Review of the curriculum and qualification needs of young people who are at risk of disengagement

Gill Bielby, Michelle Judkins, Lisa O'Donnell and Tami McCrone

From Education to Employment

Contents

Introducing The NFER Research Programme

From Education to Employment

NFER has a worldwide reputation for excellence in research in education and children's services, built up over 65 years of working with a wide range of partners to produce independent evidence to inform change.

As a charity, the Foundation exists to improve the education and life chances of learners through the provision of independent evidence aimed at influencing policy, informing practice in the learning environment and directly impacting learners. To help achieve this, The NFER Research Programme was set up in 2011. Funded by the 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 the evidence to fill the gaps. Current areas of focus are *From Education to Employment*, *Developing the Education Workforce* and *Innovation in Education*.

From Education to Employment examines approaches that could help the over one million young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) carve a route to meaningful and sustainable employment. It builds on NFER research carried out in 2009 which highlighted discrete groups within the NEET population likely to benefit from different forms of intervention.

The initial phase is a suite of four reviews that identify strategies that can assist young people with the potential to disengage from education, employment or training to 'stay on track'. It comprises:

- effective approaches to supporting young NEET people
- careers professionals' involvement with schools
- employer involvement in schools
- curriculum and qualification needs of young people who are open to learning, or undecided about their futures.

These reviews offer a unique perspective on the research and evidence-based practice of the last five years in this area and identify the gaps for future research. A series of easy-to-use guides for practitioners, school leaders and local authorities based on the findings will also be available.

Sarah Maughan
Research Director, NFER

Executive summary

This review forms one of a suite of four literature reviews that have been completed under the *From Education to Employment* theme. These reviews collectively identify strategies to assist young people at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) to make effective transitions into learning or employment post 16.[1] In 2011, one in five (22.3 per cent) young people aged 16–24 were currently unemployed (a total of 1.04 million) (Rhodes, 2011). A slightly lower, but still large proportion (19.2 per cent) of young people aged 16–24 were NEET (DfE, 2011b). All four reviews build upon a large body of research on the reasons for young people's NEET status, and on recent NFER research (Spielhofer *et al.*, 2009), which presented a 'segmentation' analysis identifying three discrete sub-categories of NEET young people aged 16–17.

- **'Open to learning' NEETs** – young people most likely to re-engage in education or training in the short term and with higher levels of attainment and better attitudes towards school than other NEET young people.

- **'Sustained' NEETs** – young people characterised by their negative experience of school, higher levels of truancy and exclusion and lower academic attainment than other NEET young people, and the fact that they are most likely to remain NEET in the medium term.

- **'Undecided' NEETs** – young people similar in some respects, such as their attainment levels, to those who are 'open to learning' NEET, but dissatisfied with available opportunities and their ability to access what they want to do.

This report explores what the best available research tells us about the curriculum and qualification needs of young people at risk of temporary disconnection from learning. The *From Education to Employment* theme within The NFER Research Programme has a particular interest in young people who are 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEET, as there is the potential to make a substantial difference to these groups if they can be effectively identified and supported.

Key findings

This review considers curriculum-related approaches to engaging young people in learning and curricula and qualifications used to engage young people and to facilitate their progression in education, employment or training. The review identifies the following key approaches that need to be considered when devising strategies to engage or re-engage all young people, but especially those at risk of temporary disengagement from learning.

---

[1] This review focuses upon all NEET young people in the 16–24 age range. However, NFER's *From Education to Employment Theme* going forward will focus specifically on the 16–19 year old age group.

Teaching-related approaches

- Encouraging learners to take ownership of decision-making related to their learning.

- Using flexible approaches to teaching so that all learners are engaged and stimulated.

- Teachers having knowledge, skills and expertise in their subject area (particularly important for vocational subjects) as well as expertise in pedagogical approaches.

- Ensuring that, especially for young people at risk of disengagement, learners develop a relationship with a trusted adult who can help them to 'keep on track' with their learning.

- Considering the class size, as evidence indicates that smaller class sizes are particularly important to keep those learners at risk of disengagement engaged in learning.

- Being alert to when learners need extra support, such as when they are not managing their workload or when they may need catch-up tuition.

- Ensuring that all teaching (academic and vocational) is delivered in an appealing way that not only interests the young person but where the relevance to life (for example future careers) is drawn out.

Learning environment

- Creating a warm, supportive learning environment where teachers show interest in learners and their learners' work.

- The development of a well-managed, disciplined learning environment conducive to learning.

- Creating a work environment based on mutual respect where learners can develop an independent approach to learning.

Support and guidance

- The provision of well-informed, impartial careers information, advice and guidance (IAG) including course taster sessions. This is especially important for those who are unsure about the way forward and which career or qualifications they want to pursue.

Curriculum and qualifications' content

- Providing young people with a wide choice of subjects and courses to suit their interests and learning style.

- Providing a flexible and personalised curriculum so young people can study the most appropriate qualification at the most appropriate place for them.

- Ensuring that there are good quality vocational, applied and practical qualifications and pathways open to young people.

- Having, where relevant, practical and unit-based assessments which provide the opportunity to acquire incremental progress, are flexible in terms of start and completion dates and offer the option to retake courses if needed.

- Making sure that curricula and qualifications provide opportunities for learners to develop personal, social and employability skills.

