and work

There has been a shift in orientation from lifelong learning to ‘skills for work’ in national policy agendas (Vanderhoven et al., 2019). Before the 2008 financial crisis, the Scottish

Government's skills strategy set the aim of upgrading the quality of employment and the productivity of companies but, after the crisis, the main aim of the updated skills strategy was simply to get people, particularly the young, into employment (Lawy, 2019).

For this paper, we investigated the impact of two education and training programmes on the experiences of a sample of young people in Aberdeenshire and Glasgow. The programmes, *Developing the Young Workforce* and *Community Benefit Clauses* were included in the EU-funded project mentioned above. Figure 2 illustrates the context in which these policies and their users and implementers were situated.

Developing the Young Workforce

Developing the Young Workforce (DYW), the Scottish Government's flagship policy for tackling youth unemployment through vocational pathways in secondary education, was launched in 2014. This strategy was a response to recommendations from *the Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce* chaired by Sir Ian Wood (2014), who pointed out the lack of employer engagement within the vocational education and training (VET) sector (2014, p. 3). The principles of a skill ecosystem policy approach are signalled in DYW and place in pole position the engagement of key partners to build better pathways for young people:

[the Scottish Government] plans to expand the Modern Apprenticeships to create more opportunities and to better align the programme with key sectors and areas of economic growth...A new supervisory board, led by employers will ensure that Modern Apprenticeships continue to be closely linked to areas of economic growth and job opportunities.

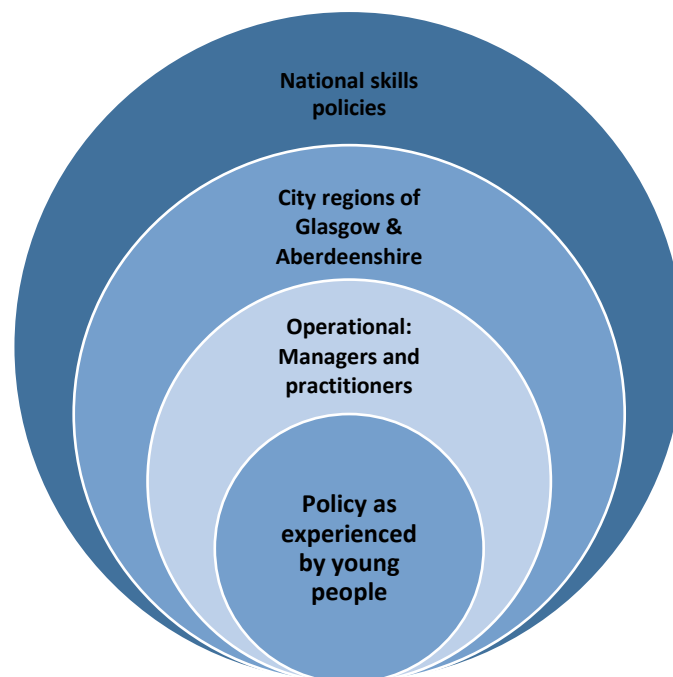
Employers are central to preparing our young people for the world of work and helping them move successfully into the workforce. By creating mechanisms through which employers can more easily influence the education system, play an active part in its delivery and remove some of the real barriers to employing young people, we aim to transform the prospects of our young people and ultimately enhance Scotland's economic performance. (Scottish Government 2014)

According to the Scottish Government, the policy saw a particular focus on the needs of young people and a commitment to help them develop the requisite skills to move into sustainable, high quality jobs (Scottish Government, 2013).

Community Benefit Clauses

Community Benefit Clauses (CBC) are contractual requirements for those businesses working with the local authorities which deliver wider benefits in addition to the core purpose of the contract. These clauses can be used to build a range of social, economic or environmental conditions into the delivery of council contracts. The clauses include: targeted employment and training initiatives, educational support initiatives, and vocational training (Doyle, 2017).

