

Summary

Developing indicators for early identification of young people at risk of temporary disconnection from learning

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In recent years the numbers of young people described as NEET (not in education, employment or training) have grown. As NFER has conducted research exploring the characteristics of young people defined as NEET, we know that they are a heterogeneous group with different characteristics, needs, attributes and ambitions.

Recent research by NFER (Spielhofer *et al.*, 2009) presented a statistical segmentation of the NEET classification, and identified three broad subgroups within the overall category. These were described respectively as:

- ‘Sustained’ NEETs – characterised by a negative experience of school, high levels of truancy and exclusion, and low academic attainment.
- ‘Open to learning’ NEETs – most likely to re-engage in education.
- ‘Undecided’ NEETs – similar to ‘open to learning’ NEETs but dissatisfied with available opportunities.

Further research endorses this view that young people described as NEET are not a homogeneous group (Allen *et al.*, 2012). They describe **core or sustained young people** who experience long-term disengagement; **floating or ‘at risk’ young people** (akin to ‘undecided’, see above) who may be dissatisfied with opportunities or are most vulnerable to economic downturn and shifting labour market requirements; and **cyclical or in transition young people** (akin to ‘open to learning’, see above) who are likely to re-engage in education, training and the workforce in the short term, and who tend to have a more positive outlook. The report observes that current Government statistics are not ‘helpful in informing the targeted and locally tailored action needed to successfully respond to the problem’ (p. 1).

The Local Government Association (LGA) and the Children’s Improvement Board (CIB) have supported The NFER Research Programme, **From Education to Employment**, by financing this scoping project to gather evidence to help practitioners to identify the **floating or ‘at risk’** and the **cyclical or in transition** young people (i.e. those at risk of temporary disconnection from learning). This report is also published as part of the LGA’s programme of research. Through further research we aim to provide evidence of strategies that may prevent disengagement at all. This will benefit young people and society and free resources to concentrate on the young people who are NEET.

Key findings

How are young people at risk of temporary disconnection from learning currently being identified?

The research evidence suggests that some LAs are developing predominantly 'hard', measurable indicators or risk factors associated with young people who might be at risk of disconnection from learning. Although these 'hard' indicators or factors may be a starting point, local circumstances appear to influence the weight of their relevance at LA or institutional level. Additionally, the research suggests that 'softer' indicators are also sometimes used (such as personal and family circumstances and young people's attitudes and aspirations).

Is it possible to differentiate between young people who are likely to become temporarily disconnected from learning and those who might become more sustained long-term NEETs?

Interviewees felt that young people may become NEET for different reasons, and that it is possible to distinguish between the characteristics of young people who are likely to become temporarily disconnected from learning in contrast to those who might become more sustained long-term NEETs. Although the evidence suggests that LAs are using tools to score young people on risk indicators in terms of **level** of risk and of interventions required, there is limited evidence to suggest that these tools can be used to distinguish between different **types** of NEETs in order to determine the **type** of intervention required.

Is there a need for a list of indicators?

The evidence suggests that LAs and schools would welcome a list of indicators or characteristics to **guide** them in their identification of young people at risk of becoming NEET, and which give them flexibility to include local factors. This would be useful as a basis for their own, more tailored, data collection exercises or risk of NEET indicators (RONIs).

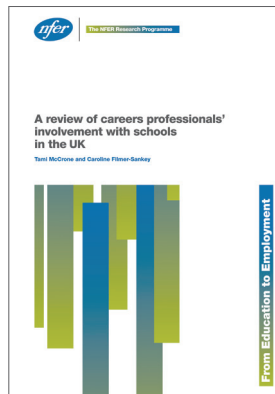
It appears that LAs (and schools) are at very different stages in engaging, understanding and developing indicators or factors to identify young people at risk of disconnection, and in identifying, for example, the emerging differences between *levels* of risk and *types* of young people at risk. A national set of indicators is not perceived to be workable as there is considerable variation by, and within, LAs. This exploratory research appears to point to different kinds of indicators, i.e. 'hard' ones that describe more measurable, factual information and 'softer' factors that include more attitudinal and personal information. This encompasses subjective judgement that needs to be considered.

The evidence gathered for this report suggests that the development of a list of factors or indicators of risk of disengagement would be useful, not so much as a quantitative tool to be completed objectively early on in secondary school, but to be used as an ongoing record of a young person's profile to be completed by a member of staff who knows the young person. As such a list of indicators/factors could be used for guidance to help staff to identify the '**causes**' of potential disengagement (i.e. 'hard' and 'softer' indicators), the '**effect**' (i.e. types of disengagement, for example, dissatisfaction with options, qualifications or indecision about future pathways) and the **solution** (i.e. the appropriate intervention that could be used to re-engage the young person, for example, careers guidance, employer involvement, a suitable learning environment and qualifications or support programmes to enhance mental resilience or 'stickability', etc.).

Through this programme of research, we hope to go some way towards reducing the gap in what is known about effective NEET prevention strategies, and to make a difference to the lives of learners.

This scoping study is part of the **From Education to Employment** series. The other reviews are available from NFER:

- **Approaches to supporting young people not in education, employment or training**
www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/RSRN01
- **A review of careers professionals' involvement with schools in the UK**
www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/RCPI01



The NFER Research Programme

This Programme was set up in 2011. Funded by NFER, it is developing partnerships with organisations and individuals who share our commitment to solving unanswered challenges young people face in education. The Programme targets key areas of education, highlighting gaps in existing evidence and conducting new research to provide evidence to fill the gaps. Current areas of focus are: *From Education to Employment, Developing the Education Workforce and Innovation in Education.*

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