These curriculum-related approaches to supporting students to stay in learning are relevant to all young people but especially to those at risk of temporary disconnection from learning. Consideration of these strategies, alongside approaches identified in the accompanying suite of reviews on ways to engage and re-engage young people at risk of disengagement such as careers-related and employer-related interventions, is recommended.

Summary and next steps

This review suggests that consideration of curriculum and qualification needs is relevant for all learners, and especially those who are at risk of becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET). Common themes to consider are: the need for positive teaching approaches that adapt to meet young people's needs; supportive and informal environments to learn where young people can achieve success; supportive relationships with teachers; high quality advice and guidance; and the availability of high quality curricula and qualification options (including vocationally-related options) that give young people opportunities to progress to their choice of further learning or employment.

Much of the literature comments, to some extent, on how the curriculum and qualifications can influence young people's engagement with learning, but rarely makes links with the segment of NEET young people who are 'open to learning' or 'undecided' about their futures but at risk of temporary disengagement from learning. This suggests that there is currently a gap in research around effective strategies to engage or re-engage those who are 'open to learning', or 'undecided' NEETs. This gap will be the focus of the *From Education to Employment* theme within The NFER Research Programme. Key features will be:

- the development and implementation of indicators that can assist in the identification of young people who are 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEETs

- the trialling and evaluation of specific strategies that aim to support these groups

- the validation and dissemination of good practice.

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.

1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of a literature review conducted as part of The NFER Research Programme. The programme currently consists of two major thematic areas: *From Education to Employment* and *Developing the Education Workforce.*

This review forms one of a suite of four literature reviews that has been completed under the *From Education to Employment* theme. These reviews collectively identify strategies to assist young people at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) so that they can make effective transitions into learning or employment post 16. The other three reviews in this series focus respectively on: strategies to support NEET young people; the role of careers professionals in schools; and the role of employer engagement in schools.

The focus of this review is to establish what the evidence tells us about the curricula and qualifications which are likely to encourage young people at risk of becoming NEET to stay in education and training.

While the end of compulsory schooling is currently at the age of 16, young people aged 16–19 have the potential to be engaged in *either* learning *or* employment. However, this demographic will change as the Raising the Participation Age legislation comes into force. From 2013, all young people aged to up to 17 will be required to be in education, training or work-based learning (including work with part-time study), with only those aged 18–19 allowed to work full time. From 2015, all young people up to the age of 18–19, will be required to be in education, training or work-based learning. A focus on 'prevention' of disconnection (as opposed to reintegration into learning among the 16–19 age group) will therefore become all the more relevant among those aged 17–19 who are NEET in the coming years.

The findings of this and the other three reviews will support the *From Education to Employment* theme within The NFER Research Programme by providing a solid evidence base for ongoing and future primary research into NEET prevention. They will also be of interest to national- and local-level policy makers focusing on NEET identification, prevention or mitigation. The timeliness of this research is apparent in recent statistics: in 2011b, one in five (22.3 per cent) young people aged 16–24 were reportedly unemployed (a total of 1.04 million) (Rhodes, 2011). A slightly lower, but still large proportion (21.5 per cent) of young people aged 19–24 were NEET (DfE, 2011b). A recent government conference paper outlines concerns about the rising numbers of young people who are NEET, and the personal and social implications that this can have:

> *The on-going consequences [of unemployment] impact not only on the individual but also on the state: young people who are NEET are more likely to suffer health problems and are five times more likely to enter the criminal justice system, with the life-time cost to the state of each young person who is NEET standing at £97,000.*
> (see http://www.insidegovernment.co.uk/children/neet-employment/)

1.1 Background to the review

In order to provide evidence of the most timely and current approaches to supporting young people who are NEET, this review focuses on very recent literature published since 2006 (see section 1.2 for details of the review's parameters).

This review's focus on the curriculum and qualification needs of young people who are at risk of temporary disconnection from learning builds upon recent research conducted by the NFER (Spielhofer *et al.*, 2009) which examined, in detail, the underlying causes of NEET status in the UK. This research explored a complex interplay between structural, cultural, educational and familial factors that can culminate in lost opportunity or hope for large numbers of young people. In recognition of the fact that young people classified as NEET are a heterogeneous 'group', the research undertook a 'segmentation' analysis, with the aim of identifying discrete sub-categories of young people within the overarching NEET umbrella. The research identified three 'types' of NEET young people.

- **'Open to learning' NEETs** – the largest sub-group (around 41 per cent of the NEET group). These young people were the most likely to re-engage in education or training in the short term and generally had higher levels of attainment and better attitudes towards school than most other NEET young people.

- **'Sustained' NEETs** – around 38 per cent of the NEET group. These young people were characterised by their negative experience of school, higher levels of truancy and exclusion and lower academic attainment than other NEET young people, and the fact that they were most likely to remain NEET in the medium term.

- **'Undecided' NEETs** – around 22 per cent of the NEET group. These young people were similar in some respects, such as their attainment levels, to those who were 'open to learning' NEET, but they were dissatisfied with available opportunities and their ability to access what they wanted to do.

This and the other reviews within the *From Education to Employment* theme have a particular interest in young people who are, or are at risk of becoming, 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEETs. Most studies focus on the sustained NEET group. This is because this group is often the easiest to identify and presents with the most acute needs. However, it is a resource-intensive and challenging group of young people to support and it only represents a minority (under two-fifths) of all NEET young people.

