

Children, Schools and Families Committee inquiry into young people not in education, employment or training

Submission from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

16 December 2009

1. Executive summary

1.1. ATL believes that it is important to develop understanding of the options available – both in professionals in education and in young people and their families. Impartial and informed information, advice and guidance provision is essential and a training programme for staff in schools and colleges is required.

1.2. We believe that both vocational and academic education are important. The existing divide between the two which politically-driven policy either promotes or does little to address has direct correlation to the capacity of some young people to avoid periods of being outside of education, employment or training. ATL advocates a skills-based curriculum which offers opportunities and interest to all young people and allows them to develop as learners and as people.

1.3. The government's strategy for reducing the numbers of those not in education, employment or training must acknowledge the disadvantages faced by the disabled, young women, and those from black and ethnic minorities and seek to tackle arising problems specifically.

1.4. Success will come for individuals and for society when a better understanding of why people are susceptible to enter the NEET category is achieved – by that for reasons of disability, geography, poverty or family, amongst others. The government must retain a long-term approach, not just a statistical focus, and should understand that education is not just about future contribution to the economy but personal development and benefiting society.

1.5. For data to be most useful and challenges truly taken on, clarity is needed in a universal definition of what it means to be 'not in education, employment or training'. Furthermore, consideration should be made of the impact and negative connotations of using the label 'NEET'.

2. About the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

ATL, the education union

2.1. ATL, as a leading education union, recognises the link between education policy and our members' conditions of employment. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate from a position of strength. We champion good practice and achieve better working lives for our members.

2.2. We help our members, as their careers develop, through first-rate research, advice, information and legal support. Our 160,000 members – teachers, lecturers, headteachers and support staff – are empowered to get active locally and nationally. We are affiliated to the TUC, and work with government and employers by lobbying and through social partnership.

ATL policy

2.3. ATL believes that teachers as professionals must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Within light national parameters, development of the education system should take place at a local level: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders; assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools and colleges are increasingly encouraged to work collaboratively to offer excellent teaching and learning, and to support pupils' well-being, across a local area. Accountability mechanisms should be developed so that there is a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition

3. Strategies for the identification of young people at risk of falling into the NEET category

3.1. Anecdotal evidence from ATL's membership shows mixed outcomes for those undertaking foundation learning. Whilst some students go on to work at level 2 or level 3, there is also evidence of students finding it difficult to re-enter the 'mainstream' qualifications route. ATL believes it is unacceptable that young people are written off, or labelled, at any age and we strongly advocate clearer progression routes within the 14-19 pathways that allows students to move 'upwards', giving young people something to aim for and seeking to raise aspiration. Nevertheless, some of those undertaking foundation learning will – for a multitude of reasons – be at risk of falling into the NEET category.

3.2. The Government's definition of what it means to be 'NEET' is not the only definition. Such lack of clarity in a common definition makes it difficult to understand the validity and reliability of data for analysis and comparison. Government should seek to collect, analyse, and present NEETS data with reference to ethnicity, gender, urban and rural areas, geography, socio-economic backgrounds, and age band and a universal definition will aid this.

4. Services and programmes to support those most at risk of becoming NEET, and to reduce the numbers and address the needs of those who have become persistently NEET

Information, advice and guidance

4.1. ATL's members offer a clear view that well-informed and impartial information, advice and guidance is crucial to the success of 14-19 education for individual students. A significant proportion of ATL members surveyed in the autumn term of 2009, do not believe that students have enough high quality information, advice and guidance to make the most of opportunities on offer at 14-19. A number of reasons were offered for this.

4.2. The complexity of the 14-19 landscape as it is emerging from recent reform means that young people do not all have a full understanding of the

choices in front of them. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence from our membership shows that this is also true of staff in schools and colleges. This is supported in research published by the DfES in 2006 which shows discrepancies in impartiality and in the comprehensiveness of information passed on. The report argues for both IAG provided by non-school staff and those adults in school that students have build relationships with as well as that training needs for staff should be considered.¹ The former requires consideration in the context of new personal tutoring requirements in the pupil guarantee. ATL believes the latter should be in two forms – knowledge and understanding of the landscape; and professional development in the skills needed to provide ‘careers’ guidance. Recognising the particular challenges faced by ATL’s members in further education colleges who are increasingly teaching younger students, ATL emphasises the need for specific staff development for them which includes relevant information, advice and guidance training.

