

Interim Report 1: Executive Summary

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Introduction

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. Against this background, *Young Lives, Young Futures* (YLYF) is investigating how England's VET system can better support the education-to-work transitions of young people who do not go to university. Drawing on interviews with policy makers, education practitioners and young people in four contrasting areas of England, this report presents key themes that have emerged during the initial stages of the research. The full report is freely available [here].

Key findings:

- The coronavirus pandemic has significantly impacted young people's lives and post-16 transitions
- Young people's post-16 transitions through VET are often non-linear and disjointed.
- Young people taking non-university routes into employment face a range of distinctive barriers and challenges in their post-16 transitions.
- A core challenge continues to be the low status of vocational pathways into employment compared to more traditional routes.
- There is widespread concern about current provision of careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) in England.

About the research

YLYF is a major national longitudinal ESRC-funded study being conducted by 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 how the VET system can better support their education-to-work transitions. The project is being conducted not only in the context of a pandemic but also amid extensive reforms to England's VET system that have been designed to improve the quality of vocational and technical education and employment for young people and address long-standing policy concerns about equality and productivity (Department for Education 2021a). In this challenging context, YLYF 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 research is a mixed methods study combining quantitative and qualitative strands. This report focuses on our initial findings from interviews and focus groups with 39 policy makers and education practitioners and 31 young people that were conducted as part of the qualitative strand of the project. Data collection commenced in 2020 and is ongoing, having been significantly delayed by the coronavirus pandemic. All participants are based in one of four local authority areas across England ('Bellden', 'Greenvale', 'Spindale', 'Tapley'), selected because they represent contrasting geographies and opportunity structures. All participant names and case study areas have been protected with pseudonyms.

Findings

The coronavirus pandemic has substantially impacted young people's lives and transitions.

The data discussed in this report was collected during sustained periods of nationwide lockdown in response to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020/2021. The impact of the pandemic on young people emerged powerfully in our conversations with all participants, who voiced concern about significant disruptions to young people's education and the exacerbation of existing inequalities and challenges. Most of the young people we spoke to had found the shift to remote learning difficult, whether due to a lack of sufficient resources to participate in their studies effectively, and/or because they found it difficult to concentrate on, or 'keep up' with, their lessons online:

I feel like I've lost a year of, like, good learning... It's a lot harder online to like pick up because, basically, they're just going through a PowerPoint and you're just writing it down... So, it's not really education, it's just like copying – *Jordan, 16, Spindale*

There was particular concern among practitioners about 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. One interviewee felt this was leading to higher levels of drop-out from VET than was typical:

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... They don't want a diluted learning experience, they want the full thing they were signing up to originally – *Ross Tait, Careers Advisor, Spindale*

All participants also expressed significant concerns about the impact of the pandemic on the youth labour market. While limited and poor-quality employment opportunities for young people are enduring problems in the UK, the devastating economic impact of the pandemic has intensified these concerns, with interviewees noting that the sectors that overwhelmingly employ young people are those that have been the most severely affected by the pandemic. Others expressed concern about increased competition for those jobs still available in these sectors, predicting that young people will have to compete with older, more qualified and more experienced candidates who themselves have been displaced from the labour market during the pandemic:

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, the pandemic, the whole hospitality sector is non-existent – *Miriam, 16, Spindale*

In addition to concerns about education and employment, many participants also expressed concern about the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health, and the difficulty of them accessing support while in lockdown. It is important to note that, as with issues around young people's education and employment, concerns about youth mental health and wellbeing predate the pandemic, but the pandemic has exposed and significantly exacerbated them.

Disjointed VET transitions

Our data suggests that young people's initial transitions through VET are often discontinuous. Many practitioners attributed high rates of course-swapping and dropout to a lack of agency, commitment and direction among students and suggested that young people often enter VET without clear aspirations or understandings of their courses. Some interviewees described young people as moving passively or 'drifting' through VET just for 'something to do' or just because their parents/carers, friends or education providers and careers advisors had advised them to take these courses:

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... stopgap, as something to do because, you know, they are expected to be in education – *Sam Deacon, Careers Advisor, Tapley*

Another issue raised by some practitioners was young people doing courses they (the practitioners) considered to be 'wrong' for them, whether because they are inappropriate for their career aspirations or because they are at the wrong level. Practitioners felt that

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students, and their parents/carers, are often misinformed about which courses will lead them to certain careers.

In our conversations with young people, a similar picture of disjointed transitions emerged. However, while many practitioners attributed this to a lack of direction and agency among young people, the young people who have participated in the project so far exhibited a strong sense of agency and were strongly future-oriented. What practitioners often negatively characterised as protracted and/or disjointed VET transitions were framed differently by young people as the result of them ‘testing the waters’ of post-16 VET 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:

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 a day where they can see what they want to do and see what it's like so then then they actually start college they know what they want to do, instead of starting college and thinking, “Oh, no, I don't like this” – *Olivia, 16, Spindale*

Young people also described a lengthy process of decision-making about their post-16 transitions, and the importance of sense-checking their aspirations and decisions with family members, peers and others, which could result in changing courses or pathways.