It is crucially important that 'sustained' NEET young people continue to receive bespoke and intensive support. Additionally, we argue that through an effective identification of young people who are 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEETs, and through tailored support to meet their specific needs, it may be possible to make a difference to the post-16 trajectories of large numbers of young people. This ambition necessarily needs to be set within the context of economic recession, public-sector budgetary reductions and a constricted labour market. Part of the story is about effective preparedness and aspirations, but the other element is about availability and opportunity of employment and work-based learning for young people. It is important not to present a deficit model that 'blames' NEET young people

for their situation. Indeed, the context within which they are trying to progress and the structural obstacles that many young people are currently facing are of crucial importance in determining 'success'.

Current government policy, based on documents such as the 2011 Wolf Review (Wolf, A. (2011)). and the recent consultations and proposals regarding qualifications for 14–16 year olds, appear to imply a move towards a more academic curriculum for all young people, based on the suggestion that this will allow more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to go on to better quality further and higher education (FE and HE) and careers. However, there is some evidence from NFER research that some young people are more likely to be engaged by learning which takes place in vocational settings, with practical elements. The NFER's evaluation of the Increased Flexibility Programme (Golden *et al.*, (2006) found that studying for some of the time in a college environment was a motivator for some students. In addition, the NFER's evaluation of diplomas (Lynch *et al.*, 2010, 2011; Golden *et al.*, 2011) found that they are valued by many of the students who take them. Feedback from students shows that they appreciate the applied learning and contact with employers and consider that diplomas have a positive impact on their confidence, learning and skills development.

The focus of this review is to establish what the evidence tells us about the curricula and qualifications which are likely to encourage young people at risk of becoming NEET to stay in education and training. More specifically:

1. What does the evidence tell us about the different pedagogies that are most likely to engage these groups of young people?

2. What does the evidence tell us about the kinds of learning environments that are most likely to be appropriate to young people who are at risk of becoming 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEET?

3. What does the evidence tell us about the content of the curricula and qualifications that most engage these young people?

4. Are there particular curricula or qualifications that encourage these approaches to be used, and are most likely to engage these groups of young people?

5. Is there evidence that these curricula or qualifications enable these groups of young people to progress to good quality FE or HE courses or employment?

The findings from this review strengthen the rationale for the *From Education to Employment* theme within The NFER Research Programme, as it develops and attempts to identify the curriculum and qualification needs of those young people who are 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEETs.

1.2 Strength and nature of the evidence base

The evidence provided here is based on a review of 32 items of literature, comprising research reports, literature reviews, programme evaluations and academic journal articles.

In January 2012 we undertook a systematic searching of key databases and websites, followed by rapid screening and coding of sources in order to identify key items for review. Our inclusion criteria were that each item must be: concerned with curricula or accredited qualifications from key stage 3 upwards; focused on 'open to learning' or 'undecided' young people; robust in research design; and published since 2006.

The quality of the evidence is high, with most items based on a strong to moderate evidence base. The majority of the items were based on qualitative research rather than on statistical measurement (See the Appendix section for a definition of these terms).

Chapter 2 presents the evidence on the teaching approaches, curriculum content and learning environments most likely to engage these young people. Chapter 3 then provides an overview of the evidence on the curricula and qualifications used to engage young people at risk, and facilitate their progression to good quality FE or HE courses or employment. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the implications of the findings and next steps.

2. Curriculum-related approaches

Overall the literature examined for this review suggest that some young people at risk of disengagement from learning are influenced by factors associated with their learning experience, that is, by pedagogy, the curriculum content and the learning environment.

2.1　Pedagogies

It is clear from the literature that, for some young people at risk of disengaging, the way in which a course is taught (whether a vocational or mainstream subject) allows them to engage in learning more effectively. Recurring themes emerge from the literature which highlight pedagogical practice that can encourage educational engagement. For young people at risk of disengaging from learning, the literature emphasises the following constructive teaching practices.

- **Creating a positive learning environment** where there are clear boundaries and where learners are not afraid to fail (Lloyd-Jones *et al.*, 2010). The evidence suggests that learners need to be motivated and encouraged with their learning, with tutors showing an interest in learners' work in order to raise their self-esteem (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006).

- **Showing learners respect** and letting them know that they are cared about (such as Archer *et al,* 2010; Hayward *et al.,* 2008; Gutherson *et al.,* 2011). For example, Archer *et al.* (2010) reported that 'when young people felt safe, respected, cared about and understood, this had a positive impact on their engagement with education and enjoyment in school'. (p. 122)

- **Listening to learners' views**. Learners should be involved in decision-making relating to their learning (Gutherson *et al.*, 2011), for example, in the creation of learning plans (Cedefop, 2010). Hallam *et al.* (2010) reported a range of positive outcomes for young people taking part in the SkillForce programme,[2] including improved motivation towards learning as well as improved behaviour as a result of the programme providing students with responsibility and choices about their work. In many cases, discussions with learners about their preferred ways of learning play a pivotal role in the successful re-engagement of learners (HMIE, 2010).

- **Treating learners like adults** by using more informal teaching strategies and giving learners more independence.

- **Maintaining close direction of learners** and ensuring careful classroom management in order to ensure that learners remain on task (for example, O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006).

