**Young Lives,
Young Futures**

Image by Ketut Subiyanto via Pexels

Interim Report 1

March 2022
Authors: Charlotte McPherson, Alice Weavers, Sharon Gewirtz, Meg Maguire, Chris Winch,
Sait Bayrakdar, Andrea Laczik

KING'S College LONDON EDGE FOUNDATION UKRI Economic and Social Research Council

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Young people's outcomes in, and transitions between, education and employment are widely acknowledged to carry significance for their future prospects and wellbeing. Extensive evidence has demonstrated the enduring wage scars and diminished labour market prospects associated with being unemployed in youth (Mros and Savage 2006; Bell and Blanchflower 2011), while a considerable literature has identified the substantial long-term physical and mental health penalties that youth unemployment can impose on young people (Parker et al. 2016; Vossemer and Eunicke 2016). Beyond their individual importance for young people's lives and futures, these transitions also have wider structural significance because of their short- and long-term implications for the economy (Local Government Association 2020, Youth Employment UK 2021). For example, recent analysis conducted by the Learning and Work Institute and the Prince's Trust (2021) forecast that the economic cost of youth unemployment will be £6.9 billion in 2022 alone.

For these reasons, young people's transitions between education and employment are of considerable interest to governments, policy makers and researchers, and in recent years in the UK there has been a growing policy focus on post-16 vocational education and training (VET) as a viable alternative to university as a route into employment for young people (e.g. House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility 2016; Department for Education 2021a).

Young Lives, Young Futures is an ESRC-funded project that is investigating how England's VET system can better support the school-to-work transitions of the 50 per cent of young people who do not go to university. The project is currently moving into its second year of data collection. The purpose of this first interim report is to describe the project and its objectives and to present key themes that have emerged from our preliminary analysis of the first tranche of interviews we have conducted with policy makers, practitioners and young people. The report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 describes the project and its aims in more detail.
- Sections 3 and 4 discuss key themes that have emerged from our interviews to date.
- Section 5 concludes this report.

2. The Project

Young Lives, Young Futures is a major national study being conducted by a team of researchers at King's College London and The Edge Foundation between 2019 and 2024. The study is investigating the education, employment and training opportunities available to the 50 per cent of young people who do not go to university in England, and considering how England's VET system can better support their transitions into further education, training or work. *Young Lives, Young Futures* is focused on the transition experiences of both young people who engage with non-university further education, training or employment after leaving school and those who spend time outside of education, employment or training altogether.

Research evidence points to the often more complex, uncertain and protracted nature of the school-to-work transitions of young people who do not go to university (e.g. Wolf 2011; Atkins 2017, 2019). This diverse group of young people are more likely to fall between gaps in the system and spend time outside of education, employment or training, which can be associated with a range of negative outcomes and lifetime costs (see e.g. Eurofound 2017). Recent studies suggest that we might also expect this group of young people to be disproportionately affected by the pandemic in terms of their access to and outcomes in education, training and work (Department for Education 2021b; Education Policy Institute 2020; Henehan 2020), as well as their mental health and wellbeing (Mental Health Foundation 2020; Young Minds 2020).

Young Lives, Young Futures is not only being conducted in the context of the coronavirus pandemic but also amidst extensive reforms to England's VET system that have been designed to improve the quality of vocational and technical education and employment pathways for young people and address long-standing policy concerns about equality and productivity (Department for Education 2021a). The reforms include a new careers strategy, initiatives to raise the profile, quality and availability of apprenticeships (especially for underrepresented groups[1]), a new post-16 technical education option ('T Levels'), and a job-

---

[1] For example, the reforms include a target to increase participation in apprenticeships by those categorised as BAME or having a learning difficulty.

placement scheme for 16-24 year olds at risk of long-term unemployment ('Kickstart'). In justifying the reforms, the government has signalled a particular concern around the disparities in education and skill levels that can prevent those living in disadvantaged regions, those from black or minority ethnic backgrounds, women and disabled people from accessing high-skilled employment and the 'untapped potential' this represents for the economy (BEIS 2017: 120). The reforms are also a response to enduring calls for greater 'parity of esteem' between academic and vocational education. These calls have recently intensified as a result of growing sensitivity around graduate unemployment and underemployment (CIPD 2015), with young people, families and system leaders increasingly asking sceptical questions about the value of a university education.[2]

In the challenging context of the coronavirus pandemic and against the background of these reforms, *Young Lives, Young Futures* is seeking to provide new understandings of how the English VET system is being accessed, navigated and experienced by young people across the attainment spectrum not taking the university route. The project is focused on the 15-20 age group and has a particular emphasis on engaging with the perspectives of young people themselves, including those who are marginalised and whose input is often not heard in policymaking. In doing so, the project aims to help close the gap between England's VET policies and practices and young people's agency, values and experiences.

The project is adopting a combination of methods in its research design, which consists of four core strands:

- Strand 1 comprises national-level statistical analysis of patterns of access to and performance in VET qualifications.
- Strand 2 is a national longitudinal survey of a representative sample of over 10,000 young people who will be surveyed three times over the course of the project.
- Strand 3 consists of longitudinal qualitative research involving 500 in-depth interviews with regional and local policy makers, employers and VET practitioners,

---

[2] Recent labour market statistics demonstrate that almost a third of university graduates are 'overeducated' for their jobs (ONS 2019), possessing higher level qualifications than are required for the employment they find themselves occupying, and that the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated graduate underemployment considerably, with Adzuna (2020) reporting that graduate job openings fell by 76% between January and May 2020 alone.

young people and their parents/carers. These interviews are being conducted in four different local authorities (see Box 1 below).

- Strand 4 will convene international VET scholars to bring cross-national comparative insights to bear on the project findings.

This report focuses on our initial findings from interviews and focus groups with policy makers, practitioners and young people that were conducted as part of Strand 3 of the project. Data collection commenced in 2020 and is ongoing.

Strand 3 of the project adopts a place-based approach to analysing young people's transitions across England. Extensive evidence points to the significance of place in shaping young people's decision-making and life trajectories, with research highlighting the substantial geographic patterning of inequalities that affect life outcomes (e.g. Crowley and Cominetti 2014; Boshoff et al. 2019). The coronavirus pandemic has both exposed and exacerbated place-based inequalities, with recent analysis illustrating how local authorities across England have been differentially affected by the virus in terms of its health, social and economic penalties. These have been more pronounced in areas that are more economically deprived, are more reliant on service sector employment and have poorer existing levels of health in their populations (Davenport et al. 2020).

Box 1: Case Study Areas

The four case study areas for the project were selected to represent regional diversity and contrasting local labour market opportunities, social and economic geographies and VET policy and provision in England. To preserve the anonymity of the case study areas, pseudonyms are used throughout this report.

Area 1 ('**Greenvale**') is a rural local authority district with a population of approximately 90,000. It is an affluent area with a diverse economy and nearly three quarters of its population living in neighbourhoods that are amongst the 40% least deprived in England. It has a very low share of people categorised as BAME in comparison to the rural county within which is it situated and England as a whole, and consistently scores higher than the national average in terms of educational attainment. Despite its relevant affluence, however,

Greenvale does contain small pockets of deprivation, particularly with regard to access to housing, local services and employment and levels of education, training and skills.

Area 2 (**'Bellden'**) is a large post-industrial local authority that is mostly rural and has a population of approximately 525,000. As in Greenvale, people categorised as BAME make up a very small proportion of Bellden's population compared to the national average. While there are areas of considerable affluence within this local authority, there are also areas of significant deprivation with lower skill levels, higher uptake of free school meals, more pronounced health inequalities and lower educational attainment compared to the national average in England.

Area 3 (**'Tapley'**) is a London borough with approximately 325,000 residents. With its very high levels of ethnic diversity and over half of its population identifying with non-white ethnic categories in the last census, Tapley has been described as a 'superdiverse' area. Tapley benefits from its London location in terms of access to an extensive transport network and a wide range of employment and education opportunities, but there are high levels of deprivation within this borough with more than twice the national average of its pupils eligible for free school meals.

Area 4 (**'Spindale'**) is a town with a population of approximately 235,000. Like Bellden, Spindale is post-industrial but its labour market has struggled more in recovering from deindustrialisation. Employment opportunities are typically restricted to low skilled jobs in services. Demographically, Spindale has higher proportions of non-white residents in its population than the national average and there is a noted lack of integration between different ethnic groups in the town. Spindale struggles with poverty and deprivation rates that are among the highest in England, with more overcrowded accommodation, higher crime rates, poorer health, a weaker skills base and lower educational attainment than the average for local authority districts in England.

Basing the project's qualitative fieldwork in these four contrasting – and internally diverse – areas will enable an analysis of place-based factors, which are increasingly recognised to be pivotal determinants of life experiences and outcomes. In a recent poll of adults on the

subject of inequalities in the UK (Duffy et al. 2021), place-based inequalities emerged as the top concern and were perceived by respondents across political lines and age groups to represent 'the most serious form of inequality in Britain'. *Young Lives, Young Futures* will scrutinise differences between these areas while also adopting an intra-area approach to analyse inequalities within them.

3. Key themes: Policy makers and practitioners

This section presents key themes that have emerged from our initial interviews with policy makers and practitioners. At the time of writing, 39 policy makers and practitioners have been interviewed for the project from across our four case study local authorities (see Box 1 above). This sample includes local councillors, school and college leaders, VET practitioners and careers staff, training providers, employers and youth workers. In their interviews, participants were asked to reflect on local, regional and national issues and policies related to the school-to-work transitions of young people who do not go to university. As with the case study areas, pseudonyms are used for participants and the institutions they represent throughout this report to protect their anonymity.

Young people's VET transitions

Echoing the findings of previous research (e.g. Atkins 2009; Cedefop 2016), our interviews with education practitioners suggest that young people's transitions into and through VET are typically non-linear and prolonged. Many who work in colleges describe high incidences of course-swapping and drop-out, particularly amongst the 16-18 cohort. Interviewees typically traced this pattern to young people entering VET without clear aspirations or a commitment to their courses, with some participants describing young people as moving passively or 'drifting' through their post-16 education just for 'something to do':

> A lot of them don't seem to be that clear in their careers thinking, they seem to more be here doing a course as a, you know, stopgap, as something to do because, you know, they are expected to be in education – *Sam Deacon, Careers Advisor, Tapley College*

The sense being conveyed was one of young people often signing up for courses because they do not know what else to do after leaving school or are heavily influenced by the advice of others, whether parents/carers, friends, FE providers or careers advisors:

> But when we kind of interviewed [and were] asking them, quite often they're not really sure about what they want to do, but their friend's doing motor vehicle or their group of friends are doing motor vehicle or their parents want them to go into business so they'll go and do business and professional. So, I think the whole thing ends up wrapped into the careers guidance and parental expectation – *Linda West, Vice-Principal, Spindale College*

At the root of this perspective was an assumption that young people possess little in the way of agency in terms of their post-16 transitions. However, some interviewees noted that while they felt that this kind of 'drifting' was prevalent among 16-18 year olds upon first entering VET, it was often their experience that after drifting, course-swapping or dropping-out initially, these young people return significantly more engaged at age 19+, achieving better attainment in courses they were more passionate about and that were at a more appropriate level.

