

# Meet the Neets



A WORRYING NUMBER OF YOUNG PEOPLE START THEIR ADULT LIVES WITHOUT EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION OR TRAINING. **JOHN PHILPOTT** EXPLAINS THE CRUCIAL IMPLICATIONS.

## Executive summary

- With growing problems surrounding the employability of school leavers who opt out of further education, the Education and Skills Bill, due for debate in 2008, is set to engage more employers and young people in education and training.

There is growing concern about the substantial proportion of young people in their mid to late teens starting their adult lives neither in employment, education or training – the so-called Neets. Neets have become the focus of public attention not only because of the costs of teenage joblessness but also because failure to equip young people with the skills they need in the world of work will have serious implications for the longer-term performance of the economy.

The Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, highlighted the challenge in a speech last November: “As a result of changes in the global economy many of the jobs British workers do now are becoming redundant. Of today’s six million unskilled workers in Britain, we will soon need only half a million, over five million fewer. While in the old days we could assume that if a teenager left education with no qualifications they could get unskilled work, in the new world the unqualified and unskilled teenager will have to acquire a skill to be easily employable.”

Tackling the Neet problem underpins the objectives of the Education and Skills Bill due to be debated in Parliament in 2008. Under the Bill, young people will, by 2013, be required to stay in education or training until the age of 17, with the statutory learning leaving age raised again in 2015 to 18. Young people failing to attend education or training courses will face fines or community service, while employers not offering apprenticeships or other forms of accredited work-based training will have to release under-18s for the equivalent of one day a week of learning.

**NEETS AND YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT** At the end of 2006, the latest year for which definitive official statistics are currently available, there were just over 200,000 Neets aged 16 to 18 in England. Other government figures indicate that there are currently almost 900,000 Neets in the broader 16-24 age group in England, and as many as 1.2 million in this age group in the UK as a whole.

In 2006 one in five (21%) of 16- to 24-year-olds were jobless and not being either educated or trained; this proportion has persisted for the past decade, even though the UK economy has enjoyed a steadily rising level of employment. The Neet rate is also roughly double the official unemployment rate for 16- to 24-year-olds since only half are actively seeking work. Indeed, measured in this way, the picture of youth unemployment in the UK – often presented as an indicator of a healthy labour market – looks far less healthy in comparison with most of continental Europe than is commonly portrayed.

**WHY YOUNG PEOPLE END UP AS NEETS** There is no consensus as to why the Neet rate has proved so persistent. Possible explanations range from failures in parenting to family breakdown, inadequate schooling, or inappropriate education and training provision that fails to engage less academic young people in the kind of practical vocational learning that might appeal to them.

Such factors can result in young people leaving school at 16 with few or no qualifications, lacking basic skills and unable or unwilling to consider post-school education and training opportunities. Those who also lack softer employability skills may find it difficult to obtain even unskilled employment or opt not to take such work, which is often hard and poorly paid.

Market research typologies used by policy makers for those at risk of dropping out of education and training at an early stage include:

- strugglers (low ability);
- settlers (limited aspirations);
- quitters (give up, having failed to succeed at school);
- hedgers (waiting to see what comes their way);
- escapist (expect something exciting to come their way);
- cool dudes (too lazy to put in enough effort);
- rebels without a cause (just want to start working and earning); and
- angry young rebels (hostile to authority, disruptive at school and less than keen to knuckle down to further education or training).

Whether a young person categorised as at risk in any of these ways actually ends up as a Neet depends on individual circumstances. But Neets are more likely to come from disadvantaged social backgrounds, to have had a troubled time at school, to have experienced difficult personal circumstances, and to live in depressed localities.

Neets are more likely to have parents at the lower end of the socio-economic and income scale, to have been brought up in lone-parent or broken families or families where parents or even grandparents have been long-term welfare dependents, and to come from the poorer ethnic minority groups such as Black Caribbean or Pakistani Bangladeshi.

Persistent truants are seven times more likely to be Neet at age 16, which probably correlates with low attainment (two in five school leavers with no qualifications are Neet at age 16 compared with 2% with at least five GCSEs at A\*-C grade). Young people with learning difficulties are twice as likely to be Neet, and two in three teenage mothers are Neet (although the degree to which this is due to teenage motherhood being a barrier to employment, education or training, or to limited skills and opportunities, will vary between individuals).

**ARE NEETS AN UNDERCLASS?** Neets register high on the Richard Littlejohn scale of tabloid columnist invective. For some Neets, the alternative to work is welfare dependency (jobless 16- to 17-year-olds may receive income support or incapacity benefit even though most are not eligible for Jobseekers Allowance until age 18). For others, the

alternative lifestyle mixes drugs, crime and delinquency. Add in the common observation that many employers seem to prefer enthusiastic migrant workers to young jobless Brits and the stage is set for media depictions of a Neet underclass.

But the image of Neets as a large group of young people at risk of permanent social exclusion and living according to different standards of behaviour is too simplistic. While some Neets conform to this stereotype, most do not. There is considerable movement in and out of Neet status. Roughly half of all 16- to 24-year-old Neets are looking for work at any one time; what prevents them escaping the category is usually a lack of skills or inability to escape the revolving door of a succession of short-term jobs, rather than a general unwillingness to work.

Similarly, most 16- to 18-year-old Neets (51%) haven't opted out, but are at any one time actively seeking employment, education or training opportunities. This group of 18-year-olds also contains young people taking a gap from study before starting courses. And while a significant proportion of teenage Neets can be said to represent a social problem (in 2006 3% were in custody, 8% were teenage parents and 2% were pregnant), estimates suggest that only 1% of 16- to 18-year-olds (2,000) can be classified as long-term Neet (Neet at ages 16, 17 and 18).

**TACKLING THE NEET PROBLEM** The government's Neet strategy is primarily concerned with the role of publicly funded bodies in improving the skills and employability of young people who already are, or might be at risk of becoming, Neet. Specific measures include the so-called September guarantee – under which every young

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person is offered a suitable place in post-16 learning by the end of the September in which they leave full-time education – a means-tested Educational Maintenance Allowance with a weekly payment of around £30 to support continued learning, and Care to Learn support payments to teenage mothers to cover child care and transport costs incurred when undertaking learning.

The broader challenge as identified in the Education and Skills Bill is to engage more young people and employers in education and training activity. It remains to be seen whether raising the learning leaving age to 18 will eventually do the trick.

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