

# **EVIDENCE TO THE NIACE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO THE FUTURE OF LIFELONG LEARNING**

## **YOUNG ADULTS**

### **The Young Adults Learning Partnership**

This evidence is being submitted by The National Youth Agency as one half of the Young Adults Learning Partnership (YALP) established with NIACE in 1997. The Partnership, principally funded by the Local Government Association, was formed to research, develop, manage and disseminate effective approaches to learning and personal development with young adults (aged 16-25). It works within the areas of education, training and employment to support young adults in recognising their abilities as young workers, parents and citizens. The Partnership also works closely with practitioners in the field to assist them in sharing and developing effective and innovative practice, and to build capacity to create exciting and engaging learning opportunities for young adults.

### **Young adults and learning**

We would urge NIACE to recognise that young adults are not a homogenous group. In considering their needs, interests, wishes and aspirations those responsible for developing policy and practice in lifelong learning should differentiate between sub-populations; for example, those who get on, those who get by and those who do neither and are sometimes classified as 'excluded'. There may for instance be issues in relation to gender, ethnicity or faith that need to be considered.

This latter group has been the principal focus of YALP's concern and work programme over the last ten years. And remains so for the purpose of this submission. Even within the sub-population of 'excluded', different groups have different needs shaped by their experience. Young adults with learning difficulties and disabilities require different approaches and practices to those who are offenders; young adults with mental health difficulties may have different needs from young adults who are parents.

Even within sub-groups of the excluded there are variations. Some young adults have a cocktail of social and emotional problems that in combination serve as a daunting barrier to learning. Even within a sector there can be significant variations. For example, some homeless young adults experience difficulties with language, literacy and numeracy skills, while others may have achieved well in secondary (and even tertiary) education but have blighted prospects caused by family breakdown and drug and alcohol abuse. The educational experiences and needs of some of these sub-groups have been well chronicled by research undertaken by the Partnership over the last ten

years and the lessons learned from such research have been summarised in a recent publication.<sup>1</sup>

### **The big picture**

Young adults grow and develop as a consequence of the interaction of structure and agency in their lives. It is important to recognise that social structures impact on the choices they make and the decisions they take as much as their own volition. This means that policy makers have to be aware of the complexity of the factors at work in motivating young adults to engage in learning and to sustain that engagement in the face of conflicting demands, needs and expectations. In other words the relationship of young adults to the learning and labour markets is mediated by complex and inter-related factors.

Globalisation is one of the key determinants of the nature of the labour market for young adults and consequently has impact on lifelong learning needs and opportunities. It shapes the structure of the youth labour market in two ways. It influences the overall occupational structure and thus the balance of job opportunities available; and also the different types of work and the skills needed for them.

For many different reasons, young adults are deferring their entry into the labour market. Transitions are becoming extended, non-linear, fuzzy and reversible. Young adults are entering the labour market at different levels and for different purposes, according to their background, educational experience and expectations, in some cases for short-term and part-time jobs and in others for more extended periods so as to begin to develop careers. This inevitably has impact on social mobility because different points of entry into the labour market determine opportunities to move between the different levels that form its structure.

Analysts of the effects of globalisation on the youth labour market have identified three major segments and their differential impact. The higher segments are relatively well-paid, stable career jobs, most often filled by graduates, largely in the private sector of business, financial services and high value-added manufacturing. There are also a high number of public sector jobs in this segment. The middle segment comprises more traditional skilled jobs in the manufacturing industry – as technicians, engineers, IT and customer support. The lower segment jobs are usually of a routine nature and require little skill or knowledge; these jobs are plentiful but are characterised by high levels of insecurity and low levels of income.<sup>2</sup>

Analysis of the impact of the forces of globalisation has highlighted how it is differentiated. These forces have helped sustain the expansion of jobs in the higher segment but as India and China attract greater levels of investment in the more highly skilled jobs doubts have been raised about the continued

---

<sup>1</sup> Learning from the Edge: Engaging and Motivating Young Adults - a review of policy and practice 1997-2007; The National Youth Agency; 2007. This is an updated version of an original report by Bryan Merton and the YALP first published in 2005

<sup>2</sup> Globalisation and the future of the youth labour market, David Ashton, in Young People in Transitions: a review of recent research, Youth Affairs Unit, De Montfort University, Leicester, 2007

growth of these jobs in Britain and other developed countries. Jobs in the middle segment have been lost in particular in the manufacturing sector to be replaced by service sector jobs demanding new skills. The segment as a whole is diminishing. A core group has been able to make conventional linear transitions from school through good quality training to work but for others the training and jobs have proved more elusive leading to more extended and complex transitions<sup>3</sup>.