Another issue raised in some interviews was that of young people doing what practitioners saw as being the 'wrong' courses. For example, interviewees noted that students, and/or their parents or carers, can be misinformed about which courses will lead them to certain destinations or misunderstand course entry requirements. Some felt that this was a widespread problem among young people, but was particularly prevalent amongst those who had started their education in other countries or whose parents had not been educated in the UK:

> So, students don't necessarily know the educational language and because family and friends haven't been in an educational setting, or been within the system within the UK, they don't know – *Sonja Akter, Deputy Principal, Tapley College*

More prominently, there were concerns among some practitioners about young people enrolling in courses at the wrong level, and specifically around students doing courses at a lower level than they were qualified for. The issue of young people engaging in inappropriate courses within VET has been acknowledged elsewhere, including in a recent independent evaluation of post-18 education in England (Augar et al. 2019). In interviews

with practitioners, this was again linked to misinformation among young people and their families, and was felt to be particularly problematic for students from migrant backgrounds with less previous family experience of VET provision in the English context.

Inequalities and differences in young people's transitions

A key theme that emerged from interviews with policy makers and practitioners was the perception that young people's post-16 transitions, and wider lives, were shaped by their ethnic backgrounds and identities in ways that intersected with social class and place. Several regarded white working-class young people as the group of most concern in relation to education. This corresponds with recent evidence suggesting that white working-class young people, and boys in particular, are consistently amongst the lowest attaining ethnic groups in England (Demie 2014; Sutton Trust 2016). For example, the Sutton Trust (2016) reported that white British pupils who receive free school meals have been ranked either the lowest or second lowest attaining ethnic group (after Irish traveller and Gypsy Roma pupils) in terms of GCSE attainment every year for the last decade.

There is such concern about the apparent educational under attainment of white working-class pupils in England that the House of Commons Education Committee launched a major inquiry in 2020. The inquiry report noted that, while pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to experience poverty, educationally (with the exception of Irish traveller and Gypsy Roma pupils) they are consistently out-performing their white British peers, suggesting that disadvantaged white pupils are more vulnerable to a greater cumulation of challenges stemming from chronic poverty and policy failure (House of Commons Education Committee 2021).

Concern about the educational attainment of white working-class young people was particularly prevalent among interviewees in Spindale, a post-industrial town heavily affected by deindustrialisation with an ethnically segregated population. Jake Peters, Leader of Spindale Council, suggested that amongst white working-class families, who, prior to deindustrialisation, were more able to access secure careers in industry regardless of educational qualifications, there was often a tendency to devalue education and transmit these attitudes to their children:

> Years ago in Spindale it didn't really matter how you did at school. If you did well and you managed to go off to university and get a professional job, then great, but if you didn't do well it wasn't much of a big deal because you could just go and work in a mill or get a job in an engineering works… And we suffer a bit with the legacy of that, so the attitudes towards education in Spindale amongst a depressingly large proportion of people remain that, you know, it's not valued. And so, there are lots of young people that still behave as if it doesn't matter how they do at school because they're not getting that encouragement at home.

A number of our Spindale interviewees juxtaposed the negative or apathetic attitudes to education they encountered in white working-class families with those they encountered in families of South Asian heritage who were thought to place a higher value on education as a means of upward social mobility. This was seen to typically translate into higher levels of family support and encouragement for young people from South Asian backgrounds to engage with school and post-compulsory education, and higher levels of educational attainment compared to their white working-class peers:

> It's hard to characterise absolutely but I would say that our Asian heritage students perform better than our white students overall… I think parents, there is an expectation that their sons and daughters will go on to university and into professions; I think that's less pronounced amongst white students – *Steven Bridges, Assistant Principal, Spindale Sixth Form College*
>
> We have high levels of poverty in our black and minority ethnic community but the attitude toward education there is that it's seen as a way out – *Jake Peters, Leader of Spindale Council*

However, while attitudes towards and engagements with education were broadly perceived to be more positive within South Asian and other Black and minority ethnic families, a number of interviewees suggested that the idealisation of education within 'BAME' communities could produce a different kind of barrier in terms of VET in particular. Several

participants had observed that parents/carers of young people from minority ethnic backgrounds were particularly committed to 'traditional' academic understandings and modes of education, often perceiving university as the best and only option for their children:

> The difficulty we have is Black and Asian parents, and I can say this with confidence…. They cannot see beyond university. An apprenticeship is a stretch for them. So, the traditional African, Asian, BAME parents, they can only really think, "well, it's university, otherwise… you're going to end up in a dead-end job" – *Sonja Akter, Deputy Principal, Tapley College*

Sonja was amongst several participants suggesting that this strong belief among migrant and minority ethnic communities in the power of traditional academic routes into employment often constituted a barrier to some young people being able to pursue aspirations in, or engage effectively with, VET.

Another way in which differences were perceived to be ethnically patterned – and gendered – was in terms of course selections by young people in VET. For example, Mark Richards, Principal of Spindale College, reported that course uptake at Spindale is:

> heavily gendered and heavily shaped by ethnicity, so Asian boys will do business and digital and no boys will do health and social care… Construction is nearly all white boys.

Similarly, in Bellden, Max Porter, Principal of Bellden New College, spoke of the need to address 'gender stereotypes' within VET and to avoid the scenario of '300 girls doing childcare [and] 300 lads doing construction'. These findings correspond with evidence that has consistently demonstrated that course choices among young people are strongly patterned by gender, ethnicity and social class (e.g. Henderson et al. 2018; Cavaglia et al. 2020). However, while similar observations were reported in interviews with other practitioners and policy makers in Bellden and Spindale and in Tapley, our participants in Greenvale – an area with considerably less ethnic diversity and higher overall levels of

affluence – did not raise either ethnic or gendered patterning of course selection as an issue. The extent and nature of ethnic, gender, class and place-based differences in course selection, and their intersections, is something we intend to explore further in subsequent rounds of data collection and in the quantitative strands of the research.

A range of barriers to successful school-to-work transitions

When asked to reflect on any barriers to young people making meaningful post-16 career and employment choices, interviewees typically identified a range of issues, spanning both individual and more structural concerns.

(i) Issues of employability

Articulated through an employability lens, a number of interviewees raised concerns about some young people's 'readiness' for further education, employment and training, pointing to poor 'soft' and 'hard' skills, lack of work experience and problems with low levels of aspiration and motivation. One implication here was that some of the barriers young people face during their transitions are attributable, at least in part, to deficits on the part of the young people themselves.

For example, Peter Hawkins, an employer and Chairman of the Spindale Enterprise Trust, felt that young people pursuing employment and vocational options often lacked the 'confidence' and 'charisma' required to compete with 'really bright kids' from Spindale's grammar schools. He had designed a soft skills initiative based on a book about the power of charisma 'that's going to give the students a bit more confidence and help them to be charismatic, based on the understanding that you can learn to be charismatic'. He believed this kind of dispositional education would help to open more employment opportunities for young people and help them to progress in employment.

Particular concerns were expressed about young people's lack of readiness for apprenticeships:

> So, that's the problem we have with our apprenticeships: we just get a load of students who just aren't disciplined or motivated enough for it, because they think they're not academic therefore they're made for the workplace. But it just doesn't work like that. And we end up dragging a lot of them through it... because they just [aren't] cut out for it, unfortunately – *Peter Cartwright, T Levels Co-Ordinator, Tapley College*

Other participants pointed to a particular need for an intensive grounding in 'the basics' for those young people who are more marginalised (for example, writing CVs and application forms, identifying appropriate clothing for interviews or work, being prepared to leave local communities to access opportunities):

> They almost think that they just need to put their hand up to say they want a job and they'll get a job, but they've got such a small understanding of how to job search, they've not got a CV, they would struggle completing a good application, they would cringe at the thought of an interview. So, the whole recruitment process is a job in itself – *Ross Tait, Careers Advisor at FutureUs, Spindale*

This emphasis on young people's employment 'readiness' aligns with dominant narratives of employability that have gained substantial political currency in the UK and the European Union in recent years (see e.g. Mertanen et al. 2020; Prendergast 2020) and that often tend to frame youth unemployment as a problem rooted in individual rather than structural deficits (Crisp and Powell 2017).

(ii) Structural barriers

Other barriers raised in our interviews with policy makers and practitioners were more structural in nature. In particular, there was widespread concern about the lack of opportunities available to young people, especially in employment. Consistent with existing literature and labour market data (Henehan 2021, TUC 2021), the majority of interviewees across all case study areas stated that the types of jobs typically available to young people in their local areas were concentrated in retail, services and hospitality, or dependent on young people's family connections:

> There's not a lot in this area, they have to move out of the area for employment. And a lot of them tend to go and work with parents. So, dad's a brickie so they'll go lay bricks with dad, or mum's a hairdresser, I'll go and work with her… High-flying wise, we don't have a lot… I've definitely seen trends, so we've gone to a lot more trade-based retail employment rather than [high-skilled jobs] – *Holly Jones, Careers Lead, North Bellden Academy*

The low quality of youth employment in terms of pay, security and future prospects had typically been a source of concern for the interviewees for some time, which reflects the progressive destabilisation of the labour market, and the youth labour market in particular (MacDonald 2009; Hardgrove et al. 2015). In the UK, over recent decades, as in other countries of the global North, the labour market has been strained and significantly reshaped by a range of socio-structural changes, including globalisation, deindustrialisation, sustained periods of economic recession, and the shift towards a service sector economy (Kalleberg 2009). As a result, employment has become progressively less stable and more precarious, creating ripple effects for young people's transitions into employment, particularly for those with lower educational qualifications and skills, who are now significantly less able and less likely to embark on long-lasting careers in blue collar industries and are instead reliant on jobs in services that predominantly have lower wages, fewer skills requirements and significantly less security or fewer prospects for progression (Roberts 2009; McDowell 2020).