Figure 2 From policy to experience



Employers: Aiming for cooperation

As Emmenegger and Seitzl (2021) explain, countries with collective skill formation systems, such as Germany, Switzerland and Denmark, also have social partner cooperation of one kind or another in the governance of education and training skills. Crucially, this includes the strong engagement of employers (via ‘business intermediary associations’). Simply put, in such systems, vocational education and training are perceived to meet a business demand i.e. skills for production. Keep (2019) has noted that the skill ecosystem approach is also cooperative in nature but as Emmenegger and Seitzl (2021) point out, in liberal regimes of which the UK, including Scotland, is an example, the general education system and market-based transactions are the primary suppliers of education and training. Public commitment to VET is limited and firms are rarely involved in VET apart from basic on-the-job-training. VET provision is not regarded as meeting a business demand. The skill ecosystem approach includes a strong focus

on employer demand for skill but within a liberal model the approach experiences barriers from the power of what Buchanan calls ‘settlement of interest’, lacking alignment of sustained resources (Buchanan et al., 2017). According to Buchanan et al (2017), ‘reforms have hit considerable tacit resistance as they have run up against key features of the current skill settlements in particular sectors and regions’ - settlements with which many employers are comfortable. Instead of investing in an inclusive and sustainable system, employers tend to rely on the ‘poaching’ of existing skilled workers, either in-country or from other countries, to fulfil their skill needs (Muehleemann and Wolter, 2011; Green et al., 2020). In the UK, the absence of meaningful public debate about the role and responsibilities of employers has been the most disturbing aspect in skills policy making (Keep, 2005).

The formation of skill ecosystems depends on an environment where skill production is organised collectively (Keep, 2019). The employers, who are assumed to be largely self-interested, may choose not to commit to this approach. Keep and Mayhew found in 2010, and it is still the case (Keep, 2020), that in the UK, employers do not need or want to train, at the same time as complaining that they cannot get workers with the ‘right’ skills (Green et al, 2020). In Keep’s words, employers are, still, ‘the ghost at the feast’ (2020). The Scottish Government’s policy, like that of the UK government, relies on voluntarism, rather than statutory enforcement, for employer engagement in skill development and this approach has been shown over many years to be wanting (Keep, 2020).

Just as a collective system with a skill ecosystem approach is not necessarily going to provide good training opportunities where the employers are not involved, it will also not necessarily provide inclusive opportunities for young people (Dalziel, 2015).

Individuals: Young people and access to skills training

The Scottish Government’s report (2017) *Young People’s Experience of Education and Training* found that in their sample: ‘most young people pursuing technical or vocational routes after school tend to make decisions based on the options that are available locally. These tend to be short-term and transient’ (p. 35). Also driven by opportunities available locally, young people completing apprenticeships tend to assume they will continue in the same occupation or industry having achieved industry-recognised qualifications and experience, but this is far from guaranteed (by employers) so they are obliged to pursue other options (p. 37).

According to Emmenegger and Seitzl (2021), a concern in collective skill formation systems, designed to provide the economy with a well-trained and competitive workforce, is which of the social partners has prominence. If it is the state at the political-strategic level, as is the case in Austria and Denmark, then socially inclusive goals are more easily pursued as it is the sole decision-maker. On the other hand, an inclusive training system is by definition less demanding and therefore less suited to the demands of highly competitive firms who do not see themselves as having a responsibility for providing training for young people, especially the less well qualified (Thelen, 2014).

The work of Furlong et al. (2018) demonstrates that young people in the UK have been facing increasing precarity over the years, specifically deteriorating labour conditions involving less secure jobs and more temporary contracts, part-time working, and work in occupations that provide little in the way of intrinsic fulfilment (Furlong et al., 2018, p. 98). Young people's decision-making processes are always part of unequal and complex relational interactions, rather than an exclusively individual act (Hodkinson, 2008). The ability of any individual to progress is strongly influenced by resources (economic, cultural, and social) at their disposal. For Ball et al. (2000), the role of family is important for young people forming social perspectives and generating resources for identity formation. The 'traditional constraints' of industrial society (Beck, 1992), such as class, gender, and family roles, continue to shape life chances (Furlong, 2013). Apart from family remaining as a key factor, scholars in youth studies (Baumgardner 1977, 1982; Hodkinson, 2008) also identified the importance of 'happenstance' or serendipitous opportunities in many young people's stories. Hodkinson (2008) argues that chance is significant in people's careers, but that serendipity of itself is influenced by positions and by the field.

Given that the intentions of Scottish policy on education and training was to offer interventions for young people (Scottish Government, 2014), for this paper, we were interested to see what was happening on the ground, at the level of policy operationalisation, specifically its impact on the micro concerns of programme practitioners, managers, and young people. In particular we wanted to compare their experiences with the claims of Scottish policy makers and the embedding of their policies.