---

[2] SkillForce is an independent charitable trust in the UK which aims to improve students' attitudes towards education and thus improve attendance and behaviour. The programme is led by former service personnel and provides young people with a range of vocational qualifications which are designed to lead to further education or training. It takes place within school hours and operates under school rules, therefore students selected typically drop two GCSE subjects to enable them to attend the programme.

- **Being flexible** by, for instance, varying the teaching methods appropriately when individuals and groups become de-motivated, in order to keep lessons fun and interactive and to maintain interest (see, for example, O'Donnell *et al.,* 2006; Hayward *et al.,* 2008; GHK Consulting, 2009; HMIE, 2010). For example, Ofsted (2010) report using topical matters as a way to develop literacy and numeracy skills, while Increased Flexibility Programme tutors achieved this by combining theory work and practical activities, with practical elements given as a reward after students had completed written work (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006). In addition, GHK Consulting report that focusing on one programme area for a day or half a day, rather than moving from one subject to another, was seen as beneficial in order to raise young people's aspirations. Evaluation of a Scottish national strategy to re-engage young people in learning, *More choices, More chances*, found that teaching staff need to ensure that young people are treated as individuals and adapt their communication styles, and teaching and learning approaches, to meet individual and group needs (HMIE, 2010). Flexible approaches are also vital in encouraging and sustaining participation for young people in courses such as apprenticeships. This should include varied start dates, flexible working hours and a range of activities and environments for learning and work (Anderson *et al.,* 2010a and b).

In addition to teaching practice, the literature highlights that delivery by appropriate staff is also important. Teachers who show themselves to be experts in their field, and share this expertise through an apprenticeship approach, are valued by their learners (HMIE, 2010; Spielhofer and Walker, 2008). This is in contrast to a culture of facilitation in traditional schooling practice in which teachers and students explore areas of learning together, or a view of knowledge as something simply to be passed on to learners.

Furthermore, it is clear from the literature that, for young people who are at risk of becoming disengaged, **relationships with trusted adults** in the community can be crucial to maintaining their participation. The research indicates that good relationships with even just one teacher (Archer *et al.*, 2010) can make a difference to how 'at risk' young people feel at school and whether they engage with learning (for example, Archer *et al.*, 2010; Edward *et al.*, 2008; GHK Consulting, 2009). This was observed as particularly the case for female learners (Lloyd-Jones *et al.*, 2010). For example, Canduela *et al.* (2010) examined exceptional-entry winter leavers,[3] and found that schools and colleges had developed a range of innovative approaches to engage with early school leavers, including a small number of teaching staff being responsible for building relationships with potentially vulnerable learners. One-to-one advice, guidance and mentoring was also seen as a crucial way in which to support and facilitate their future progression. Lloyd-Jones *et al.* (2010) reported that kindness, reliability, consistency and calmness were characteristics of supportive institutional staff. Furthermore, the literature recognises that young people differ in their choice of the type of person from whom they seek guidance, and recommends that education and guidance professionals need to be adaptable and knowledgeable about

---

[3] Exceptional entry allows students to enter college in the term before their statutory school leaving date and learners attend college for most or all of the time, while formally remaining the responsibility of their school. In Scotland there are two statutory leaving dates. Young people whose birth date falls between the October and February have the right to leave school in December and are known as 'winter leavers'.

alternatives and refer young people to those who can inform or support them best (Marson-Smith *et al.*, 2009).

It is worth examining the evidence further, to identify the ways in which tutors can provide practical support. The following techniques were highlighted.

- **Smaller class sizes** – the evidence suggests that this enables greater interaction with the teacher (Cedefop, 2010; Burgess and Rodger, 2010; Gutherson *et al.*, 2011; Ofsted, 2010; Simmons and Thompson, 2010) and allows teachers to respond to learners as individuals, offering care and personal support as well as developing and supporting collaborative activity within the classroom (Cotton, 2007). Positive outcomes reported from the SkillForce programme were attributed to small group teaching and staff having close interaction with the students for extended periods of time (Hallam *et al.*, 2010). Gutherson *et al.* (2011) suggest that about ten students per teacher is an optimum number.

- **The use of teaching assistants** – Cedefop (2010), for example, details the worth of a supportive, inclusive learning community. Such communities have been introduced in a formal, coordinated manner across eight regions in Spain. Teachers become 'coordinators' of learning and they utilise volunteers from the local community (for example, parents) to support students during lessons and extra-curricular activities. Volunteers do not need to be experts in the subject; their role is to ensure that there is effective collaboration within a group. This alternative teaching method to tackle the problem of early school leaving is termed 'dialogic learning' and is reported as 'promoting cooperation, motivation, self-confidence, solidarity' .

- **Supporting learners with their increased workload** – there is some evidence to suggest that there is value in monitoring the workload for these learners and supporting them in managing their workload and timetable in order to prevent disengagement. For example, Lloyd-Jones *et al.* (2010) emphasise the need to support students as they adapt to the increased emphasis on independent learning from key stage 3 to key stage 4. Such independence could be daunting to learners and could lead to a gradual detachment from learning over time, if not monitored. The NFER's evaluation of the Young Apprenticeships Programme (Golden *et al.*, 2010), reported that females were more likely to have difficulty coping with course workload.