While low- and poor-quality employment opportunities for young people have continued to be an enduring problem in the UK, the devastating economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic has intensified these concerns for interviewees, who noted that sectors that overwhelmingly employ young people are the ones that have been the most severely affected by the pandemic and associated containment measures:

> So, since industry and the public sector has been hollowed out, most entry-level jobs, if you were to leave school and look for something, would be in a supermarket or in retail or in a bank or in a café or something. Now, that's going to be really problematic over the next few years because many of these businesses are places that have gone under or are cutting back… The number of opportunities for people to go into when they leave school is reducing in the service sector, so that's going to be a huge challenge – *Jake Peters, Leader of Spindale Council*

Whilst the longer term ramifications of the pandemic for youth unemployment are as yet unknown, rapid response data from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (2020) during the first nationwide lockdown in England suggests that young people under the age of 25 have been amongst the worst affected by the pandemic in the labour market, due to their greater likelihood of being employed in 'shutdown sectors' like retail, services and hospitality. Interviewees were seriously concerned about the future availability of these opportunities given the extent of shop and hospitality venue closures during the pandemic. Others expressed concern about increased competition for those jobs that are still available in these sectors, predicting that young people will likely have to compete with older, more qualified and more experienced candidates who themselves have been displaced from the labour market during the pandemic:

> And then obviously you've got these other, kind of, 20-/30-/40-/50-year-olds that have been affected, have been made redundant, who are hoovering up what would be traditionally a student job, they're going into the recruitment for them jobs… So, the young person I want to get the job is now in competition with somebody who has got 10/15 years' experience and a certain qualification. So, I am really worried about [that] – *Lorraine Dawson, Operational Manager, FutureUs, Spindale*

Given that these entry level jobs in retail and hospitality are often 'stepping stones' for young people's future employment (MacDonald 2009), there are widespread concerns about how difficult it will be for young people to gain a foothold in the labour market. Some interviewees commented on more promising job opportunities coming to their respective local areas in the near future, most commonly in the digital and technology sectors.

However, excitement about what these opportunities could bring to local areas and to local young people was often tempered somewhat by two key worries: first, that the arrival of these opportunities could be significantly delayed by the pandemic; and second, there was concern expressed by some interviewees about whether local young people would be able to access these higher skilled and more desirable opportunities when competing with older, better skilled candidates from both within and outside of the local area.

(iii) Local barriers

Finally, many interviewees identified barriers – both individual and more structural – pertaining to their respective local areas that they felt combined to make young people's school-to-work transitions challenging.

In addition to concerns about limited or poor quality employment opportunities, when reflecting on their local areas, our research participants often also described challenging environments for young people in relation to problems with violence, gangs, racist policing, and poverty. This was particularly evident in interviews with participants in Bellden, Tapley and Spindale, which are less affluent and more ethnically diverse than Greenvale:

> It's a typical, like, deprived borough kind of thing: students have issues outside, a lot of parents on low incomes… you've got the kind of gang element and things like that. We have a few students who we lose to, like, gang violence every year and things like that… It kind of is the standard things that come with being in a deprived borough – *Paul Cartwright, T Levels Co-Ordinator, Tapley College*
>
> One of our students… she's living in a house that's actually condemned. There's no electricity. The mum's got mental health issues; a lot of our parents have issues, so either mental health, drugs issues, alcohol issues. This obviously impacts on the families but they all live in estates and in neighbourhoods that are the same… they're not very nice at all. And the kids end up getting in trouble on the estates – *Rosie Swanson, Careers Lead, Grassmere Pupil Referral Unit, Bellden*

These concerns were often discussed in conjunction with the declining availability of youth provision and leisure facilities over the last decade, services that have been severely affected by sustained cuts to public funding since 2010 (Youdell & McGimpsey 2015; YMCA 2020):

> The proper youth clubs, as you and I would recognise them, mostly demised about 10 years ago following the big credit crunch. There wasn't the money in local government to support youth provision, it wasn't a statutory duty in those days, and all of the youth workers got culled, so there was none to do it… And so, what youth clubs still exist primarily revolve around other activities like football clubs, rugby clubs, that sort of thing – *Donald Watts, Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Skills & Young People, Greenvale*

There is evidence to suggest that austerity policies have disproportionately affected children and young people (Horton 2016). As well as cuts to youth and leisure services, these have included the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), which paid a small weekly bursary to low-income students to support their continued participation in education (Weavers 2021), and reductions in welfare benefits for low-income families (Taylor-Gooby 2017). As a result of these policies, many interviewees felt that young people lack resources, support and things to do, often spending time on the streets and in public spaces, which, while not in itself always seen as a problem, was felt by some to often lead to young people 'getting into trouble'.

Where youth projects or clubs do exist, interviewees reported that some young people lack interest in them, either because they see themselves as being 'too old' to attend or because they are not services they feel are intended, or desirable, for them. There was also a sense among some interviewees that these services typically engage with young people who require less support, with particular concern expressed about the marginalisation of young people categorised as BAME and those encountering more challenges in their lives and transitions:

> The kids that attend youth clubs are not usually the ones in danger, they're the ones whose parents have sought that out for them – *Sonja Akter, Deputy Principal, Tapley College*

Another concern that was raised consistently in interviews with policy makers and practitioners across all four of the case study areas was how the high cost of public transport and/or the poor quality of the local transport infrastructure could act as a barrier to connecting young people with education, employment and leisure opportunities. Local transport networks are increasingly important for this purpose because of the progressive relocation of opportunities from local communities into more centralised urban centres (OECD 2020). Jake Peters (Leader of Spindale Council) spoke to these issues in Spindale, noting, for example, that while a significant number of job opportunities had recently become available at a nearby city airport, they were simply inaccessible or undesirable for many local young people because of the prohibitive financial and time costs of accessing them, particularly given that they pay minimum wage:

> So, they have huge numbers of jobs being created at Brickly Airport, but entry-level jobs at Brickly Airport don't pay that great, and it's two trams if you've not got a car… It takes two hours in either direction, it's a really expensive season ticket to do that.

A number of interviewees commented on a more general reluctance on the part of some young people to leave their local communities to access employment opportunities elsewhere. This perception emerged particularly strongly in Spindale, which is heavily deindustrialised and where young people's unwillingness to travel or move elsewhere was characterised by one participant as a legacy of an earlier industrial era when opportunities in employment, training and leisure were available on 'their doorstep'. A reluctance to travel out of local communities to connect with opportunities in bigger towns or cities has been identified in other research with young people, illustrating the value many young people place in 'staying local' and the important role played by young people's attachments to place in shaping their employment aspirations (see e.g. White and Green 2015).

Lack of parity between academic and vocational routes

Turning to VET itself, a theme that has emerged powerfully from interviews conducted to date is the view that more work is needed to bolster the reputation and status of VET provision. Despite a policy emphasis on generating greater 'parity of esteem' between academic and vocational education pathways, many of the school and college staff, careers advisors and policy makers we interviewed expressed concern that vocational routes are still commonly viewed as inferior 'back up' options to more prestigious academic routes through sixth form and university.

Some VET practitioners felt that a major factor contributing to the lower status accorded to VET is its chronic underfunding, which limits its capacity to deliver provision of the quality that can compete with university provision. Many interviewees also felt that the continued imbalance in the relative status accorded to academic and vocational education was evident in, and exacerbated by, the nature of the career information, advice and guidance (CIAG) that young people are able to access at school. This remains weighted towards promoting the academic university route to young people, who are often not presented with full or accurate information about alternative pathways into employment:

> Part of it is countering this narrative that, actually, if you are bright – and I think the careers service and the careers advisors have a part to play, and the teachers and parents in this, because if their thinking is, my child's quite bright, and instinctively, including teachers, they say, "Right, okay, what university are you thinking about?"
> – *Raheem Durrani, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, Spindale*

Some VET practitioners argued that this 'weighting' of advice in favour of academic pathways can at least in part be explained by a lack of knowledge among school teachers, and some careers advisors, about post-16 transitions that do not involve the traditional academic route through school and university.

Some interviewees also suggested that when vocational pathways are being recommended as options for young people to consider, misinformation and a lack of clarity around vocational routes make them a 'hard sell' to young people, with some young people

sometimes erroneously believing they must possess academic qualifications and a university degree in order to access certain professions:

> But, again, it's the promotion of it, it's society bias and their opinions on it and… what vocational is. Vocational to some people is just manual labourer and they get put in the same kind of environment as, like, construction. It's like, well, vocational is nothing to do with construction: you can do a laboratory technician apprenticeship. Like, I don't know why those connotations exist. But until they get broken down, I don't think the vocational thing can really take off – *Paul Cartwright, T Levels Co-Ordinator, Tapley College*

Many interviewees expressed the view that it was equally important – and equally challenging – to educate parents/carers about the value of VET as an option for young people. Parents/carers were consistently identified as powerful, influential gatekeepers in young people's transitions. The strong influence of parents/carers in shaping young people's decision-making was often perceived to be problematic by interviewees, who felt parents/carers were typically not well informed about VET:

> For a lot of our parents, apprenticeships, what they think of as apprenticeships, is very outdated and from what they remember, you know, from when they were younger, where apprenticeships were for people who weren't clever enough to go to university… whereas now it's not. So, again, it's about trying to explain that it's a viable option, the benefits of it all – *Justine Matthews, Employer Engagement & Apprenticeship Co-Ordinator, Lawrence College, Greenvale*

Interviewees felt that many parents/carers idealised the university route and struggled to understand the structure or value of VET. Some suggested the influence of parents/carers was ethnically and socioeconomically patterned. This is a subject that has received wide scholarly attention (see e.g. Khattab and Modood 2018; Scanlon et al. 2019). As discussed earlier in this report, some interviewees reported that, in their experience, parents/carers of South Asian heritage seemed typically heavily subscribed to the notion that university offers the best and only route to prestigious professions, while white working-class families

often struggled to see the value in post-16 education entirely or lacked the cultural capital required to navigate the VET system.

These findings suggest that, while in recent years VET has risen to prominence as a means of addressing pressing national policy priorities around productivity, youth unemployment and democratising access to careers, there is more work to be done to raise its status if young people and their parents/carers are to be convinced of its value.

Concerns about T Levels and apprenticeships

When interviewees were asked to reflect on recent reforms to VET provision, there was a mixed response, particularly around the introduction of T Levels, which started to be rolled out in 2020. T Levels are new vocational qualifications developed in collaboration with businesses and employers. Designed to be equivalent to 3 A Levels, they offer a combination of classroom learning and on-the-job work experience during an industry placement of approximately 45 days (Department for Education 2020).