Methods

The previous sections analysed the skill ecosystem approach and reviewed the literature on the policy and contextual matters within which young people in Scotland have to negotiate their options. The paper examines the discrepancies and contradictions between the abstract claims of policy makers about young people, and the ‘concrete’ aspects of their lives (Rudd and Evans, 1998). The research involves the important interface between ‘the structural’ and ‘the individual’ aspects of individual experience. A qualitative research design was adopted to bring into focus the impacts of structural forces on the individual experiences (Rudd, 1996). The aim was not to make large-scale generalisations from the data, or reach saturation, but rather to use the data to provide ‘indications of the way in which subjects think and feel’ (Bryman, 1988, p. 140), which would inform us about the career hopes of these young people. The research was conducted in accordance with university and institutional ethics committee guidelines and protocols. Particular attention was paid to reassuring the research participants that anonymity and confidentiality would be preserved (for example, through use of pseudonyms) given that employees and programme members were being asked for a critical appraisal of their experiences.

The data was collected in the Aberdeenshire and Glasgow City Regions. ‘Experts’ - policy managers (at local authority level), project managers (at employment programme level) and practitioners (working directly with the young people) were interviewed for each of the two policies. A purposive sampling method was adopted for the study and in total seven experts working for DYW and four experts working for CBC were interviewed. Eight young adults were interviewed in the Glasgow City Region. The sample comprised 3 males and 5 females, all born in Scotland. All but one, whose father owned a car mechanic business, came from working-class backgrounds and of those two came from a skilled worker background. Ten young adults were interviewed in Aberdeenshire. The sample consisted of 8 males and 2 females. All were born in Scotland except two of the males, one from Poland and one from Thailand (with a Scottish father). Most came from traditional working-class backgrounds. There were two exceptions: the parents of one have a farm in Aberdeenshire, and the father of the other owns and runs an engineering company. At the time of the research, all of the young adult participants, aged 16 to 29 years old, were engaged in either DYW or CBC. The interview schedules, after the pilot had been carried out with similar participants in both regions, made it possible to explore the lived experiences of young people in order to gain some insights into their thinking. A thematic approach was taken to the data analysis. The study employed such coding procedures and techniques as open coding, axial coding, and thematic networks (Strauss

and Corbin 1998). The four factors of the skill ecosystem approach analysed in the previous sections: policy, education/training programmes, employers, and individuals served as general themes for the findings below. The intent of employing these themes is to portray the concrete ways in which policy arrangements dominate young people's lives, and explore the effects and contradictions of the claims embodied in the policies and related programmes.

Findings

Policy as espoused and the programme intentions

The 'experts' (pseudonyms are employed) gave their understanding of the objectives and expected impacts of *Developing the Young Workforce* (DYW) and *Community Benefit Clauses* (CBC). Adam, an Aberdeen-based policy manager considered that the simple goal of DYW is the engagement of business with Years 1-6 in schools and eventually to be broadened out into colleges and universities. He said:

We understand what the region needs in terms of skills for the future and we join it up making sure that the employers and schools are getting what they need. I think we need to keep it as simple as that to start with.

Glasgow policy manager Gary spoke with equal clarity about: 'two primary objectives in DYW Glasgow: better industry links with education and getting more young people into work...'. Adam was critical of the DYW. He felt strongly that a 'positive destination' (a key element in the Scottish Government policy narrative) was not good enough – it had also to be what he called the 'right' destination for the individual person.

For CBC, the policy and project managers agreed that its objective was to persuade contractors and suppliers who engage with Glasgow City Council to write clauses into the contracts to include training and employment obligations and other benefits for the local communities where the work is taking place. They explained that there is also CBC funding:

(for) small suppliers or organisations on the basis that they help and improve the local area in some way e.g. help the community or take on young people for work experience.

The perspectives of these respondents suggest skill ecosystem thinking, addressing the concern with coordination failures and balancing between development (young people's skills formation) and deployment (the performance of work on the job) (Buchanan et al., 2009). The idea of a skill ecosystem highlights the way in which different groups of actors—individuals,

educators, employers and policy advisors—must be motivated by mutually reinforcing advantages for a high skill ecosystem to flourish (Dalziel, 2015). Therefore, ‘employers and schools are getting what they need’. DYW aims to build ‘better industry links with education’ and get ‘more young people into work’. CBC tries to engage contractors and suppliers to provide training opportunities for young people. From a skill ecosystem perspective, both DYW and CBC were intended to be ‘well-coordinated’ skills policies with the aim of creating more effective VET pathways and better links for educational and occupational progression for young people (Buchanan et al., 2009).