The impact of globalisation on the lower segment – that part of the youth labour market that draws the kinds of young adults that have been the focus of YALP's work – has been to firstly relocate poorly paid jobs from the manufacturing to the service sector; and, secondly, to continue the de-skilling of jobs in the related occupational sectors such as retail, hotel and catering. Young people in this segment tend to have periods of casual, serial and intermittent employment, usually in poorly-paid jobs. Often their problems with transitions into the labour market are compounded by difficulties with more domestic transitions.

Family formation is being delayed and family trajectories made by young men and women are becoming more complex and diverse<sup>4</sup>. At an aggregate level, entry into marriage is being delayed to a larger extent than entry into parenthood. However there are significant class differences. Postponement of parenthood is less pronounced among those from more traditional working-class backgrounds. Moreover the contemporary patterns of widening and increasing participation in tertiary education have also contributed to extending transitions into parenthood.

Raising the age of participation in full-time education and training to 18 is likely to underline the trend of deferment of young adults' transitions into independent adult life. Available evidence shows that social class, levels of family income and prior educational attainment of young adults and their parents continue to have a significant influence on young adults' participation in learning. Successful transitions are also influenced by the quality of family life and its impact on the protection afforded to and the resilience acquired by the young<sup>5</sup>.

We can see therefore that journeys to independence for young people in Britain are complex, contingent and a consequence of the different strands of transition with their different stages and speeds – from learning to labour market, from being a dependant to being a partner or parent, from living in the parental home to having a place of one's own. The vagaries of economic factors, such as the housing market, can also have a major impact on the length of stay in the parental home with the sometimes unintended consequences of further extending transitions. Continuing dependence on financial assistance from families is also affected by changes in arrangements

---

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> Family formation and processes and youth transitions, Bryan Merton and Malcolm Payne, in *Young People in Transitions: a review of recent research*, Youth Affairs Unit, De Montfort University, Leicester, 2007

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

made by the state to provide support for the financial needs of young adults. These have differential impact on particular groups. Policy as expressed through entitlements such as child benefit, job seekers allowance, educational maintenance allowances and student loans tend to treat young adults as dependent until 18 and semi-dependent until 25. The adult minimum wage does not kick in until the age of 22; this suggests that until then parents are involved in providing some level of subsidy<sup>6</sup>.

Overall, therefore young adults are facing considerable challenges in seeking independence. The courses of transition they navigate are lengthy, unpredictable, hazardous and require of them levels of resourcefulness, resolve and resilience against risk they may not have been sufficiently prepared for. They have significant implications for lifelong learning.

### **Implications for learning and work**

The bigger picture that is beginning to emerge is best discerned with the benefit of hindsight. We are now able to understand the connections between the main factors that impact on young adults' lives, including the way they learn and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The most important is globalisation, the economic processes whereby capital, goods, services, people and information are increasingly mobile and cross national boundaries. This in turn is fuelled by the information revolution in which more powerful digital technology creates rapid communication and information exchange. The introduction of telephone banking and web-based shopping has changed the nature of the service sector. Technology is not only changing the way people work and trade but also the ways in which they learn. Truly it is transforming people's lives.

These changes bring rewards to some and risks to others. One of the well-known risks associated with this is job insecurity and the particular fragility of the youth labour market. A significant minority of young adults is subject to a disproportionate amount of risk and those who fare worst have labels attached to them – excluded, disaffected, unemployable. Not surprisingly, they tend to conform to the deficiency model ascribed to them. Their own experience and that of their families tells them that they cannot depend on a supply of steady, permanent jobs since unskilled labour can be bought more cheaply overseas. An uncertain, bleak future of casual, part-time temporary work beckons, unless or until young people can acquire and demonstrate the characteristics demanded of an increasingly flexible labour market.

**Generic qualities such as communication skills, positive attitudes, team working and problem solving** are highly valued by employers but are said to be lacking in many individuals entering the labour market. The growth in the service sector and other trends in the labour market mean these skills are increasingly important not only for the individuals themselves but also for the continued competitiveness of the British economy. They are significant in determining how people from different socio-economic backgrounds fare in

---

<sup>6</sup> ibid

education, employment and the broader society of which they are a part. It is important to ensure that all young adults are adequately equipped with appropriate skills for life and work. These include the basic skills of literacy, language and numeracy which remain in short supply among many young adults. Therefore they will need to be provided for in a sustained and sensitive fashion, as proposed in important and influential research conducted by the YALP.<sup>7</sup>

Young adults are negotiating risks previously unknown to their parents and teachers. Points of reference which applied to the experience of mature adults have little relevance in helping younger ones to construct an effective identity to support their transition to adulthood, particularly since there is no clear idea what that adulthood will look like. Those who are not sufficiently supported or do not have the personal skills to chart their path effectively often choose alternative sources of satisfaction and identities, some of which entail high levels of risk.