While interviewees typically reflected positively on the work experience component of T Levels and their potential for contributing to greater parity of esteem for vocational education, there was an overwhelming sense of scepticism about the new qualifications. A key concern expressed relates to how poorly interviewees felt T Levels have been promoted by the government, with college leaders and careers staff reporting that young people typically have not heard of the qualification, reflected in a relatively low uptake of T Levels in their colleges:

> And it's not something I've seen in the news particularly, or it's not something that's been advertised to parents or on posters… I was listening to Spotify the other day and I did [hear] a T Level advert, which was you know, we've got T Levels in these subjects, find your local college. If I was somebody else, I would have thought, what's a T Level? – *Sonja Akter, Deputy Principal, Tapley College*

Another related concern that consistently emerged was the difficulty of pitching the value of a new vocational qualification to young people and parents/carers who often already find

VET confusing alongside the comparatively simple proposition of A Levels and university. As discussed in the previous section, practitioners described the challenges of 'selling' VET options to young people and their parents/carers as a viable alternative to university, and there was considerable concern that adding another qualification into the mix would compound this sense of confusion.

The work placement component of T Levels was criticised by some participants for potentially incorporating, as they saw it, some of the same shortcomings as apprenticeships. As has been reflected in other research (see e.g. White 2015), interviewees discussed a range of concerns about apprenticeship provision, including: young people often not being 'ready' for the demands of an apprenticeship, leading to poor completion rates; inconsistencies in the quality and availability of apprenticeships open to young people in England; and the long-standing concern about some apprenticeships being used as a means of cheap labour by employers:

> We're coming up with things because other things haven't worked, like apprenticeships… We've now had to create a T Level, which has probably taken a huge amount of money and funding… Fix the apprenticeship provision and it can work, but you have to make sure there's the right job within that apprenticeship and not just somebody looking for cheap labour – *Sonja Akter, Deputy Principal, Tapley College*

A further concern raised by many interviewees related to the feasibility of the work experience component of T Levels in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. Practitioners noted the strain already placed on apprenticeships in this regard, with some employers and training providers unable to accommodate apprentices, let alone young people doing T Levels:

> I can't see how employers can be taking on graduates, apprentices and students studying T Levels and try and manage all of that and find the resource... So, if you've got to then fit in T Levels, (a) employers probably don't all know about them; (b) do they value them, do they see them as something that, you know, they're going to benefit from as an organisation? Would they rather have an apprentice or somebody with an A Level? So, I think there's a lot of things wrong with [T Levels] at the moment – *Peter Hawkins, Chairman of Spindale Enterprise Trust, Spindale*

The importance of high quality career information, advice and guidance (CIAG)

Another theme that emerged consistently in interviews was the importance of high quality career information, advice and guidance (CIAG) for young people. Interviewees raised significant concerns about current provision, describing its quality and availability as troublingly inconsistent across institutions, rendering it something of a postcode lottery.

As noted above, and as has been found elsewhere (see e.g. Moote & Archer 2018; Dickinson 2019), some interviewees felt that the advice young people receive at school typically reinforces traditional choices by not presenting young people with information about the advantages and logistics of non-traditional options. One interviewee, a careers lead at Tapley College, argued that careers advisors should be given training and work experience in a range of sectors in order to help them gain more specialist knowledge about a wider range of options and employment sectors. Similar sentiments were expressed by others, including Peter Hawkins, an employer in Spindale:

> And the teachers as well: I've argued for a long time that work placements should be available for teachers, so the teachers should come in and see what careers we have... And then understand from that what sort of skills, what sort of knowledge, you know, what qualifications should the student, what route should they follow in order to make themselves employable.

Numerous interviewees emphasised the importance of careers advisors providing 'honest' and 'realistic' advice to young people and their parents/carers about the feasibility of their

aspirations, which they felt were often misaligned with their prospects based on their existing attainment or capabilities:

> Most of them come in saying they want to be a doctor because they don't fully know about the careers in science and their parents have told them you go and do science and become a doctor and make lots of money and be successful, then we have to spend a year kind of saying, okay, that's really nice you want to be a doctor, but have you tried this career… You've got these grades, which means that avenue has sort of shut for you, how about you try this – *Paul Cartwright, T Levels Co-Ordinator, Tapley College*

The problem of young people doing courses that are considered unsuitable for them was also raised by some interviewees in connection with a commodification of young people in the context of an underfunded VET system:

> And it's heart-breaking to say that but there are unscrupulous providers who just want students, and it's just a bottom line. And I know departments within the college that are like that, who are just like, "we need to take students", and that's a bums-on-seats approach. Now, the only reason why education providers have to think that way is because we're so underfunded and FE colleges don't attract the money – *Sonja Akter, Deputy Principal, Tapley College*

This concern was also raised in relation to some training providers. For example, Lorraine Dawson, Operational Manager of FutureUs, a careers organisation in Spindale, discussed the problem of 'cowboy' training providers:

> So, we try and test people out: when we did our NEET (not in education, employment or training) drop-ins we used to bring providers… so we could… not grill them but get a sense of where they were… You can very easily kind of pick up just through a range of questioning if they're young person centred or if they're just financially driven… the young person is basically just a number that comes through the door, they get the funding… they're not bothered about progression.

Interviewees felt that the problems associated with these kinds of unscrupulous practices are amplified by a lack of understanding on the part of some young people and their parents/carers, resulting in some young people participating in courses at an inappropriate level or that would not lead to the outcomes they expected. There were particular concerns about the implications of this for young people with more limited knowledge of England's VET system, including those from migrant families.

While our interviews with both practitioners and young people (as we will go on to discuss below) did reveal many examples of good careers guidance practice in schools and colleges, demonstrating how specific individuals can play a valuable role in positively supporting young people's decisions and transitions, such good practice, where present, appears to rely heavily on the efforts of key individuals, rather than on an established, consistent careers education and guidance system.

The Gatsby benchmarks, which form part of the Government's statutory guidance for schools and colleges, are an attempt to remedy this problem, at least in part, by providing a framework to support a more systematic approach to careers guidance provision within schools and colleges. One interviewee in Greenvale was very positive about the benchmarks as a means of standardising expectations while not being overly prescriptive:

> I think the Gatsby principles has been great because it standardised the expectation right across all schools...and I think there's enough flexibility in the Gatsby principles, which means that your careers programme could be very different to another school's careers programme and you're still very much meeting the requirements of what you do - *Mr Hughes, Head of work-related learning, Pynchon School, Greenvale*

However, others commented that the increased workload entailed in delivering on all

aspects of the benchmarks[3] has not yet always been recognised by senior staff in schools and colleges:

> I think SLT know what the role is, I just don't think they know how big the role is at the minute, especially with Gatsby, and I don't think they quite understand the full responsibility that comes with it now – *Holly Jones, Careers Lead, Bellden*
>
> We're still to see the full impact of the Gatsby standards … It's about the culture of the school…how well they [teachers] are trained and how well they're supported as teachers…Is it something…that's being added on to their role as a teacher or is [it] something that actually is their role as a teacher? …Some schools are incredibly supportive…other schools, it's kind of, you know, it's seen as a distraction - *Ian Dickson, CEO, Youth Voices Initiative (an organisation which works with schools across the North of England)*

These interviews suggest that, although there is potential for the Gatsby benchmarks to help improve the quality of careers guidance in schools and colleges, their success will depend heavily on the readiness and capacity of individual schools and colleges to invest in the staff time and training needed to support their implementation.

Mounting concerns for young people during the pandemic

Finally, interviewees spoke widely about their growing concerns about the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on young people's lives and transitions. Some of these concerns have been highlighted already in this report, in particular shrinking labour market prospects and the strain the economic effects of the pandemic are placing on the availability of apprenticeships and the work placement element of T Levels. Many interviewees also expressed serious concern about the impact of the pandemic on the educational engagement of particular groups of young people and the potential for this to lead to an exacerbation of existing inequalities in attainment. VET practitioners noted that the shift to

---

[3] For those unfamiliar with the benchmarks, a sense of the workload entailed in fully implementing them can be gleaned from reading the summary document, Holman (2018), published on the Gatsby web pages.

remote learning necessitated by the pandemic had been extremely challenging for those in the 16-18 age group who were struggling to engage before the pandemic, especially in the VET context where young people often turn to access more practical, hands-on education and training but instead have been confined to classroom style learning. Two representatives from a national careers organisation believed that this was leading to higher levels of drop-out from VET than is typical:

> There's a reason why young people go to do a practical programme at an FE college or a training placement, isn't there, because they don't want to be in the classroom… They don't want to be in the GCSE class… And that's been really, you know, for the layer of NEET [not in education, employment or training] young people we work with, that's what turns them off college. So, this added layer of Covid this year, where they just weren't able to… They finally escaped from the classroom at school, they were wanting to go and do their hands-on practical course or their hair and beauty or whatever it was… They don't want a diluted learning experience, they want the full thing that they were signing up to originally
> – *Ross Tait, Careers Advisor at FutureUs, Spindale*

Policy makers discussed their efforts to address the inequalities that the pandemic has exposed, particularly around the 'digital divide' (Children's Commissioner 2020; Child Poverty Action Group 2021), with some young people unable to access their education due to a lack of technology or Internet access:

> We had a huge issue with the availability of tech for many of our young people, who simply couldn't access learning at home like this, because they didn't have reliable Wi-Fi or didn't have a laptop. So, we did a big exercise in distributing tech to young people – *Jake Peters, Leader of Spindale Council, Spindale*

The majority of interviewees also expressed serious concern about young people's mental health and wellbeing. For example, Jake Peters, Leader of Spindale Council, suggested that the pandemic constitutes a 'timebomb' with regard to young people's mental health. Lockdown measures were widely seen as particularly harmful for those young people who

relied heavily on face-to-face interactions with friends, family and organisations for support and safeguarding:

> What's coming through with our recent survey, you know, [it] being really difficult for a lot of young people to be at home with their parents for a long time without access to their friends, you know, and the increasing rise of mental health issues, which is just sort of rife… a lot of the young people, particularly, facing that additional pressure of being at home without support and without their friends and without some of the other ways to get out, you know, and express yourself and let off steam and whatnot – *Nick Halliday, Youth Worker at Greenvale Together, Greenvale*

These concerns are consistent with other research that suggests that young people's mental health and wellbeing has been substantially affected by the pandemic and its containment measures (see e.g. Young Minds 2020), and with what some of the young people themselves told us (as we will go on to discuss below).

4. Key themes: Young people

This report now turns to key themes that have emerged from our interviews and focus groups with young people. At the time of analysing the data for this report, 31 young people had participated in interviews for the main phase of the project; 4 had participated in interviews for the pilot stage; and a further 9 young people had participated in two focus groups in Spindale, also during the pilot stage. As with the policy makers and practitioners, all of these participants were based in one of our four case study areas, though it should be noted that all 31 of the young people participating in the main phase lived in Greenvale and attended the same, well regarded, school. Moreover, the majority of the sample upon which the analysis for this report is based identify as white British. As a result, while we have developed a strong understanding of the trajectories of young people who are based in mostly affluent areas with generally high levels of access to good quality career guidance and considerable support from family, at this point in the project we know significantly less about the transitions of young people in more urban and less affluent areas, black and minority ethnic young people, those living with health conditions and disabilities, and those with more limited access to career guidance and other sources of information, advice and support.[4]

Young people were asked to reflect on their processes of decision-making, any barriers they might have encountered, their experiences of career guidance, their access to emotional and practical support, how the coronavirus pandemic is affecting their lives and transitions and what they think could be done differently to better support the transitions and futures of young people who do not go to university.