Is it working? Policy as enacted and the role of employers

The experts in both regions and both programmes explained their challenges with engaging the employers when implementing these policies. For DYW, Glasgow-based practitioner Ella was concerned about employers’ lack of engagement in creating opportunities for young people, despite the subsidies for apprenticeships, because of the longer-term commitment this set for paying the living wage. She mentioned:

Although schools should be doing more to increase young people’s soft skills, and their maths and English, employers expected them to come as fully fledged workers when “modern apprenticeship” (means young people are) not ready. (Their) job (as employer) is to train them up until they become ready for that job role. But for whatever reason, and I do find this is a frustration of mine, ...a lot of employers will pay a fairly low rate but expect a full time qualified member of staff return and that’s not going to happen.

In Aberdeen, the DYW policy manager was similarly challenged by the lack of employer engagement. He said this had to occur ‘through collaboration or with a stick’ but ‘actually, we have got no stick so we will have to do it through collaboration’. He continued: ‘this can only be done: ‘if there is a will’. He saw the need for ‘a cultural change programme rather than an enforcement programme’ which he expected would take seven years and even then not to be fully embedded.

Other concerns Ella had were around employers’ lack of sensitivity to young people’s nervousness as they started out in the workplace without the advice and help of parents who themselves may be struggling and unaware of what is required. Ella is expressing the concern, from her strongly networked position, that employers are not yet sufficiently committed to training and employing young workers, even with these subsidies, and that a cultural change is needed in employer attitudes.

For CBC, whilst the policy and project managers were clear that: ‘there is obviously a recognition that community benefits are almost part of a contractual obligation’, there was a number of issues raising concern at the level of implementation. Kevin was a practitioner from a construction management contractor which does not employ workers directly. He explained that when the contract is shorter than the duration of for example an electrical apprenticeship of 4 or 5 years: ‘it becomes difficult for me to say to you I will definitely take the guy on and I’ll commit to his future for the next five years’. He felt that it was the subcontractors who should take responsibility but he did not know how they could monitor that process of delivery. Lisa, a practitioner from a construction company expressed the same concerns about not wanting to let a young adult down by terminating the apprenticeship when the contract ended. She said that subcontractors and suppliers should be provided with incentives as they: ‘need to buy into it as well’.

Although the intention of these policies was to strengthen the connectivity and co-operation between education and the world of work, according to the respondents, employer engagement was less satisfactory, suggesting more fragmentation and discoordination between policy and operationalisation. The contracts are often shorter than the length of an apprenticeship and there is no provision to help the apprentices to complete their training. The subcontractors are not necessarily bound by the clauses. This means young adults’ routes into work can be blighted although this had not affected any of those in the project. It is not clear from the enactment of the policies where the responsibilities of employers lie. Clearly, a change of culture is needed and it had to be with the carrot (collaboration) rather than the stick as explained by the Aberdeen DYW policy manager.

Is it working? Individuals’ experiences of policy

With an ambition of moving beyond ‘supply-side policies’ (Warhurst and Findlay, 2012), the Scottish government embraced the notion of skill ecosystem in order to build strong transition systems for young people by engaging employers and other key partners (Scottish Government, 2014). The policies were intended to form coordinated institutional networks and promote ‘internal diversity’ for young people (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2017). However, for this research, we were unable to trace any elements of the impact of institutional ‘coordination’ in the stories of young people. Rather, some ‘traditional’ factors were still in evidence (Beck, 1992). Their pathways seemed to be either serendipitous or to emanate from family influence

and connections; in the experience of the young people, institutional sources of information and guidance were not accessible.

Pathway of serendipity

Young people were asked to articulate their life projects and their future plans. A combination of factors such as unwanted academic pressure and lack of effective careers information and support resulted in rather complicated, confusing and therefore troubled post school destinations (for all the DYW, and two of the CBC, respondents). Only two respondents had had a relatively smooth pathway between school and their apprenticeships although not in paid employment during that time.

