

Current UK Initiatives to Put Young People to Work

Jon Huggett 25 June 2013

The challenge in the UK

Five years of recession in Britain have driven up youth unemployment (British Youth Council, 2012). Employers seem to be "hoarding" older employees (The Economist, 2013). Some estimate that up to a million young people in Britain are now not in education, employment or training (NEET) (Confederation of British Industry, 2011), up from 120,000 (Safer London Foundation, 2007) at the height of the boom in 2007. While some have good qualifications, many have challenges ranging from dysfunctional work behaviours to issues as simple as a lack of previous work experience.

Early work experience can create work habits for life (Duhigg 2012). Lack of work experience can cause embarrassment and even lasting harm (PEF, 2012). Early unemployment points to long-term unemployment (Gregg 2011), raising fears of a "lost generation" ("Generation Jobless," 2013).

Luck, rather than ability, can often determine whether a young person is employed or not following the completion of their education: research suggests that a student who

has had three contacts with the world of work before leaving school can have a three times greater chance of employment than a student who has had none (ETF). Ofsted, the UK Office for Standards in Education, has shown that post-school employment is an indicator (Ofsted 2010) of long-term employment, even after accounting for background and school performance.

British NEETs can struggle to find work experience, as EU citizens also have the right to work in the UK. Some argue that UK schools do not always prepare students for work (BYC 2009), citing scores from Program for International Student Assessment (run by the OECD) or Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. Oft-cited statistics suggest that social mobility in the UK has declined since the 1970s, meaning a child from a poor family is becoming less likely to escape the cycle of poverty. The largest riots by young people in 30 years in 2011 in London aroused fierce debate, with views of the cause ranging from alienation to "sheer criminality."

The young "undeserving poor" are often scorned in the media. For example, Vicky Pollard, an unemployed, ignorant "chav," in the popular BBC comedy *Little Britain*, among other things offered to swap her baby for a CD. A 2006 poll revealed that most people working in TV thought she was an accurate representation of Britain's white working class (Jones 2011).

Responses to the challenge: focusing

on the transition from school to work

The private sector and civil society have some hopeful initiatives to help those who have finished school to transition into their first job. Companies are pursuing a range of programs which go beyond the usual “corporate social responsibility” to touch employment practices. Nonprofits are developing what are termed “employer-pull” initiatives.

Among the most ambitious initiatives are those from corporate giants including McDonalds, which targets to employ 10,000 NEETs each year; and KFC, which aims to hire 5,000 in the next two years. Barclays Bank and its suppliers now have 1,000 apprenticeships in place, with plans to increase to 10,000. Gregg’s (a bakery) and Brakes Brothers (a food service firm), each offer NEETs short work experience as well. Marks & Spencer’s program “Marks & Starts” also offers work experience, though on a smaller scale (~800 young people). But significant challenges to employment arise each year and the best of intentions may not always go as planned. Burger King pulled out of the government’s Get Britain Working initiative after bad press following its implementation at retailers Tesco and Poundland.

But public awareness is growing. Pret announced programmes for both school leavers (graduates or otherwise) and homeless youth amid reports that only 20% of its workforce was British. The Mayor of London

publicly questioned their hiring practices, and the London Evening Standard headlined "why can't a Brit get a job at Pret?" in an article which tracked four young Brits living in London as they tried to secure employment at Pret, although "all four were rejected without an interview" (Herrmann 2012). Anti-immigrant sentiment is rising in opinion polls; the anti-immigrant, anti-EU United Kingdom Independence Party gained seats in local elections held in May 2013.

However, supporting employer efforts continue to offer possibilities. Solid business alliances such as Business in the Community, the Confederation of British Industry, Education and Employers Taskforce (ETF), and the Private Equity Foundation (PEF) have all contributed ways to foster employment. ETF has created the "Speakers for Schools" and "Inspiring the Future" programs to give state school students contact with the world of work on the level enjoyed by students at private schools. PEF focuses on NEETs through programs that target the transition from school to work, including "Think Forward." These efforts complement the great work by other nonprofits that focus on NEETS and employability, such as Prince's Trust and Tomorrow's People.

Against this, there is a kaleidoscope of efforts by government agencies to tackle a problem estimated to cost around £5B (approximately \$7.7 billion) (ACEVO, 2012). Local governments try to address pockets of youth unemployment (The Guardian), while national responses

come from a variety of sources including the Departments of Education and Work and Pensions, the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills and the Cabinet Office.

The prospects in the UK

Each of these programs is still relatively new, and will be watched and scrutinized in coming years. Media coverage has been mixed, with some praise for McDonalds (The Economist, 2013) yet criticism for others, such as Tesco. A number of companies are exploring new programs, and their implications for employment practices, customer relations, public relations and corporate social responsibility will hopefully have far-reaching effects.

A question for future study will be the relative effect of "employer-pull" versus "school-push" programs, and the power of collaboration between the two. Intergenerational mentorship, sponsorship and apprenticeship have been central to career development of a nation's youth for generations. They are still essential to career development in professional services now. Yet many young people today sit in classrooms with friends of the same age, and have fewer opportunities to learn and build external links for life. We may need to rediscover how to nurture these links for all young people.

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