Strong sense of personal agency over post-16 transitions

A key theme to emerge very consistently across our interviews and focus groups with young people is that they have a strong sense of personal agency and are strongly future-oriented in their thinking and decision-making. Young people typically described high levels of engagement with their courses and a strong commitment to pursuing their aspirations. They

---

[4] Our more recent interviews have been conducted with young people in these categories and their experiences will be the focus of future publications.

generally all had a career goal in mind, to varying degrees of certainty and specificity, and felt broadly confident that they were on the right path to achieving their aspirations. They described giving a lot of thought to the future and of being highly motivated to access lifestyles and incomes through jobs that ideally involved their passions and interests (see Box 2 below).

Many of the young people described proactively researching and identifying opportunities and support resources in pursuit of their aspirations, actively seeking out advice from careers staff, teachers, friends and parents/carers or work experience opportunities. This contrasts with the way some policy makers and practitioners characterised young people as moving passively through education without a clear plan, either in search of something to do or at the behest of their parents/carers or careers advisors. Characterisations of (some) young people as lacking aspiration or motivation have long been a dominant narrative in policy rhetoric around youth unemployment in the UK, but have consistently been challenged by research that suggests that what is in fact often lacking are the opportunities to facilitate young people's goals (Spohrer 2011).

Box 2: Interests, hobbies and values

In Greenvale, many young people's post-16 courses and career aspirations were linked to their interests and hobbies outside of school, from professional sports to horse riding. These interests helped young people to plan for specific careers or gave them an idea of the practical jobs they would enjoy. For many of these young people, their interest in particular careers had started at an early age. For example, Isabel told us that she always knew she wanted to work with horses and had applied to study a level 3 diploma in equine management at college. Her aspirations were also closely linked to her values. She talked about how some people saw careers with horses as 'controversial' because they did not always lead to high-income jobs but that, for her, job satisfaction was more important:

I want to enjoy my job and, even if that doesn't get me a lot of income, at least I enjoy what I do – *Isabel, Year 11 student, Greenvale*

Many young people discussed the importance of enjoying their future job or avoiding types

Of jobs which they knew they would not enjoy. Melissa, for example, wanted a physically active job in the military or police and had applied to do a level 3 course in public services at college:

> I don't do very well sat behind a desk… so doing a course which you can go on more trips and is a more physical kind of thing… is quite good – *Melissa, Year 11 student, Greenvale*

For these young people, post-16 VET routes were attractive because they offered courses which matched their career aspirations and a more practical learning environment than school.

Positive experiences of VET

For the pilot stage we conducted interviews and focus groups with young people in Greenvale, Bellden and Spindale who were older than the Year 11 group interviewed for the main phase, and some of whom therefore already had some experience of VET. These young people were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences of VET. Many reported a preference for the more flexible and independent model of college-based further education and an appreciation of the opportunity to participate in courses that they felt were significantly more aligned with their interests and career aspirations than the courses they had studied at school or that were on offer in their school's sixth form. A number of young people were drawn to VET – and apprenticeships in particular – because of the opportunity these provided to combine learning with earning a wage and gaining practical, hands-on experience in a workplace environment. These were, in the main, young people who had either struggled with or simply not enjoyed a purely classroom-based learning environment and were looking for a more blended, flexible or practical education, employment and training experience:

> I didn't apply to any sixth forms because I knew that I wouldn't really want to go there, I knew in my head that I didn't really want another two years of a kind of classroom environment… I was going more for the apprenticeship because… the money motivated me as well, to get an apprenticeship, because I wanted to start earning money, getting experience whilst I'm getting money – *Lucas, 17, Spindale*

Some young people had discounted the idea of university because they were worried about how they would finance their studies, but for others university was simply not an attractive proposition in that it entailed several more years of classroom learning, was regarded as delaying entry to the labour market and because it compared unfavourably with more streamlined and engaging VET routes into similar occupations:

> I always wanted to complete an apprenticeship because I'm quite driven and love to keep engaged with things. So, I knew I could go to university, but I wanted to try and do a full-time job… I kind of had my goals set to push myself, not just at university, because it wouldn't have kept me engaged or interested enough – *Liam, 18, Greenvale*

These young people's perspectives are reflective of changing narratives around post-16 education in the UK, and align strongly with the government's vision of VET as a viable alternative to university.

Decision-making about the future

Our interviews and focus groups with the young people participating in the pilot stage of our project also provide an insight into how young people navigate their transitions into and through VET after school. These young people described their decision-making as a process, with choices made, negotiated and revised over time and influenced by a range of actors. Our interviews with policy makers and practitioners discussed earlier in this report characterised young people's transitions through VET as often disjointed and protracted, punctuated with course-swapping and drop-out. Some of the experiences of the young people we spoke to corresponded with this characterisation. However, rather than this being rooted in apathy or misunderstanding, as was sometimes suggested in our interviews with policy makers and practitioners, these young people appeared to be weighing their options seriously and carefully, sampling different courses and seeking advice from friends and family before committing to decisions.

A number of these young people had changed courses, either partway through or prior to their commencement, or had changed track entirely, moving from an apprenticeship to a

vocational college course, for example. They often felt they had not had sufficient time to understand and weigh their post-16 options in Year 11, a school year characterised by intensive examinations and mounting expectations for them to make important decisions about their futures. This resonates strongly with experiences of the young people participating in Lupton et al.'s (2021) study of the post-16 transitions of 'lower attainers' who similarly described the stressful nature of having to make critical decisions about careers and vocational courses in 'the pressure cooker atmosphere of Year 11' (p.60). The demands of preparing for their GCSE exams can leave young people with little room to consider their options, which can result in some feeling rushed in their decision-making, later reversing their decisions and opting for alternative post-16 routes.

However, in other cases the process appeared to be less pressured with some participants appearing to have the time and 'head space' to carefully consider different options in discussion with family and friends. For example, Lucas, who was part of our pilot sample and had made his transition into VET pre-pandemic, had initially planned to pursue an apprenticeship but later changed his mind, deciding instead to take a course at college. This process of decision-making was heavily influenced by his friends and parents:

> My best mate, who did business at school with me, I spoke to him towards the end of the summer and he said he was going to do an apprenticeship like me as well but he decided that he wanted to go into college – he felt like you'd be able to learn more than you would in an apprenticeship. So, he talked me into it, in a way, and then I found out more information myself… and my mum and dad were both really saying that it could be more… better if I went to college and studied it first and then went on to get actual getting experience after… So, it was my mum and dad that influenced me, and my friend.

In Lucas's case, his decision-making was also influenced by his capacity to 'test the waters' of an apprenticeship by spending time at a garage, where he found that he disliked the 'long hours and hard work'. This experience sealed his decision to pursue a college course in business instead. As other researchers have noted (e.g. Allen and Hollingworth 2013; Hartas 2016), having the time and resources to be able to carefully consider and revise post-16

decisions is enabled by socioeconomic factors in young people's backgrounds and home lives, and on their ability to draw on the advice and lived experience of relatives and peers with relevant expertise, forms of cultural capital not necessarily available to all young people. Lucas's case is also an example of the greater opportunities that young people making their transition into VET pre-pandemic were able to access compared to those available to young people making these transitions during the pandemic.

Many of the young people articulated a desire for more time to test the waters with different options while still in school, and wanted more opportunities to spend time observing apprenticeships, courses or training schemes before committing to them only to later discover they were not as imagined, which could lead to course swapping and drop-out:

> Well, I think, throughout Year 11, it would have been better if people got like work experience throughout as well as being in school… And also going to college throughout the year, maybe once a month having like a day where they can see what they want to do and see what it's like so then when they actually start college they know what they want to do, instead of starting college and then thinking, "Oh no, I don't like this", and then having to change their mind – *Olivia, 16, Spindale*

Some young people felt they would have been able to make better decisions at earlier junctures in their transitions if they had been more aware of the practical realities of a range of post-16 options and how these might fit in with their interests, capabilities and existing lifestyles. This extended to GCSE choices too, with some Year 11 students wishing they had received more information on the subjects that were required for different post-16 education and careers. Thus, when asked for their ideas on how young people's post-16 transitions could be better supported, some of the young people we interviewed called for greater encouragement of, and support for, young people to think about options and pathways earlier on in their decision-making trajectories:

> I'd like more of a "if you take this, it could eventually lead to this" kind of thing – *Mitchell, Year 11 student, Greenvale*
>
> I think if there was one thing I'd say to upcoming Year 11s, or 10s, I'd definitely say start looking for what you want to do at that age, because say you don't think about it until as soon as you're going to leave Year 11, you're a bit stuffed – *Arthur, Year 11 student, Greenvale*
>
> I think it's just more of like when you're in your GCSE years, you've just got to be really certain of what lessons you like – *Cat, Year 11 student, Greenvale*

Some young people in Year 11 spoke about choosing A Levels specifically to keep their future options open when they were not sure about what they wanted to do. This was the case for Cat, a Year 11 student in Greenvale:

> I may as well do the A Levels because I can branch off of all my options: like, PE, I could go and be like a sports physio or a PE teacher or something like that.

While for Grace and her friends the decision to do A Levels was related to a lack of knowledge of other options:

> I think, for a lot of us, a lot of people in my year group went on to sixth form because they didn't really know what else was available – *Grace , Year 11 student, Greenvale*

Mitchell, in the same school, told us that he was also planning to stay on to do A Levels, partly because he did not know much about other options, but also in response to a strong steer from his mother:

> My mum as well, kind of pushed me towards this as an option – *Mitchell, Year 11 student, Greenvale*

The experiences of these students illustrate how A Levels still carry a certain weight among young people and their parents and were perhaps, therefore, seen as the 'safe option' when

students were either unsure or did not know about the range of vocational options available to them.

As has been found widely elsewhere (e.g. Evans 2021; Dickinson 2019) and echoing what practitioners told us (as discussed above), it was clear from the young people we spoke to that their decision-making about the future was also strongly influenced by the input of other actors, with parents/carers and peers particularly influential. Numerous young people stated that their parents had played a significant role in steering their decisions, sometimes resulting in them changing their minds from one post-16 route to another. Parents' input was generally trusted and appreciated by the young people, who relied on them for expertise and guidance.