A logical response to the growing risks is to develop **resilience and coping strategies** – an important dimension in personal and social development programmes. This characteristic is very important for those encountering severe risk factors in their daily lives. Where social and economic conditions foster an increased likelihood of poor outcomes in education, employment, health (physical and mental), offending behaviour and so on, resilience becomes a crucial response. One of the strongest and most durable educational bulwarks against risk is the promotion of resilience through emotional intelligence, as part of programmes of personal and social development.<sup>8</sup>

It is increasingly evident that the way individuals relate to wider social networks and communities has important effects on their personal development and employability. One key emerging concept in this policy arena is social capital: the existence of social and community networks; civic engagement; local identity; a sense of belonging and solidarity with other community members; norms of trust, and of reciprocal help and support.<sup>9</sup> These features of social life enable participants to act together more effectively to achieve shared objectives and hence to build stronger and inclusive communities. Social capital helps us to identify how social processes and practices and people's experiences of their own environments affect their relationships and ultimately their long-term development.

Young adults from fractured communities therefore have to manage their own development within the context of the most severe challenges. Given the amount and speed of interlocking changes, many have often simultaneously

---

<sup>7</sup> Success factors in informal learning: young adults' experiences of literacy, language and numeracy, National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy, 2005

<sup>8</sup> Explaining personal and Social Development, YALP on behalf of the Connexions Service National Unit, Research Report 440, Department for Education and Skills, 2003

<sup>9</sup> This is now a well documented and researched subject of many publications, one of the most influential being *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam, 1993

to deal with more issues than they can easily resolve or delay – family breakdown, acceptance or rejection by peers, anxiety about image and fear of failure. Without support this can lead some into escapist behaviour such as drug or alcohol abuse and even serious mental health problems, including panic attacks, depression and self-harm. In order to avoid such alienation and resulting exclusion, it is important to develop **intervention strategies with young adults at a point where they are attempting to make choices in coping with crisis**. This might be at the point where they are adjusting to change rather than when they feel they have become dispossessed by it. **Programmes of personal and social development** can play an important and influential part.

### **Lessons from experience to inform strategy**

We have learned some key points from the research and development work so far undertaken. They can be briefly summarised as follows:

- the causes of disengagement are many, complex and inter-related
- family circumstances play a big part in disrupting education and hindering achievement;
- there are serious problems concerning the relationships between young people and the agencies established to support them, mostly derived from perceptions on both sides;
- outreach is an effective means of contacting the missing;
- incentives remain important in motivating young adult learners;
- a safe environment with sympathetic staff and sensitive assessment is a good place to start
- a flexible responsive curriculum should be offered in achievable portions with opportunities for non-paper based assessment and accreditation
- the curriculum on offer needs to become more flexible, combining key and vocational skills with programmes of personal development, thereby addressing and extending emotional literacy and self-esteem;
- clear pathways of progression and continuous support are vital in building on achievement
- differentiation has to be made between types of disaffection
- providers should seek, as far as resources allow, to make individual responses to the needs, interests and aspirations of each young adult – commonly referred to in the current policy climate as ‘personalised learning’.
- peer group pressure and culture remain powerful factors in determining young adults’ decisions about returning to learning
- age makes a difference, but short-term perspectives seem to narrow the range of choices made.
- intensification of practice is necessary if a sustained impact is to be made: outreach, assessment, guidance, coaching, teaching and learning, advocacy and support should be available at all points in the young adult’s development.

It is important that any lifelong learning provision that is aimed at young adults is not done so in isolation from other interventions. The complex interweaving

of so many social challenges faced by young adults have been well chronicled in our work and in official reports.<sup>10</sup> They show that no single agency or profession on its own can remedy some of the problems faced by young adults. Joined-up approaches entailing multi-agency responses are required for effective and sustainable remedies. Informal, community-based learning has to complement more formal provision made by colleges and training providers. Awards and non-certificated learning that recognises and records achievement has a rightful and valued place alongside formal qualifications. Learning has to be encouraged and developed in different settings where young people congregate and feel secure – for example, in hostels, leisure centres and youth provision. Teachers should work alongside personal advisers, health professionals and probation officers to provide comprehensive interventions that are inclusive and make a difference. The price of failure is as great as the prize worth striving for – young adults achieving, being part of society and making a positive contribution to their own lives and the lives of others.

**Bryan Merton**  
**Young Adults Learning Partnership**  
**The National Youth Agency**

---

<sup>10</sup> Reaching Out: a report and action plan on young adults with complex needs, Social Exclusion Unit, 2005

**December 2007**