4.3. Analysis of NEET data published by DCSF shows trends over the academic year which see numbers lower in autumn, rising in spring and peaking in the summer. One reason for this is young people being on the wrong course or pathway. Effective, impartial IAG, coupled with developing decision-making skills, is a solution. ATL also believes in increased flexibility for students to switch pathways during their 14-19 educational journeys if it will best serve their development and futures.

Skills and eradicating the vocational-academic divide

4.4. There needs to be a concerted effort to increase the prestige and credibility of vocational qualifications to encourage their take up. At present the education system and society at large seem to place more emphasis and attach more prestige to the traditional GCSEs, A Levels and HE educational route. Changing and widening the curriculum has not proved enough – the currency of vocational and academic education must be equalised and combining the two encouraged.

4.5. ATL has argued for the need to move away from a subject based curriculum to a skills-based, mixed provision curriculum. The benefits of a skills-based curriculum need to be effectively marketed. Increasing the profile and knowledge of the benefits of a skills based curriculum will lead to parity of esteem between vocational and traditional academic qualifications.²

Apprenticeships

4.6. The minimum wage exemption for apprenticeships is problematic and ATL strongly recommends that rates for apprentices aged 16-18 are consistent with the current age-related minimum wage rates. This would be fairer in itself but would also likely have a positive impact on completion rates and counter the risk of those dropping out of apprenticeships not remaining in education, employment or training and instead opting for better paid work without meaningful training. Indeed the TUC presented evidence to the Low Pay Commission arguing for an increase in apprentice pay that showed that the introduction in 2005 of an £80 minimum weekly pay rate for apprentices in England had a significant impact in improving apprenticeship completion rates.³

¹ Blenkinsop et al, DfES / National Foundation for Educational Research, *How do young people make choices at 14 and 16?*, 2006

² Martin Johnson, “Subject to Change: New Thinking on the Curriculum”, ATL, 2007

³ TUC, *Minimum wage apprentice exemptions review*, 2008

Understanding why

4.7. ATL Cymru, in a response to the Welsh Assembly Government's consultation on *Skills that work for Wales*, highlighted the need to undertake collaborative work to identify why young people become disengaged in the first instance to develop preventative measures.

5. The effectiveness of the Government's NEET strategy

Thinking of everyone; acting specifically

5.1. ATL does not dispute the Government's desire to create a universal offer for all young people. However, there is strong evidence to suggest some young people are more likely to become NEET and we believe it is essential for the Government to address the challenges they face more specifically.

5.2. By the age of 19, young disabled people are three times as likely to be NEET as their non-disabled peers. Over a third of those without any formal qualifications are disabled. Improving the provision of IAG can play a part in reducing the likelihood of young disabled people entering adulthood with social and employment disadvantages. ATL is concerned about the absence in the Government's NEET strategy of any specialised strategies to ensure that all young disabled people can fully participate in education, employment and training. This may include: the promotion of work experience for disabled pupils; a requirement of schools to make links with Access to Work providers to promote awareness and availability of reasonable adjustments; and the facilitation of continuous professional development in relation to disability awareness and resources to support disabled pupils prior to leaving compulsory education.

5.3. The Equalities and Human Rights Commission's June 2009 report, *Staying On*, argues that:

"Gender appears to be a more important differential than social class in accounting for differences in career aspirations. Boys are more likely than girls to expect to work in engineering, ICT, skilled trades, construction, architecture or as a mechanic. Girls are more likely to expect to work in teaching, hairdressing, beauty therapy, childcare, nursing and midwifery."