Box 3: Family connections and businesses

Family connections had a strong influence on some young people's course choices and career aspirations. In Greenvale, several young people like Ben whose family were fourth generation farmers grew up on family farms and intended to take post-16 VET courses related to agriculture alongside working on the family farm. Working in the family business was also the case for Freddie who had 'always wanted to be a builder when [he] got older'. Freddie has three close male relations all with their own building companies and he had spent much of his time helping them out and learning about different building trades.

Freddie was also planning to do an apprenticeship with his father's building company. He had enquired about apprenticeships with other companies but they were not taking on apprentices, which Freddie attributed to the impact of the pandemic on the capacity for small businesses to hire apprentices. This shows how family connections can help young people on their paths when there are fewer external opportunities, but it also highlights the problem of access for young people who do not have family contacts in the industries they want to work in.

Equally important to some young people was the influence of peers, which manifested in a number of different ways. Many young people were heavily distracted by the advice and decisions of their friends, people they trusted and who knew them intimately. Some

enrolled in the same courses or colleges as their friends because they had similar interests or simply wanted to continue studying alongside them, although one participant described deliberately taking a different path from her friends in order to avoid distraction so as to perform better in her course:

> I wanted to be away from my friends, I wanted a fresh start, because I had a choice in Year 9 to move school and I chose not to, which I probably regret now… If I'd spent more time away from them I probably would have focused more on my own learning – *Olivia, 16, Spindale*

Lucas, who was engaged in a two-year vocational course at the time of our interview with him, noted the positive benefit of the college teaching two year cohorts together. This brokered contact between his class and older, more experienced peers one year ahead who could impart valuable advice about how to navigate the college and the programme:

> So, they decided to put us all together in one class and just teach the same things, because we'd just started and they'd got some of their year left… and that was really beneficial… because I met this lad called Sam, and he was… the smarty-pants of the class… so he influenced me a lot… The older ones taught us a lot, like gave us their experiences and told us, like, well not through the college but a lot of them told me that it's just easier to just get your work done and just do it on time – *Lucas, 17, Spindale*

Whether through parents/carers, trusted friends or peers, what emerged very clearly from our interviews and focus groups with young people is the importance for young people of being able to engage with a range of actors in order to sense-check post-16 transition options at a time, and in a VET landscape, that can sometimes feel pressurised and overwhelming.

As noted earlier in this report, in addition to peers and parents/carers, some interviewees referred to certain teachers and staff at their schools and colleges as important sources of emotional and practical support in their decision-making process. Young people often

described having one or two select institutional contacts that they could go to for advice about their options or for support with things like student bursaries or course-swapping. Alongside parents and peers, these members of teaching, pastoral or administrative support staff were often instrumental in young people's decision-making and transitions. Olivia, 16, from Spindale, identified a careers advisor in her school as particularly pivotal in her decision-making around VET options:

> She was called Emma, she was really good actually, really nice, and anyone could go speak to her whenever she was in school… She'd help you apply for college if you couldn't do it… She showed me the childcare and what you can do with childcare and health and social and that's when I changed to health and social, when she talked to me about the differences and stuff.

As noted above, the majority of young people we have interviewed to date live in Greenvale, a broadly affluent area, where they all attend the same highly regarded school. The capacity for these young people to access a range of support and advice at school and at home when making decisions about their post-16 options is likely to be greater than for young people living in less affluent areas of England and this is an issue we will explore later in the project.

Mixed experiences of CIAG

When asked to reflect on their experiences of CIAG, young people's responses were consistent with the testimony of practitioners, who had expressed concern about the inconsistency and patchy quality of careers provision in England. While most young people could recall previously meeting with a careers advisor or attending assemblies providing general information about post-16 options and careers, there was an overwhelming sense that the CIAG they had access to was insufficient and overly generic.

Many expressed a desire for more one to one, individualised guidance, where they could access detailed information about steps they could take towards their education and employment aspirations. Echoing what some practitioners told us, some young people felt they had not been presented with a full range of post-16 options in their experience of

career guidance, which they described as featuring insufficient information about vocational pathways and as still being heavily weighted towards the university route:

> They didn't say anything about anything else. And they did push you on that academic route… but everybody was kind of forced into the A Levels and being told, well, after you've got your A Levels you need to go to uni and get a degree and then you can get a job – *Miriam, 16, Spindale*

Some had been told about apprenticeships but felt they were covered too briefly for them to fully understand what was involved in being an apprentice. This was information they had to find themselves, derive from friends, parents/carers or through later enrolling in apprenticeships:

> It was definitely one of the schools where apprenticeships weren't the first option, and they weren't kind of not encouraged but they weren't necessarily pushed towards you like university was. I think it's still very much a stigma now, where only university is pushed… It's unfortunate that people never, ever hear about the experiences, not just apprenticeships but other opportunities that are available to them, and they may kind of have the view that, to get to where they want to in life… that university is the only option…. There was only one person… I could go to for advice to speak about apprenticeships. Other than that, I had to do everything myself, kind of thing – *Liam, 18, Greenvale*

Several young people felt disadvantaged by the pandemic in terms of CIAG because it had prevented them from accessing opportunities to attend college open days, apprenticeship or careers fairs and, most coveted of all, work experience placements. While these opportunities have been made available to some young people online, the majority reported that attending virtually was not as immersive or beneficial as being able to engage in person:

> year as of yet. But a lot of teachers do keep like posting things in our class Teams about online work experiences. Like, for example, I've joined a programme where

> We were supposed to do work experience in June of Year 10, which was, obviously, during the pandemic so that didn't work out, and we've had no chance to do it this year as of yet. But a lot of teachers do keep like posting things in our class Teams about online work experiences. Like, for example, I've joined a programme where you get a certificate saying you've done 10 hours of medical work experience by the end of it, after watching four webinars. I mean, they're long webinars but it isn't by any means the same as doing it in person, just sitting in front of a screen watching it – *Alexis, 16, Spindale*

Where young people had been able to access these kinds of opportunities in person, there was a broad consensus that there was a need for more such opportunities because they could be so useful in helping to inform their decision-making. Work experience placements and open days were also widely believed to come too late in the school year.

Box 4: The impact of the pandemic on career information, advice and guidance

In Greenvale, Year 11 students in one school had faced severe disruption to different elements of career support as a result of the pandemic. In 2020, when the students were in Year 10, their work experience placements were cancelled. Many students had been looking forward to these placements as an opportunity to learn more about different careers and industries. For example, Arthur had been planning to go to a golf club:

> I would definitely have loved to do it, but no, you can't do it – *Arthur, Year 11 student, Greenvale*

College visits were also cancelled in person, with many students applying for colleges they had never visited. Some students made use of official online information events. For example, Ben joined a virtual tour to get an idea of the college campus. Other young people, such as Isabel, who had watched videos of horse events at the college on YouTube, did their own research, making use of online sources or their peer and family networks. Many students, such as Alfie, relied on reputations and stories they had heard from friends or siblings to help them make a decision:

> I know people that have done that course and they've said it's a really good course – *Alfie, Year 11 student, Greenvale*

Some young people had also witnessed or directly experienced inequalities in access to CIAG at their schools, citing examples of work experience and open days only being offered to high-achieving young people intending to go to university.

Barriers to transitions

In addition to insufficient CIAG, young people mentioned a range of other barriers they had encountered in their post-16 transitions, many of which corresponded with those mentioned by policy makers and practitioners. Barriers were typically represented through a local lens, for example, with young people in Spindale in particular typically articulating negative views of their local area. For these young people, their local area was seen as offering very little to young people, particularly in relation to employment opportunities. Many of the participants also felt their area offered little for young people to do in terms of leisure, with several noting the decline in local youth provision and there being fewer spaces for them to spend time with one another on their own terms. Some felt unsafe in their local area, citing issues with gangs, violence, racism and deprivation:

> What I've got to say about Spindale is there are some areas that are not so nice, you know what I mean, because most areas are either very white or very Asian and that, and there's a lot of racist people here, I've got to say… I don't think Spindale is a very nice place. It's just a bit rough I think – *Ashraf, 16, Spindale*

The combination of a lack of good quality employment opportunities and things to do and a sense that their neighbourhoods were unappealing and unsafe, meant that many young people intended to live elsewhere in the future:

> I do not want to stay in Spindale… I'd like to move somewhere different. I want to move to a place where it's nice and calm and safe, I want to have children and stuff like that, because I would not live here and have children, I just wouldn't. And it's not just the schools… it's like the people, they're just, it's the way they're brought up and the families and stuff – *Olivia, 16, Spindale*

A further barrier raised by some young people, that again pertained to their local areas, was transport, with some young people finding public transport too expensive and being put off by lengthy, complicated journeys to access opportunities outside the local area:

> It's ridiculous… I got reimbursed about £7.40 just for two tickets… They shut down a lot of the good youth clubs and they're just kind of raising the transport prices. And it just kind of sucks because, you know, me being me, I just want to move. I don't want to live in Spindale anymore, I'd rather live in like Brickly or something, then at least in Brickly it's a bit better and the facilities are a bit better… you can travel long distances, or like you can go on the tram and go back home – *Damian, 18, Spindale*

However, other young people had broadly positive views of their local area and wished to stay there in the future. This was particularly the case for young people in Greenvale who wanted to work in their family business, such as Ben who wanted to work on his family's farm:

> It's not like I want to move to the city and then get a train to the farm…I couldn't have wished for a better place to grow up in, really.

Students like Ben were very rooted in their local area and industry and wanted to stay there in the future. Some young people in Greenvale already had part-time jobs in Year 11, from working in local stables to waitressing or helping out in the kitchens of local pubs. Greenvale has many areas which are popular tourist destinations and the local tearooms and cafes provided good first job opportunities for some local young people, including Isabel: 'We're really lucky in this village because…there's a lot of cafés and like, tea rooms…people can pot-wash and like chef assistants and waiters and stuff like that'. However, this was not the case for all young people in Greenvale where some lived in villages with limited employment opportunities and activities for young people, as noticed by Matt: 'My village is very barren on activities', and Dylan: 'And like little stuff, like youth clubs, places, like places for us to go, there's not really much about…around here anyway.'

Some young people were also contending with additional challenges, including mental health problems, challenging home environments and financial and familial pressures[5].

Impact of the pandemic

A final theme to emerge powerfully from interviews and focus groups was the impact of the pandemic on young people. Fieldwork was conducted during periods of sustained lockdown in England, which has widely disrupted young people's experiences of education and their post-16 transitions more broadly.