For example, after Jenny finished her Highers¹ in secondary school, she decided to study radio at further education college. However, she did not make it to the end of the course because she found it discouraging. Next, she worked part-time at a sun tanning place and then in a shop. She found that there was a music course she really wanted to do but in the end did not manage to finish it due to funding issues but then her boyfriend made a helpful suggestion:

so I decided OK back to the drawing board and I re-applied for (another college) The lecturers ... were absolutely spot on that's just when I was like I can't not have a full time job and still keep up studying and it was such a shame and I was actually quite disheartened and sad to leave but I though right I'll leave and see where I end up and for the moment in time I had nothing planned, and then my boyfriend was like, listen I went and done an apprenticeship why don't you go, he was like this is basically the last year to fit in for it as I was 19. I was like well I'll go for it then.

Jenny's story is typical of the element of serendipity that affects the career pathways of young people without a steer either from home or from school. George shared his experiences when choosing to do an apprenticeship:

We got a careers adviser that did come round the school but they were maybe not the best, I found out about my training course through friends and older family that had went to it and people that I knew that were already there before I had joined and that's where I found out about it and I knew that a few people had got jobs apprenticeships through the training scheme and that was my first opportunity ... I see that as an opportunity to maybe get an apprenticeship.

¹ Highers are courses that school pupils aged 16-18 in Scotland sit that can lead to university, further study, training or work. They normally undertake four to five Highers and start them in the fifth year of secondary school.

Taking an apprenticeship seemed to be a result of this element of serendipity rather than a smooth transition from school to work which was purposefully chosen by young people.

Serendipity could also be found in the life projects of young people who had experienced early termination of their apprenticeships. For example, George had completed year 3 of his 4-year apprenticeship when the company folded. He had been very upset and struggled with having to start all over again. He took a big pay cut and worked on building sites as a labourer so as to keep himself in the same sort of trade. He was very keen to continue his training and was offered his current opportunity² through a construction company he was labouring for.

Family still acting as significant factor

Although the policies aim to build better links between young people's educational and vocational progressions, nearly all the respondents still considered family as a significant source which provides helpful information and connections for them to transition from education to work. For example, George's grandfather helped him find his first apprenticeship in heating and ventilation, and from there his career aspiration:

The first one (apprenticeship) ... luckily for me the two guys my grandpa knew were tradesman; my grandpa was a plumber and heating engineer as well and two guys that had started had moved onto another company. My grandpa and them still spoke and I got the job through them, so that gave me a start and I went and done an interview, and they accepted me for an apprenticeship.

Another family influence that came through was that of fathers on girls' wanting to pursue an engineering career. Rosie explains, echoed by Louise:

Rosie: I always had encouragement and knowledge about the industry from my dad. He helped me with the idea of going onto the PEO (Performance Engineering Operations) course at college.

Louise: My dad is a technician. He's a big influence (on me) and used to take me to work with him. I just thought if my dad can do it, I can do it.

It was Michael's uncle who alerted him to the Training Centre. Tim was informed by his father of the vacancies where he himself worked, and also about the right time to approach his boss to ask about an apprenticeship. For young adults, family is still a very important factor for their past, present and future plans and aspirations. This risks exacerbating inequalities between

² This was through CBC although he was not aware of that.

young people (Furlong, 2013; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). There was evidence that class inequalities correlate with access to different skills development training programmes: apprentices were more likely to come from highly skilled working-, or newly middle-class backgrounds, while those on employability programmes tended to come from lower skilled working-class backgrounds (Doyle, 2017, p. 52).

Lack of information about vocational routes

Whilst there was evidence that young adults were receiving good careers advice and guidance prior to leaving school, others were very critical of the lack of support and information they received regarding vocational pathways. Interviewees reported that their school-based careers advice heavily encouraged further and higher education, and that as a result they had experienced pressure, even if only through a lack of alternatives, to take an academic path when they had decided against this.

Rachel, female, 20: There was careers advice, but it was more not careers advice [...] (but) what stone are you jumping onto next, are you going to college or University?

Britney, female, 20: I think if apprenticeships were better advertised more people would go into a job where they're learning at the same time [...] I knew apprenticeships were a thing, it just wasn't – nobody ever really recommended it as such.

Cora, female, 21: If you were doing a certain amount of Highers [...] it was like a conveyor belt kinda situation and it got to the point where I was like wait a minute, I don't even know if I want to go to university.

In general, the young people in the sample wanted to see a more balanced focus on vocational as well as academic learning in the last years of school rather than pressure to stay on and a sense of failure if the right number of Highers at the right grades for university were not achieved:

Anita: That's the sort of culture that we're in – in that you've not done well unless you get 5 Highers, ... I'm in a better position now than some people that have had 5 Highers but speaking to teachers now that I had in school they're very impressed with what I'm doing but yes, there's that sort of stereotype that you have to go to uni or you're not doing well.