There is a range of effects of this. Aspiration – whether met or not – clearly impacts upon the likelihood of being in, and staying in, education, employment or training. What those aspirations are disproportionately disadvantages women and girls whose 'traditional' career choices tend to lead them into a life of low pay with often poor working conditions – including, crucially here, a potential lack of job security. The context of being in recession highlights that it makes little sense not to tackle gender stereotyping in vocational choice. If certain, unpredictable, industries are disproportionately affected by economic circumstances we run the risk of increasing the chances of one gender being significantly more likely to be NEET. At 16, boys are now more than twice as likely to be NEET as girls of the same age; but, despite their higher rates of staying on in formal education, girls are as likely as boys to be in the NEET category between 16 and 18 years of age, partially because they do not appear to get the same access to jobs and government training.

5.4. There is significant evidence showing disadvantages due to race in

education and employment. Black and minority ethnic pupils are under-represented on 'gifted and talented' programmes. The majority of those identified as gifted at an academy for the gifted and talented set up at Warwick University, for example, consisted of white, middle-class students. We also know that Black young people in Britain are less likely to be in education, employment or training at age 16 than white, and significantly less likely at ages 17 and 18. Young people of Black-Caribbean origin and those of mixed race with one Black-Caribbean parent are more likely to be in the NEET category than people from any other background.⁴ The government's Ethnic Minorities Employment Task Force has shown that for any given level of qualifications, a black or minority ethnic person will be less likely to be employed than a white person with the same qualifications. For instance, 81.4% of BME people with degrees are employed compared with 87.4% of white people. In fact, a white person whose highest qualification is GCSEs at grade A-C is substantially more likely to have a job than a black or minority ethnic person with A levels.⁵ ATL believes that it is important to target support at young people from a black and ethnic minority background.

The NEET label – neat but negative

5.5. ATL believes that the term 'NEET' is problematic as it classifies a heterogeneous group with one label; a label with negative connotations. (Indeed, this is highly evident in the very language used in the foreword of the Government's strategy for dealing with those not in education, employment or training.) For example, it includes young people in such diverse situations as being long term sick, on a gap year, or trying to get a band started. How far those in the category are actually 'disengaged' and 'disaffected' is not measurable as the group is so heterogeneous. Policies are not always effectively targeted because of prevailing assumptions as to what constitutes the NEET group. The Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education offers a different example of difference within the group undermining a one-size-fits-all approach:

"... young people who are classified as so-called 'core NEET' (those who are 'NEET' for extended periods, and struggle to move out of 'NEET' status) require more sustained input and support in order to progress to what are termed 'positive outcomes', than those who are so-called 'churn NEET', meaning that they are in and out of short-term periods of education, employment and/or training."

5.6. At the same time, many of ATL's members are unfamiliar with the term and significant disagreement was evident in the results of ATL's survey of 14-19 education practitioners as to whether the 14-19 curriculum minimises the number of NEETs.

6. The likely impact of raising the participation age on strategies for addressing the needs of young people not in education, employment or training

6.1. In the context of economic recession, the raising of the participation age may appear timely. However, it is important to understand that this is not a 'cost neutral' policy. Aside from the resources associated with ensuring employers are providing suitable and sufficient, high quality training, to

⁴ Commission for Racial Equality, *A Lot Done, A Lot to Do*, 2007

⁵ Ethnic Minority Employment Task Force, *Equality Opportunity Success*, 2004

benefit the additional young people staying in education, it will be necessary to increase the number of teachers, lecturers and other staff. They will require the resources to develop their students and encourage them to stay in education or training.

6.2. From the Government's approach to higher education, it can be seen that the intention to increase participation does not necessarily equate to an increase in public funding. ATL is clear that this can not be the case for pre-19 education. It is essential that the allocation of resources is appropriate. Spending targeted at those in jobs without training must ensure that there is a wider public benefit and a long-term educational/training benefit to young people who may join the employer in the future. It should not be the case that public expenditure simply subsidises employers instead of making a significant impact, beyond short-term statistic chasing, in reducing the number of young people classified as NEET.

7. The opportunities and future prospects in education, training and employment for 16-18 year olds

Inclusion and entitlement in rural areas

7.1. ATL has noted with increasing concern the serious inclusion issues for young people in rural areas with regard to their full entitlement in the 14-19 Diploma provision. Poor transport infrastructure, personal cost implications and a paucity of opportunity with limited choice can put these young people at a disadvantage compared to their peers in urban areas. These difficulties associated with 14-19 learning can lead to withdrawal from education, employment and training. ATL believes the Government, or even the Select Committee, should conduct a rural impact assessment that addresses these issues with a view to finding and implementing urgent remedies to avoid an increase in NEETs in rural areas.

Retaining a long-term view

7.2. We believe that raising aspiration of young people is important but also that the demand for a job at any cost is not consistent with this ideal. In terms of both the curriculum and IAG, young people should have the freedom and skills – as well as support – to do what is right for them, even if that takes time to achieve. Only then might cross-generational poverty be readdressed. Shildrick and Macdonald's UK research reported in *Biographies of exclusion: poor work and poor transitions*⁶ 'found much in respect of working-class adults' encounters with education, training and employment that was depressingly reminiscent of previous decades.' The Government's challenge, not to be tackled exclusively by education professionals, is to understand why young people are disengaged in the first place, including the impact of parental poverty and geography. Only by understanding circumstances can the long-term challenge take precedent over short-term statistical changes, and really make a difference to people's lives and their capacity to utilise learning to succeed.

7.3. ATL welcomes recognition of the long-term problem of disengagement in learning from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for 14-19 Reform and Apprenticeships:

“Being NEET disproportionately affects vulnerable young people and those from the poorest backgrounds. It is passed on from generation

⁶ International Journal of Lifelong Learning, Vol. 26, No. 5 (Sept-Oct 2007)

to generation like some sort of grotesque inheritance. It is a moral and social injustice that we have a responsibility to deal with. A progressive government could never write off a generation.”⁷

The Government’s approach to 14-19 reform and pledges on the provision of information, advice and guidance are stepping stones to dealing with the problem the minister highlights. ATL hopes that the government acknowledges the need to understanding *why* and focuses efforts on tackling root causes that go beyond simple differences in schooling.

8. Other comments

Lifelong learning

8.1. Whilst we understand the committee’s focus is on 16-18 year olds, ATL believes that it would be helpful for the committee to acknowledge that the impact of being NEET at a young age can impact upon individuals in the medium and long-term also. There is a greater number of NEETS aged 19-24. Over 18s, and indeed over 25s, should not be neglected. They also need help and support to get jobs, yet the Government has cut funding for adult training leaving the latter group in danger of being cast adrift. The Government cannot afford to assume of our young people that disengagement from school equates to disengagement from learning – the avoidance of ‘writing off’ people must be paramount.

Pre-14 education

8.2. ATL believes the Government can not ignore the effects of pre-14-19 education. An inflexible curriculum and the pressure to teach to the test do cause pupils to disengage from learning at any early age.

Accountability

8.3. ATL discourages the holding to account of schools and colleges for the outcomes of former students who have moved on from the institution. The raising of the participation age and tracking of young people increases the likelihood of this happening. 11-16 schools, for example, should only be accountable for that which they control such as the teaching and IAG provision up to the age of 16, and not responsible for looking after students post-departure who may or may not have fallen into the NEET category.

The personal and social benefits of education

8.4. Machinery of government changes in 2009 that have seen the formation of BIS, a new government department with responsibility for FE and HE, convey the embedding of education with economic contribution. ATL argues that this is only a small part of the purpose of education which for the vast majority of staff in schools and colleges has goals for young people of personal development, social contribution, improving life chances, and eradicating cycles of child poverty. The closer the realisation of these goals, the more likely it is that the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training lowers.

9. Conclusion

⁷ Iain Wright MP, ippr and Private Equity Foundation Youth Tracker, *Backing young Britain*, Autumn 2009

9.1. At the heart of tackling the number of young people not in education, employment or training is understanding. Success will come for individuals and for society when a better understanding of why people are susceptible to enter the NEET category is achieved – by that for reasons of disability, geography, poverty or family, amongst others. But we also need to develop understanding of the options available – both in professionals in education and in young people and their families. Combined with a skills-based curriculum which enables young people and develops the ability to make sound decisions, we can tackle the short-term problems. Only when this approach is applied over the long-term might we see tendencies to be NEET not pass from generation to generation.