Many of the young people we interviewed were finding remote learning challenging, particularly those who had transitioned to VET from school at a time where no or very little face-to-face teaching was possible:

> I feel like I've lost a year of, like, good learning… It's a lot harder online to like pick it up because, basically, they're just going through a PowerPoint and you're just writing it down… And that's pretty much the education, so it's not really education, it's just like copying – *Jordan, 16, Spindale*
>
> I'm supposed to be sitting a maths and English exam next year but I don't know how that's going to work with this coronavirus and obviously me not revising any maths and English… I have to revise it off my own back because… like I can't go into college and revise it and I don't have a teacher to tell me what to do – *Olivia, 16, Spindale*

The transition from school to a new learning/working environment can often be challenging for young people (see, for example, Thompson 2017), but felt especially challenging for some participants who were unable to physically meet their tutors, support staff or classmates. Others were struggling to engage in their education online, finding it difficult to stay focused on, or on top of, their courses without being able to ask for help in person. The loss of structure and routine associated with a shift from face-to-face to remote learning

---

[5] This will be a focus of future publications.

was also challenging for many of the young people, with many commenting they had struggled to remain motivated during learning at home:

> It's kind of hard to get motivated so I was a bit worried in case I got really bad marks [for GCSE] – *Arthur, Year 11 student, Greenvale*
>
> It's harder to be motivated, and you had like such an easy option just to not do it, but I did try and do quite a bit, especially in the last lockdown – *Perry, Year 11 student, Greenvale*
>
> I didn't really enjoy it because I found it quite hard to get motivated to actually do the work, because I was at home – *Alfie, Year 11 student, Greenvale*

Moreover, as in the interviews with policy makers and practitioners and reflecting the findings of other research conducted during the pandemic (e.g. see Holmes and Burgess 2020 and Sutton Trust 2020), digital inequalities surfaced in our conversations with young people, some of whom did not have access to the technologies required to make remote learning possible, while others had been provided with ample learning and technological resources by their schools or colleges. One participant who did not own a laptop or computer and was not provided with one by her school was forced to use the small screen and limited capacity of her mobile phone to participate in her classes, which she was finding very difficult. Several young people, while sympathetic to the challenges facing teachers in organising remote learning, told us that they had received very little communication or learning materials to help them learn remotely.

Young people's unequal experience of remote learning and support was encapsulated particularly starkly by one young person who reflected on the considerable differences between his experiences of online learning and those of his sister in terms of the quality of communication with – and the levels of resources and support made available by – their respective teachers (with him receiving a lot more support than his sister). Others had observed inequalities in the distribution of resources in their schools, with some year groups prioritised over others:

> I remember people telling me, oh, school's providing laptops. And I turned up at school because I thought if I get a laptop I'll be able to get some work done, so I went to school… and they said, "not to the Year 11s anymore, it's just Year 10s, 9s, 8s and 7s, the people that will be in school in the future"… So, I basically got turned down for a laptop – *Olivia, 16, Spindale*

With that being said, some young people were enjoying remote learning more than they had expected, and were performing well in their classes and courses. Some were keen for a more blended model of learning to continue beyond the pandemic, encompassing elements of face-to-face and remote learning:

> I think, for me, the independence we get from online working works really well and I find that at home there's less distractions than there are at school, but I am looking forward to seeing my friends, because we do finish in, like, less than three months and then we'll be going to different colleges and I might never see some of them again – *Alexis, 16, Spindale*

Beyond the challenges (and opportunities) of remote learning, many young people reported feeling anxious about the uncertainty of their futures in the midst of the pandemic. Young people currently in school were particularly unnerved by the uncertainty around their assessment and felt there had been a lack of clear, open communication or consultation about this from their schools or the government:

> With the whole GCSE exam situation that's going on at the minute and nobody really knows what's going on, I think, for me, that's been a greater cause of stress than any of the actual learning we've been doing in school – *Miriam, 16, Spindale*

Given how future-oriented the young people appeared to be, the uncertainty surrounding how their schoolwork and school careers would be evaluated was a source of considerable anxiety, with young people concerned they might be assessed unfairly and worried about the implications of this for their futures. One participant was concerned about how disadvantaged her cohort of young people might be compared with future cohorts, who

may be more able to participate in traditional examination processes and in opportunities like volunteering, careers and apprenticeship fairs, and work experience that may in turn place them at an advantage when it comes to competing for education and employment opportunities in the future. The participants were generally cognisant of the significant impact of the pandemic on the availability of employment and training opportunities and, when combined with concerns about the longevity of the pandemic, there was a pervasive sense of anxiety about how this might impact on their ability to attain their goals in the short- and long-term:

> And I mean, granted you don't have that many options getting a job at our age anyway, but to reduce such a small number to even smaller, makes competition quite high for the few jobs we *can* get. And, I mean, obviously the pandemic, the whole hospitality sector is non-existent – *Miriam, 16, Spindale*

Finally, many young people commented on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on their mental health and wellbeing. Beyond heightened anxiety about assessment, their more limited access to opportunities that may help them to access employment in the future and the shape their post-16 transitions may take in the context of the pandemic, some of the young people were struggling with feeling isolated and cut off from their friends, family and other important sources of support and were missing the social dimensions of school or college, such as having fun with their friends and navigating assessments and coursework together.

Some young people had been through challenging personal events during the pandemic, including unemployment and bereavement, and were struggling to cope with these challenges without physical social interaction:

> I just want to say that I feel like Covid has affected me in like a different way, like obviously it's affected my employment and stuff but also it's been really bad for my mental health because I haven't been able to go over and see my girlfriend, who also like struggles with her mental health… So, it's been awful, like, the worst time of my life – *Ashley, 16, Spindale*

The routines and social practices that help to balance young people's lives – whether participating in sports, attending youth clubs or spending time with friends, family and significant others – had long been or were felt to be off limits.

Young people in Spindale seemed to be struggling with the pandemic more than those we have interviewed in Greenvale who typically confined their reflections on the impact of the pandemic to exams, remote learning and next steps. In Spindale, which is considerably more economically deprived than Greenvale, the pandemic has undeniably hit harder, with Spindale and its surrounding areas living with amongst the toughest pandemic containment measures in England for a prolonged period of time in both 2020 and 2021. These factors may have contributed to young people in Spindale finding navigating the pandemic particularly challenging.

However, not all young people (in Spindale and elsewhere) were enthusiastic about the return to 'normal'. Some had positively enjoyed spending time away from the pressures of socialising and the rigid structure of face-to-face learning, and were worried about transitioning back to more intensive, in person education, employment and training after such a long period of time spent at home without a structured routine:

> In a normal world we'd have to be coming [in]… like every day from like half nine till four, for me currently I'd find that so hard to like get myself out of bed, get dressed, actually come [in], spend the whole day socialising with people, like that would be so draining for me to do that five days a week – *Ashley, 16, Spindale*

This last quote is a reminder that school and college are not always comfortable places for many young people, a theme we hope to explore in future publications.

5. Conclusion

Drawing on interviews with policy makers and practitioners and interviews and focus groups with young people, this report has discussed key themes that have emerged from the *Young Lives, Young Futures* to date. Unsurprisingly, given the timing of this fieldwork and the unprecedented context in which it has been conducted, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic emerged powerfully in our conversations with all participants. The extent to which the pandemic has disrupted young people's experiences of education and revealed or exacerbated existing inequalities was a key talking point, with participants concerned about the impact of the pandemic on young people's prospects and mental health in both the short and longer term.

Further parallels between interviews with policy makers/practitioners and young people are evident in the range of barriers the participants identified as preventing young people from accessing meaningful post-16 education and employment opportunities. Barriers were typically characterised as local and structural, stemming from poor availability of local VET and/or employment opportunities, the contraction of leisure and support services in communities, unaffordable and/or poor quality public transport and problems with violence, gangs and deprivation.

There was also widespread concern about the inconsistency and patchy quality of CIAG, with practitioners' concerns about the unevenness of CIAG provision often reflected in the experiences of young people who expressed a desire for more tailored and less generic career support, and greater, more equal, and earlier access to opportunities to participate in work experience and attend college open days while still in school. Indeed, what many practitioners negatively characterised as protracted and/or disjointed transitions through VET were characterised more positively by some young people as a way of testing the waters of the post-16 options they often felt rushed to enrol in, and many expressed a desire for more opportunities to sample a range of these options while still in school. Relatedly, the concern expressed by the majority of policy makers about the continued need to establish a greater 'parity of esteem' between academic and vocational pathways was reflected in young people's experiences of career guidance, with many feeling that it had

been weighted towards promoting the sixth-form-to-university route and that they had not been presented with full information about alternative, vocational options and their benefits.

One key difference between the findings from interviews with policy makers/practitioners and young people was in the extent to which young people were characterised as active agents in their post-16 transitions. While many practitioners felt that young people lacked direction and agency, and moved passively through VET either for something to do or because they had been steered by parents/carers in a particular direction, the young people who have participated in this project so far exhibited a strong sense of agency and were very future-oriented in their thinking and decision-making. They typically had clear career aspirations and were proactive in identifying opportunities and resources and support to help them navigate their post-16 options, with those young people who were already engaged in VET generally finding it to be an overwhelmingly positive experience that was more flexible and interesting than school.

In conclusion, we should underline that the project on which this report is based remains in the very early stages of data collection, which have been significantly disrupted and delayed by the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. The analysis that has been presented here is therefore preliminary and based on a relatively small proportion of participants that we intend to engage with over the next few years. Moreover, the themes and analysis presented in Section 4 are largely based on a sample of young people that mostly live in one of the four case study areas for the project, Greenvale, an affluent, mainly white local authority. The inherent lack of diversity in the sample upon which this report is based should therefore be noted and the analysis presented here will be reviewed, refined and further developed as more young people engage with the study from the remaining three case study areas. More detailed analyses based on a larger and more diverse sample of participants will be published at later stages of the project.

References

Adzuna (2020) Graduate recruitment down over 75% in 2020. [online] Available at: https://www.adzuna.co.uk/blog/graduate-recruitment-down-over-75-in-2020-but-theres-some-hope/

Allen, K. and Hollingworth, S. (2013) 'Sticky subjects' or 'cosmopolitan creatives'? Social class, place and urban young people's aspirations for work in the knowledge economy. *Urban Studies,* 50(3): 499-517.

Atkins, L. (2009) *Invisible students, impossible dreams: Experiencing vocational education 14-19.* Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.

Atkins, L. (2017) The odyssey: school to work transitions, serendipity and position in the field. *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 38(5): 641-655.

Atkins, L. (2019) *Pride and prospects: Developing a socially just Level 1 curriculum to enable more positive school to work transitions.* International Centre for Guidance Studies, Derby: University of Derby.

BEIS (2017) Industrial strategy: Building a Britain fit for the future. [online] Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664563/industrial-strategy-white-paper-web-ready-version.pdf

Bell, D.N.F. and Blanchflower, D.G. (2011) Young people and the Great Recession. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy,* 27(2): 241-267.

Boshoff, J., Moore, J. and Speckesser, S. (2019) Inequality in education and labour market participation of young people across English localities: An exploration based on Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data. [online] Available at: https://cver.lse.ac.uk/textonly/cver/pubs/cverbrf010.pdf

Cavaglia, C., Machin, S., McNally, S. and Ruiz-Valenzuela, J. (2020) Gender, achievement, and subject choice in English education. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy,* 36(4): 816-835.

Cedefop (2016) Leaving education early: Putting vocational education and training centre stage. [online] Available at: https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/5557_en.pdf

Child Poverty Action Group (2021) Digital exclusion during the pandemic. [online] Available at: https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/Digital-exclusion-during-the-pandemic_0.pdf

Children's Commissioner (2020) Children without internet access during lockdown. [online] Available at: https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/08/18/children-without-internet-access-during-lockdown/

CIPD (2015) Over-qualification and skills mismatch in the graduate labour market. [online] Available at: https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/over-qualification-and-skills-mismatch-graduate-labour-market_tcm18-10231.pdf

Crisp, R. and Powell, R. (2017) Young people and UK labour market policy: A critique of 'employability' as a tool for understanding youth unemployment. *Urban Studies,* 54(8): 1784-1807.

Crowley, L. and Cominetti, N. (2014) The geography of youth unemployment: A route map for change. [online] Available at: https://impetus.org.uk/assets/publications/Report/Missing-Million_The-Geography-of-Youth-Unemployment-FINAL-08-04-14.pdf

Davenport, A., Farquharson, C., Rasul, I., Sibieta, L. and Stoye, G. (2020) *The geography of the COVID-19 crisis in England.* London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Demie, F. (2014) *The educational attainment of white working-class pupils.* Lambeth Research and Statistics Unit: London.

Department for Education (2020) Introduction of T Levels. [online] Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/introduction-of-t-levels/introduction-of-t-levels

Department for Education (2021a) Skills for Jobs: Lifelong learning for opportunity and growth. [online] Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/957856/Skills_for_jobs_lifelong_learning_for_opportunity_and_growth__web_version_.pdf

Department for Education (2021b) Evidence summary: COVID-19, children, young people and educational settings. [online] Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/963639/DfE_Evidence_summary_COVID-19_-_children__young_people_and_education_settings.pdf

Dickinson, P. (2019) Choices that students make between different post-18 routes and whether these choices are effective and reliably informed: Review of relevant literature and evidence. [online] Available at:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/918941/DfE_Review_Educ_and_VET_choices_-_Final_1709.pdf

Duffy, B., Hewlett, K., Hesketh, R., Benson, R. and Wager, A. (2021) *Unequal Britain: Attitudes to inequalities after Covid-19.* King's College London: London.

Education Policy Institute (2020) Preventing the disadvantage gap from increasing during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. [online] Available at: https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/EPI-Policy-paper-Impact-of-Covid-19_docx.pdf

Eurofound (2017) Long-term unemployed youth: Characteristics and policy responses. Publication Offices of the European Union: Luxembourg.

Evans, C. (2021) Not going to university: examining the role of 'learning identities' in young people's decisions to embark on alternative post-18 pathways. *Journal of Youth Studies,* 24(9): 1164-1178.

Green, C. (2015) UK apprenticeships: Opportunity or exploitation? *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Equality and Diversity,* 1(1): 1-17.

Hardgrove, A., McDowell, L. and Rootham, E. (2015) Precarious lives, precarious labour: Family support and young men's transitions to work in the UK. *Journal of Youth Studies,* 18(8): 1057-1076.

Hartas, D. (2016) Young people's educational aspirations: Psychosocial factors and the home environment. *Journal of Youth Studies,* 19(9): 1145-1163.

Henderson, M., Sullivan, A., Anders, J. and Moulton, V. (2018) Social class, gender and ethnic differences in subjects taken at age 14. *The Curriculum Journal,* 29(3): 298-318.

Henehan, K. (2020) *Class of 2020: Education leavers in the current crisis.* London: Resolution Foundation.

Henehan, K. (2021) *Uneven steps: Changes in youth unemployment and study since the onset of Covid-19.* London: Resolution Foundation.

Holman, J. (2018) Good Career Guidance. [online] Available at: https://www.gatsby.org.uk/uploads/education/final-0099-gcg-college-booklet-a5-4pp-rgb-aw1.pdf

Holmes, H. and Burgess, H. (2020) "Pay the wi-fi or feed the children": Coronavirus has intensified the UK's digital divide. [online] Available at: https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/digitaldivide

Horton, J. (2016) Anticipating service withdrawal: Young people in spaces of neoliberalisation, austerity and economic crisis. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* 41(4): 349-362.

House of Commons Education Committee (2021) *The Forgotten: How White working-class pupils have been let down, and how to change it.* House of Commons: London.

House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility (2016) Overlooked and left behind: Improving the transition from school to work for the majority of young people. [online] Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldselect/ldsocmob/120/12002.htm

Institute for Fiscal Studies (2020) Sector shutdowns during the coronavirus crisis: which workers are most exposed? [online] Available at: https://ifs.org.uk/publications/14791

Kalleberg, A.L. (2009) Precarious work, insecure workers: Employment relations in transition. *American Sociological Review,* 74(1): 1-22.

Khattab, N. and Modood, T. (2018) Accounting for British Muslim's educational attainment: Gender differences and the impact of expectations. *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 39(2): 242-259.

Learning and Work Institute and the Prince's Trust (2021) *Facing the Future: Employment prospects for young people after Coronavirus.* Leicester: Learning and Work Institute.

Local Government Association (2020) Re-thinking youth participation for the present and next generation: education to employment. [online] Available at: https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/re-thinking-youth-participation-present-and-next-generation-education-employment

Lupton, R., Thomson, S., Velthius, S. and Unwin, L. (2021) Moving on from initial GCSE 'failure': Post-16 transitions for 'lower attainers' and why the English education system must

do better. [online] Available at: https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Post16-transitions-for-lower-attainers-Final-report.pdf

MacDonald, R. (2009) Precarious work: Risk, choice and poverty traps. In: A. Furlong (Ed.) *Handbook of Youth and Young Adulthood,* London: Routledge, pp.167-175.

McDowell, L. (2020) Looking for work: Youth, masculine disadvantage and precarious employment in post-millennium England. *Journal of Youth Studies,* 23(8): 974-988.

Mental Health Foundation (2020) Impacts of lockdown on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people: Considering evidence within the context of the individual, the family and education. [online] Available at: https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/MHF%20Scotland%20Impacts%20of%20Lockdown.pdf

Mertanen, K., Pashby, K. and Brunila, K. (2020) Governing of young people 'at risk' with the alliance of employability and precariousness in the EU youth policy steering. *Policy Futures in Education,* 18(2): 240-260.

Moote, J. and Archer, L. (2018) Failing to deliver? Exploring the current status of career education provision in England. *Research Papers in Education,* 33(2): 187-215.

Mros, T.A. and Savage, T.H. (2006) The long-term effects of youth unemployment. *Journal of Human Resources,* 41(2): 259-293.

OECD (2020) How COVID-19 could accelerate local labour market transitions. [online] Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/a0361fec-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/a0361fec-en#

ONS (2019) Overeducation and hourly wages in the UK labour market; 2006 to 2017. [online] Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/uksectoraccounts/compendium/economicreview/april2019/overeducationandhourlywagesintheuklabourmarket2006to2017

Parker, P.D., Jerrim, J. and Anders, J. (2016) What effect did the global financial crisis have upon youth wellbeing? Evidence from four Australian cohorts. *Developmental Psychology,* 52(4): 640-651.

Prendergast, L. (2020) A self-governing reserve army of labour? The commodification of the young unemployed through welfare policy, practice and discourse. *People, Place and Policy,* 14(3): 262-281.

Roberts, K. (2009) Opportunity structures then and now. *Journal of Education and Work,* 22(5): 355-368.

Scanlon, M., Powell, F., Leahy, P., Jenkinson, H. and Byrne, O. (2019) 'No one in our family ever went to college': Parents' orientations towards their children's post-secondary education and future occupations. *International Journal of Educational Research,* 93: 13-22.

Spohrer, K. (2011) Deconstructing 'aspiration': UK policy debates and European policy trends. *European Educational Research Journal,* 10(1): 53-63.

Sutton Trust (2016) Class differences: Ethnicity and disadvantage. [online] Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Class-differences-report_References-available-online.pdf

Sutton Trust (2020) COVID-19 and social mobility impact brief #1: School closures. [online] Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/School-Shutdown-Covid-19.pdf

Taylor-Gooby, P. (2018) Re-doubling the crises of the welfare state: The impact of Brexit on UK welfare politics. *Journal of Social Policy,* 46(4): 815-835.

Thompson, R. (2017) Opportunity structures and educational marginality: the post-16 transitions of young people outside of education and employment. *Oxford Review of Education,* 43(6): 749-766.

TUC (2021) Jobs and recovery monitor – Insecure work. [online] Available at: https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/jobs-and-recovery-monitor-insecure-work

Vossemer, J. and Eunicke, N. (2015) *The impact of labour market exclusion and job insecurity on health and wellbeing among youth – a literature review.* EXCEPT Working Paper No. 2, November 2015. Tallinn University: Tallinn.

Weavers, A. (2021) *Education Maintenance Allowance,* Learning from the Past Paper No. 4, Edge Foundation. [online] Available at: https://www.edge.co.uk/documents/194/Learning_from_the_past_Paper_No._4_EMA_Final.pdf

White, R.J. and Green, A.E. (2015) The importance of socio-spatial influences in shaping young people's employment aspirations: Case study evidence from three British cities. *Work, Employment and Society,* 29(2): 295-313.

Wolf, A. (2011) Review of vocational education: the Wolf report. [online] Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180504/DFE-00031-2011.pdf

YMCA (2020) Out of Service: A report examining local authority expenditure on youth services in England & Wales. [online] Available at: https://www.ymca.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/YMCA-Out-of-Service-report.pdf

Youdell, D. and McGimpsey, I. (2015) Assembling, disassembling and reassembling 'youth services' in Austerity Britain. *Critical Studies in Education,* 56(1): 116-130.

Young Minds (2020) Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs. [online] Available at: https://www.youngminds.org.uk/media/355gyqcd/coronavirus-report-summer-2020-final.pdf

Youth Employment UK (2021) Youth unemployment will cost £6.9 billion in 2022. [online] Available at: https://www.youthemployment.org.uk/youth-unemployment-will-cost-6-9-billion-in-2022/