Barriers and challenges to VET transitions

A range of barriers and challenges in young people's post-16 VET transitions were identified by participants, and can be broadly grouped into one of three categories.

(i) Individual

Some practitioners and policy makers expressed concern about young people's ‘readiness’ for further education, employment or training, suggesting deficits in ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ skills and a lack of work experience and understanding. One VET practitioner said of new apprenticeship students that ‘we just get a load of students who aren't disciplined or motivated enough for it’. Others felt that more marginalised young people lacked readiness for employment, suggesting there was a need for a grounding in ‘the basics’ (e.g. writing CVs and application forms). This emphasis on young people's ‘readiness’ aligns with dominant narratives on employability that have gained currency in the UK and elsewhere in recent years, which typically frame youth unemployment and disadvantage as problems rooted in individual rather than structural deficits (Crisp and Powell 2017).

(ii) Structural

Young people, policy makers and practitioners identified a range of structural barriers to young people's post-16 transitions. There was particular concern about both the lack of job opportunities available to young people and the poor quality of these jobs. As stated above, these are enduring problems in England, but ones that have been considerably compounded by the pandemic, which has significantly reduced opportunities and intensified competition for them.

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(iii) Local

Finally, interviewees described a range of barriers pertaining to their respective local areas that they felt combined to make young people's transitions more challenging. In addition to a lack of (quality) job opportunities available locally, interviewees often also described challenging environments for young people in relation to chronic problems of violence, public spending cuts and poverty. Policy makers, practitioners and young people also identified expensive and/or poor quality public transport networks as key barriers to young people accessing opportunities.

The low status of VET pathways

Despite a sustained policy emphasis on generating greater 'parity of esteem' between academic and vocational education pathways in England, many policy makers and practitioners 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 believed that this was attributable to a lack of knowledge among school teachers, and some careers advisors, about post-16 transitions that do not involve university.

Some interviewees also suggested that young people and their parents/carers often had limited understandings of VET, which made VET a 'hard sell' next to traditional academic pathways into employment. Parents/carers were consistently identified as powerful, influential gatekeepers in young people's transitions, and there was a sense that this influence could be problematic in relation to VET:

For a lot of our parents, apprenticeships, and what they think of as apprenticeships, is very outdated and from what they remember... 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, Greenvale

Young people's own accounts of their experiences of VET were broadly positive, however. They were enjoying their courses and felt they had greater freedom, independence and choice in college than they had experienced in school. However, their reflections on their experiences of career guidance did reinforce the sense, evident from our policy and practitioner interviews, that there is a continued lack of parity between academic and vocational routes in the way in which opportunities are framed for young people (see below).

Uneven and insufficient career information, advice and guidance (CIAG) in England

There was widespread concern about current CIAG provision in England, which was perceived to be uneven and inconsistent in quality. While some participants could identify examples of good practice or welcomed recent policy initiatives intended to enhance the quality of CIAG (e.g. the Gatsby benchmarks), the consensus was that the quality and consistency of CIAG needs to improve for young people who do not go to university.

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There were particular concerns among some education practitioners that the CIAG young people receive in school typically reinforces traditional choices by not presenting young people with adequate or full information about the advantages and logistics of vocational options. This perception was echoed in the experiences of many of the young people we spoke to, who felt they had not been presented with a full range of post-16 options by careers advisors and teachers, and that advice was overwhelmingly weighted towards promoting traditional academic routes through sixth forms and university:

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 you're A Levels you need to go to uni and get a degree and then you can get a job – *Miriam, 16, Spindale*

In addition to feeling they were not presented with a full range of options, the young people we spoke to generally described their experience of CIAG as being overly generic and insufficient (typically involving meeting a careers advisor only once during Year 11). Several young people expressed a desire for earlier and more individually tailored CIAG while in school.

Next Steps

The project on which this report is based remains in the very early stages of data collection, which has been significantly delayed by the coronavirus pandemic. The analysis presented here is therefore preliminary and based on a relatively small proportion of the participants we intend to engage with over the next few years. More detailed analyses based on a larger and more diverse sample of participants will be published at later stages of the project.

At the time of writing, *YLYF* is moving into its second full year of data collection. The second wave of the national longitudinal survey of young people will be launched in September 2022 and the second wave of qualitative interviews with young people, and interviews with their parents/carers, will commence in the next few months. Further interim reports, academic publications and conference presentations will be generated as the project progresses.

To follow the progress of the *Young Lives, Young Futures* project beyond these outputs, please visit our website for regular updates at www.ylyf.co.uk. We can also be reached on social media here:

