

POLICY WATCH

2008/16

29 February 2008

Setting the latest level 2 and 3 figures in context

The release this week of the latest official figures on the progress being made by young people against the level 2 and 3 targets was accompanied by an understandable banging of drums. *"Record numbers of young people are qualified for work and life as target hit early,"* the DCSF press release struck up although the *Financial Times* hit a more mellow note, *"vocational targets in doubt."*

The target in question is the one about the proportion of 19 year olds gaining a level 2 or 3 and was originally set in 2004 with milestones in 2006 and 2008. The figures show that with 73.9% of 19 year olds now reaching the level 2, a milestone has been hit ahead of time. Numbers wise, as the DCSF release explained *"this means that 31,000 more 19 year olds have level 2 qualifications and 18,000 more have level 3 qualifications than a year ago."* It feels good and certainly some of the efforts put into trying to 're - engage' young people through initiatives such as the September Guarantee for potential school leavers and extra funding through EMAs seems to be paying off. Ed Balls was quick to claim, *"these figures show that where opportunities are made available, young people want to learn."* Hopefully so but continuing concern here suggests it's not always that straightforward.

There are some interesting sub - texts in the figures, most noticeably the rise in Apprenticeship successes - gradual, and the increase in vocational qualification take up and successes - steep and impressive, but beyond the fanfare, the question remains: does this mean we are getting any nearer to solving the NEET problem, those disengaged 16 - 18 year olds referred to the other week by Chris Grayling, the shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, as the "Jeremy Kyle generation?"

In terms of the impact on disengaged young people, the signs are not immediately obvious. The press this week has been full of stories about the latest truancy figures, *'around 63,000 pupils skip class every day;'* last week it was the *"shocking"* story about the number of young people who left school with few or no qualifications. According to a response in Parliament, last year more than 30,000 young people in England left school without any GCSE qualifications at all, while 10,000 managed to get only one lower grade pass, where lower stands for D grade and below, 14,000 two lower passes and 20,000 three lower grade passes. On top of that, as the Conservatives highlighted, *'an estimated two million 16 - 24 year olds are now living below the poverty line.'* One in six young people in Britain, they argued, now claims unemployment benefits while nearly one in ten is officially classed as not in education, employment or training (NEETs.)

Such figures are notoriously difficult to validate and the Government could justifiably claim that measures such as their proposed compulsory extended participation age will do a lot to help but the message is clear - a lot of young people are either being left out or choosing to drop out of the education system often with dire consequences.



This is not a unique English problem. The OECD has recently published some interesting reports on youth employment policies across its 30 membership countries. Two of the latest cover the Netherlands and New Zealand where youth unemployment for young people, that is for those aged between 15 and 24, was 8% and 10% respectively. In both cases, this is below the OECD average of 15% but some familiar concerns lie deep within: too many young people leaving school too early, *"in 2005, almost 12% of Dutch youths left school before completing upper secondary education;"* retention problems heavily concentrated within certain ethnic groups; and poor matching of skill levels to employer needs.

In both countries, vocational education is being seen as the answer. In New Zealand, *"the Government has recently stepped up efforts to encourage youth (sic) to stay longer at school, particularly through increased investment in vocational training and in work - based education."* It's a similar story in the Netherlands where *"the Government aims to cut the numbers of early school leavers by half over the next five years"* by stepping up vocational education.

None of this will come as a big surprise here to bodies such as Edge which have dedicated themselves to *'promoting practical and vocational learning'* wherever they can, nor to providers who have increasingly been faced with the problem of how best to provide a different form of learning for young people and have generally seized on vocational forms.

But, significantly both major political Parties are once again turning to the power of vocational education as they search for solutions for what is in danger of becoming an intractable problem. For the Conservatives, the difficulty they face is one of belief, this is not natural terrain for Conservative policy makers. As the *New Statesman* wrote this month, *"it's always been tricky talking about vocational education if you're a Tory"* but Cameron Conservatives are beginning to say the right things. Who would have expected, for instance, the shadow Minister for Schools to remark: *"most opinion formers are from an academic background. This has poisoned public thoughts on vocational education."* The challenge they now face will be to come up with some credible solutions. For Labour, the difficulty they face is one of initiative fatigue on the one hand but new ideas on the other.

The DCSF NEET strategy announced last November was built on three 'embedded' principles: careful tracking to identify those at risk early on; personalised guidance and support; a comprehensive course offer. All useful stuff but with a hint of old clothes about it.

The difficulties young people face can be vividly seen in a recent Paper from the Nuffield Review and Rathbone as part of its *'Engaging Youth Inquiry.'* In the last few months, it has been finding out the views of young NEETs and of some of the practitioners who work with them. The attraction of a *'comprehensive course offer'* seems a long way off for many of these young people who have left school at the earliest opportunity with little to their name.

"The sense of failure affects the young people's capacity for self - motivation" the Paper concludes. Of course, it's more complicated than just offering a large dose of vocational education but given the range of aspirations young NEETs seemed to have, *"run me own pub," "own a hair and beauty salon,"* a large dose of vocational education would surely help.

Edexcel Policy Watches are intended to help colleagues keep up to date with national developments. Information is correct at the time of writing and is offered in good faith. No liability is accepted for decisions made on the basis of information given.