- **Impartial and personalised IAG –** as detailed in section 2.2, a wide curriculum offer is one way in which to engage young people in learning. However, in addition to this, the research indicates that this is only valuable if learners are aware of which part of it is appropriate for them (for example, Marson-Smith *et al.*, 2009; Burgess and Rodger, 2010; BIS, 2011). The National Learner Satisfaction Survey (BIS, 2011) found that 42 per cent of early leavers from FE neither sought nor were offered support to help them stay on a course, with the authors concluding that 'there is more that providers can do to identify and help learners who are at risk of leaving prior to completion' (p.42). There is also some evidence to suggest that a number of learners are encouraged to pursue vocational qualifications (or vocational-related qualifications) without full consideration of other options available (Burgess and Rodger, 2010). Robust, personalised IAG, which fully informs young people about the content, structure and practical issues regarding the

programme of study, as well as supporting visits to the location of study and/or meeting with staff and current students, can assist with appropriate decision-making at the outset and can prevent dissatisfaction with the course and potential drop-out (Burgess and Rodger, 2010; Marson-Smith *et al.*, 2009).[4]

- **Catch-up tuition** – learners who miss lessons, for any reason, are at risk of disengaging from learning if they are not provided with opportunities to catch up with missed work (Marson-Smith *et al.*, 2009; Lloyd-Jones *et al.*, 2010). Such learners would benefit from additional support to prevent them falling behind.

In summary, working with this group of learners is resource-intensive. These young people require skilled educators to work with them to provide more individualised support than other confident independent learners. They do not respond well in larger group sizes and need consistent positive interaction and relationships with staff and their peers to sustain them in learning. The relationship between young people and their teachers is recognised as being of crucial importance to their sustained engagement in learning.

2.2 Curriculum content

Most of the items reviewed commented, to some extent, on how the curriculum on offer to young people can influence their engagement with learning, and it is clear that it plays a crucial role in determining young people's enjoyment of, and engagement with, education, as well as impacting on their transition to further learning and employment. There are, however, differences across the literature in the degree of relative importance placed upon the curriculum content, compared with other factors such as the learning environment (discussed in section 2.3), and the teaching approaches adopted (discussed in section 2.1). There is also limited evidence on the specific curriculum *content* or *types of qualification* that may help to engage the particular group of young people of interest to this review – those who are open to learning, or undecided about their futures, but at risk of disconnecting from learning. Rather, the evidence provides broad recommendations on how the curriculum offer could be improved to engage all young people, those at risk of becoming disengaged, or those that have already disconnected from learning.

Despite some small differences of opinion within the literature, overall, there are concerns that the current education system is failing to meet the needs of all young people, and that the culture of prioritising academic skills and excellence is disadvantaging many young people and causing them to disconnect from learning. Some recommendations for curricula characteristics that may be successful in engaging young people at risk of disconnecting from learning, and re-engaging those that have already disengaged, are discussed below. However, it is worth noting that this evidence needs to be set within the current policy

---

[4] From September 2012, legislation will make schools responsible for securing access to independent and impartial careers guidance in years 9, 10 and 11. Providers are also expected to identify an individual member of staff with overall responsibility for putting together and overseeing each student's individual programme of study (HM Government, 2011). This is expected to ensure that young people receive the tailored support that they need to stay engaged.

context of curriculum refocusing as a result of the introduction of the English Baccalaureate[5] and the recommendations of the Wolf Review (2011). This means that curriculum flexibility is becoming increasingly difficult for schools to achieve in practice, as schools are encouraged to focus their curriculum on a core set of academic subjects. Taking these constraints into consideration, the literature makes a number of recommendations for the curricula/qualifications offered to young people.

- **Provide a wider, richer curriculum offer** – the main recommendation within the research reviewed is that schools need to provide young people with a wider curriculum, with more choice of subjects and qualifications. Ofsted (2010), for example, concludes that 'the development of a richer and more flexible curriculum was a key factor in re-engaging young people in education, employment or training, and also in preventing 14–16 year olds from becoming disengaged' (p.20). Successful approaches adopted by schools include increasing the choice of GCSEs and vocational qualifications, and providing taster or short courses to enable young people to better understand the options available to them. Similarly, Tunnard *et al.* (2008) argue that offering a wider or alternative curriculum 'appears to be essential in engaging young people at risk of disengaging from learning' (p.33). It is also crucial for young people's engagement that they are given the opportunity to choose their own curriculum and qualifications (Gracey and Kelly, 2010).

- **Improve the vocational offer** – the research evidence demonstrates that a traditional academic pathway does not suit all young people, with many young people finding academic qualifications such as GCSEs and A-levels 'uninspiring and irrelevant' (Ofsted, 2010, p.14). Many of the items reviewed argue that young people at risk of disengaging from learning prefer, and respond better to, more vocational and practical qualifications or pathways (for example, Archer *et al.,* 2010; GHK Consulting, 2009; Tunnard *et al.*, 2008). Consequently, much of the research evidence recommends that schools improve their vocational offer to young people. However, as indicated in the Wolf Review (2011), there are long-standing concerns about existing vocational qualifications, including the huge array of such qualifications available and their comparability to academic qualifications, factors which are perceived to have led to the de-valuing of vocational education. Policy changes to the vocational education system are currently being implemented which aim to improve the vocational offer to young people (for example, from 2014 only valued vocational qualifications that meet strict new criteria will be recognised in school performance tables). However, the literature also emphasises the need for the quality of vocational teaching, assessment and curriculum integration to be improved, to ensure that vocational qualifications provide genuine vocational learning which is challenging, practical and work-related, and which provides opportunities for progression in the future (for example, Birdwell *et al.*, 2011; Gracey and Kelly, 2010). Vocational qualifications are discussed further in chapter 3.

---

[5] The English Baccalaureate was introduced as a performance measure in the 2010 performance tables. It is not a qualification in itself. The measure recognises where pupils have secured a C grade or better across a core of academic subjects – English, mathematics, history or geography, the sciences and a language.

- **Provide a flexible, more personalised curriculum** – a common theme within the research literature is that schools need to be able to offer a curriculum which can be adapted to the needs of individual learners, with opportunities for young people to study the most appropriate qualifications for them at the most appropriate place. HM Government (2011), for example, states that 'the most important priority for helping schools to improve participation and attainment is giving them freedom and flexibility to meet the needs of their individual pupils' (p.19). Curriculum flexibility is particularly crucial at key stage 4, as research has shown that young people are vulnerable to becoming disengaged at the end of key stage 3. The very nature of the group of young people of interest to this review – those who are open to learning, or undecided about their futures, but at risk of disconnecting from learning – means that they need careful guidance in selecting a curriculum/qualifications that meets their needs. Consequently, Gracey and Kelly (2010) argue that:

  Such young people lack a clear direction and tend to be dissatisfied with available opportunities [...] and there may be value in strategies that reflect the indecisive nature of this sub-group, such as taster courses and opportunities to sample a range of employment opportunities. (p. 56)

Recommendations for a more flexible, personalised curriculum include giving young people the option of taking a year out of the National Curriculum at the end of key stage 3, and offering them a carousel of options, including long-term taster courses and projects (see, for example. Gracey and Kelly, 2010); or providing an alternative curriculum where young people can experience taster courses focusing on different areas of work (for example, Hayward *et al.*, 2008), to help them decide what subjects they enjoy and what their career preferences are.

- **Improve the delivery of the current curriculum content** – although much of the research literature focused on the need to *widen* the existing curriculum offer, some of the items reviewed argued that it was equally important to *adapt* the current curriculum, or *'inject character'* into the curriculum, as suggested by Birdwell *et al.* (2011), as a means of increasing young people's enthusiasm and motivation for learning. In other words, it may not necessarily be the curriculum content, or particular qualifications, that influence a young person's engagement with learning, but the way in which it is delivered, and it is possible for all young people to be engaged by more traditional academic subjects if they are taught in an appropriate way (further discussion about the pedagogies which best engage young people is provided in section 2.1). Hayward *et al.* (2008), for example, stress the importance of young people's education not becoming too narrowly focused on vocational subjects, but rather for it to include areas such as music, the arts and humanities, which can also engage young people if delivered appropriately. Consistent with this evidence, the Department for Education (2011a) recommends that art and music should be made compulsory at key stage 4 in order to encourage student engagement, cognitive development and achievement. Birdwell *et al.* (2011) also recommend that schools should be offering 'vocationalised' academic learning, with more opportunities for practical/kinaesthetic learning across the entire curriculum, through, for example, more project-based and community-based learning, and enrichment activities.

- **Make the curriculum as relevant as possible** – Archer *et al.* (2010) argue that for most 'at risk' young people, their engagement with the curriculum is shaped largely by whether they perceive particular subjects as relevant to their current and future lives, and they view 'practical subjects as relating directly to their aspirations and useful for entering the labour market' (p.108). This highlights the need for schools to ensure that young people's entire curriculum, including more traditional, academic subjects, is made as relevant to the world of work as possible. In line with this, much of the research reviewed recommends that schools should offer more opportunities for young people to 'contextualise' their learning and familiarise themselves with the world of work. Examples of approaches used to achieve this include work-based learning programmes, opportunities for practical and vocational learning that connect to business, enterprise and entrepreneurship education, and meaningful work experience, or work pairings, that is tailored to the particular needs of the individual (for example, Birdwell *et al.*, 2011; HM Government, 2011; Cedefop, 2010; GHK Consulting, 2009).

Other recommendations for providing a curriculum that helps to engage young people were identified in the literature.

- Provide curriculum content across all subject areas that offers a mix of practical and theoretical learning, and develops young people's basic and employability skills (for example, Lloyd-Jones *et al.*, 2010). This was one of the aims of diplomas – for learners to acquire a range of widely applicable skills, relevant to a broad employment sector, developed through an applied learning context.

- Offer young people a 'second chance' to take qualifications (for example, Burgess and Rodger, 2010).

- Reduce key stage 3 to just two years, to allow key stage 4 to expand to three years (DfE, 2011a), thus enabling subjects to be taught in greater depth over a longer period of time, to motivate students, and expanding possibilities for non-certified curricular enrichment for all students, such as in the arts.

- Provide a curriculum that gives young people the opportunity to build up qualifications from course units that can be built up over a period of time, if required (GHK Consulting, 2009).

2.3   Learning environments

A number of the studies reviewed highlight the importance of the learning environment in young people's engagement with education, and the literature distinguishes between two different aspects of this environment – the **physical environment** and the **learning atmosphere**.

The importance of the **physical environment** is highlighted by evaluations of a number of programmes (for example, diplomas, the Increased Flexibility Programme, the Young Apprenticeship Programme, and Skills for Work), where young people spend some time learning outside of the school environment, within a FE college, work-based training provider

or in the workplace. These evaluations indicate that young people are generally positive about their experience of a different learning environment, and feel that it facilitates their engagement or re-engagement with learning, and leads to improvements in their confidence, motivation, and maturity (for example, Cedefop, 2010; Edward *et al.*, 2008; O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006; Spielhofer and Walker, 2008). There is also evidence (such as Edward *et al.*, 2008; Marson-Smith *et al.*, 2009) that attendance at college pre-16 can help to prepare young people better for the transition to FE at age 16 (discussed further in chapter 3).

Young people appear to benefit from learning in a more adult environment that is different to their previous experience of schooling, as well as from the opportunity to mix with older, more mature students who can potentially act as role models, and the more varied teaching approaches adopted (for example, Canduela *et al.*, 2010). Providers such as FE colleges and work-based training providers are also more likely than schools to be able to offer specialist facilities within a 'real-life' setting, and staff with experience of industry, both of which can help to engage young people and enable them to see the relevance of their learning (for example, Canduela *et al.*, 2010; O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006).

It is worth noting, however, that despite the benefits summarised here, Hayward *et al.* (2008) raise some concerns about this experience of learning across different sites and providers, as this often causes disruptions to young people's established peer groups. Peer-group relationships, and the security these provide for many young people, play an important role in young people's engagement with learning, and the authors argue that, for those young people at risk of disconnecting from learning, disruptions to these relationships could inevitably increase the likelihood that they will become disengaged.

The proximity of the physical environment can also be a crucial factor for some young people (see, for example, Simmons and Thompson, 2010), as lengthy or difficult journeys can be a barrier to some young people's learning. Both of these factors highlight the need for careful guidance to be given to young people before they embark on learning in a different environment to ensure that it is the best option for them.

While the physical environment clearly plays a role, some of the items reviewed argue that it is the **learning atmosphere** that is more crucial in determining young people's engagement with learning. They suggest (see also the discussion in section 2.1) that young people, particularly those at risk of disengaging from education, need a learning environment that is warm, supportive and secure, where they feel valued, respected and safe, and where young people experience positive relationships with their peers and teaching staff (for example, Archer *et al.*, 2010; Cedefop, 2010; Hayward *et al.*, 2008). Indeed, Hayward *et al.* (2008) argue that it is an 'inability to cope with the school's power and authority structures' (p.49) that causes many young people to disengage from school. The evidence from the programme evaluations discussed above suggests that young people perceive non-school learning environments (such as FE colleges) to be better placed to provide such a positive learning atmosphere. Young people particularly appreciate the more relaxed and adult atmosphere offered by these learning providers, and the more informal approach of staff.

Gutherson *et al.* (2011), in an international review of 'alternative education provision', argue that smaller, more personal learning environments are crucial for engaging or re-engaging young people and, indeed, the authors stress that 'the need to engender a sense of community and belonging among individuals has been identified by a number of authors as perhaps the most significant element in any programme involving disaffected youth' (p.35). Similarly, evidence from the Engaging Youth Enquiry (Hayward *et al.*, 2008) concludes that the curriculum is far less important than is often assumed, and that what is more important is that young people are provided with positive, safe places for learning. The authors also highlight the potential contribution of small schools 'that can offer small-scale learning communities providing personalised learning strategies' (p. 83).

The curriculum-related approaches to engaging young people at risk of temporary disconnection from learning outlined in this chapter highlight the importance of considering the methods and principles of teaching, the curriculum content and the learning environment to learner engagement.

3. Curricula and qualifications used to engage young people at risk, and facilitate their progression

Chapter 2 provided an overview of the curriculum content, pedagogies and learning environments that most engage young people at risk of disconnecting from education. This chapter explores whether there are currently any particular curricula or qualifications that encourage these approaches to be used to engage young people, and facilitate their progression to further learning and/or employment. There is little evidence for this within the literature reviewed and it is, on the whole, limited to evaluations of alternative curriculum programmes. Moreover, these alternative curriculum programmes are not necessarily focused on the cohort of young people of interest to this review – those who are open to learning, or undecided about their future, but at risk of disconnecting from learning. Therefore, while these evaluations offer some useful indications on what curricula and qualifications are most likely to engage these young people, there is no evidence from the research literature reviewed that is specifically focused on this group. There was, however, general consensus across much of the literature that vocational qualifications can be useful in engaging young people, as discussed in section 3.1.

3.1 Vocational qualifications/vocationally relevant qualifications

While the research evidence does not focus on specific types of vocational qualifications, in general they are regarded as important provision for young people at risk of becoming disengaged, with a range of outcomes for learners reported in the literature reviewed (for example, Burgess and Rodger, 2010; Gutherson *et al.*, 2011, Ofsted, 2010). These include enhanced engagement with learning, improved personal and social skills (including confidence, self-esteem and motivation), and a greater understanding of the world of work.

There is also evidence that studying vocational qualifications, particularly where some learning takes place out of school, at a college or training provider, helps to improve young people's progression to further learning by preparing them better for the transition at 16, and helping them make more informed decisions about their choices (for example, HMIE, 2010; Marson-Smith *et al.*, 2009; O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006). Birdwell *et al.* (2011) report evidence that the increase in choices of vocational qualifications for 14–16 year olds is encouraging young people, who would otherwise have disengaged from education, to continue into FE or training. Similarly, a study by Burgess and Rodger (2010) found that participation rates of 16–19 year olds have increased as a result of the vocational provision now on offer in schools and colleges, even among some learners who were not previously expected to stay in learning post-16. They also indicate that, on the whole, vocational learners are not disadvantaged in terms of general access to HE courses, however, they may well be

disadvantaged in the range of courses they can pursue and the type of institution they can apply to.