The data demonstrated the life projects of young people who have been in the DYW or CBC programmes. It is apparent that their transitions to work have been determined by the element of serendipity and the influence of family, rather than 'well-coordinated' or 'managed' (Gallacher and Reeve, 2019) pathways proposed by the policies. The phenomenon of

‘academic drift’ was observed from the young people’s experiences, resulting in a lack of options provided in the information they received.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper, we have demonstrated that there is a gap in the rhetoric between the intentions of the policies and what is actually happening, particularly to the young people who are affected by these policies. These skills policies aimed to embrace the principles of a skill ecosystem approach and promote the coordination of key partners, yet remained mere ‘rhetorical ambitions’ with few concrete changes to ensure better pathways are delivered for young people (Valiente et al., 2020, p. 229). The findings in this paper reveal the lack of employer engagement in creating opportunities for young people, as it seems that they did not acknowledge their role as providers of learning, their responsibilities for training young people, or a commitment to their future. Rather, they were just fulfilling their ‘contractual obligations’. As the experts mentioned, in their experience employers would expect a full-time qualified employee for a fairly low rate, but they lacked the sensitivity and patience these young people need. Anderson (2010) pointed out that the attempted reframing of Scottish skills policies to embrace the concept of skill ecosystems had not been met with a clearly articulated, corresponding framework. Within the ‘liberal market economy’ (Hall and Soskice, 2001), it is hard for the employers to ‘serve the common good’ (Le Grand, 2003, p.12)—developing young people’s skills out of their own self-interest. Influenced by the role of the market, the employers are found to be reluctant to ‘buy into it [the policy]’.

For Keep (2005) the absence of meaningful public debate in the UK about the role and responsibilities of employers has been the most disturbing aspect in skills policy making. Wheelahan and Moodie (2017) note there remains a tension in liberal market economies: on the one hand there needs to be a collectively organised environment where employers are expected to engage, but on the other the danger that employers may increasingly shift the responsibility/cost of skill acquisition from themselves to the state and the individual students. The authors argue that this may lead to a reversion back to narrowly conceived and disjointed notions of skill with more fragmentation and discoordination. For young people, the likely result is they will encounter increased precarity on their routes into work (Buchanan et al., 2001).

In their review of skill developments in Australia, Scotland and the USA, Buchanan et al (2017) noted ‘it is difficult to establish the conditions for self-sustaining skills ecosystems’, and there are ‘problems involved in moving from models which emphasise supply-side issues to ones which fully incorporate the demand side’. Gallacher and Reeve (2019) argue that this may particularly be the case in the Scottish context ‘where policy has often constructed national representative structures to channel employer involvement’. Arguably the highly managed system we have been describing results in a practical focus on those elements that can be managed, which lie on the supply side. So, while improving partnerships with employers remains a key problem, it is clearly one in which a great deal of policy learning, and commitment to addressing training and employment precarity for young people, will be required. As the Aberdeen DYW policy manager suggested, it points to the need for long-term, government-led culture change to encourage employers to engage but also the will to undertake the task. This might mean more state sponsored incentives through policy with a greater focus on Corporate Social Responsibility, but also penalties (the stick) for non-compliance with more regulation designed to compel employers to employ more young and vulnerable people (Doyle, 2017).

For this paper, we drew on the perspectives of a small purposive sample of young people on two education and training programmes, along with some associated policy and programme managers, and practitioners with the aim of examining the provision for young people in Scotland within the context of the skill ecosystem approach adopted by the Scottish Government. Inevitably, with a small sample, there are limitations to what the data can yield. Whilst it offered significant findings of young people’s experiences of education and training policy enactment, and the basis for a more extensive study, it did not allow for examination of issues of class and gender, for example. Nonetheless, the paper has highlighted the importance of employer engagement for stabilising the education and training experiences of young people in a liberal market economy such as the UK, rather than strengthening precarity with its absence, and the need for cultural change. The skill ecosystem provides the framework for policy reform that could result in a higher level of coordination and restructure the transition system for young people (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2017) but in Scotland the cultural change is needed to ensure that any discrepancy between government rhetorical ambitions and young people’s experiences can be addressed.

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