While there was very little evidence on the specific types of vocational qualifications most likely to engage young people, Birdwell *et al.* (2011) argued against encouraging young people to study only Level 1 and Level 2 NVQs, as they reportedly often have little value among employers (compared with academic qualifications and other vocational qualifications). The authors do, however, acknowledge the value of these qualifications as a means of engaging young people and as 'stepping stones' to further qualifications or training.

The most appropriate and successful vocational qualifications are reported to provide the following characteristics, all of which are known to help engage young people (as discussed in chapter 2):

- a curriculum with industry value, which prepares learners for the world of work and enables young people to see the relevance of their learning

- practical and unit-based assessment approaches, often with re-take options, giving young people a 'second chance' to achieve their qualifications

- more varied and creative teaching approaches, including those that encourage more independent learning

- incremental progression through qualifications, giving young people a sense of success and direction.

3.2 Alternative curriculum programmes

As reported above, the literature reviewed includes several alternative curriculum programmes or pathways – at local, national and international level – which have reportedly had positive impacts on young people's engagement with learning, as a result of many of the features outlined in chapter 2. Five such programmes or pathways are discussed here in further detail.

- **Apprenticeships** are seen as one of the most successful alternatives to classroom-based education and a valuable form of vocational education, and several of the items reviewed recommend the development of more apprenticeships for young people, particularly at Level 3 (for example, Birdwell *et al.*, 2011; Cedefop, 2010, Gracey and Kelly, 2010; OECD, 2010).

  Apprenticeships have proved to be successful in other European countries. In Germany, where there is a 'dual' vocational training system, training takes place in both private companies and vocational schools. Apprenticeships are provided for some 350 recognised 'training occupations' and are regarded as the most important channel for recruiting skilled young workers. In total, 1.6 million individuals underwent apprenticeship training in Germany in 2009 (Walden and Troltsch, 2011). In England, apprenticeship schemes are increasingly one of the main learning routes within the 14–19 phase and all

young people meeting the specified entry standards will be entitled to an apprenticeship place in 2013.

The reasons given for the reported success of apprenticeships include that they:

- provide access to a work-related learning environment, which many young people find engaging, with applied learning using up-to-date methods and technologies

- combine real-world practical learning with formal and theoretical learning, and provide an opportunity to develop general skills, such as literacy and numeracy

- provide an opportunity for young people to develop personal and social skills, and employability skills, such as self-confidence, team-working and using initiative

- provide a potential route into employment.

They have also been viewed as beneficial for young people who are vulnerable to becoming NEET due to the blend of vocational training and employment they can provide. They have been described as a route that can ease the transition between education and work, and there is some evidence that the probability of unemployment is substantially lowered by apprenticeship training (Anderson *et al.*, 2010a).

- **Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP)** – a national programme which involves FE colleges and training providers working in partnership with schools to offer vocational qualifications to young people at key stage 4, including NVQs, GNVQs and GCSEs in vocational subjects. The majority of the young people involved were satisfied with their IFP course (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006), and it reportedly led to improvements in young people's motivation, engagement, and preparedness for working life. The factors which appeared to have contributed to these positive outcomes include:

  - the opportunity to study a vocational course, which young people valued as relevant to their future careers

  - the more practical/applied style of learning associated with their course

  - the opportunity to study in a different, more informal, 'real-world' learning environment, with specialist staff and facilities.

- **SkillForce programme** – this is an alternative curriculum programme, involving around 7,000 students across the UK, which aims to improve young people's attitudes towards education and thus improve their attendance and behaviour. The programme is led by former service personnel and offers young people the opportunity to study a range of vocational qualifications. The core is the ASDAN key skills award, but other qualifications and accreditation are offered (including the Duke of Edinburgh Award and the OCR Certificate in Preparation for Employment). The programme takes place within school hours, and the emphasis is on work-related learning in practical situations. Overall, the programme is perceived to be a successful alternative to the National Curriculum for participating students, and reported outcomes included enhanced personal and social skills (such as motivation, self-esteem and communication skills), and improved attitudes

to school (Hallam *et al.*, 2010). These outcomes are attributed to the following features of the programme:

– the more informal teaching approach of SkillForce staff, who have non-education backgrounds, and the positive and supportive relationships between staff and students

– the small group sizes, which give students more attention from staff and more opportunities for individual support

– the opportunity to gain accreditation, in the form of certificates of achievement as well as formal qualifications, which promotes feelings of success and motivation among the young people.

- **Reach programme** – this is a good example of a local programme (in Wolverhampton), which makes use of different pedagogies and learning environments to engage young people. It provides an alternative Level 1 curriculum for young people at key stage 4 through a variety of different experiences, and is delivered on two full days per week. The programme leads to two qualifications – BTEC Level 1 Certificate or Diploma in Vocational Studies, and the Level 1 ASDAN Certificate of Personal Effectiveness Award. Two factors appear to contribute to the reported success of this programme (Hayward *et al.*, 2008).

  – Young people choose three vocational areas to experience, which are covered in one term each. This gives young people variety within their curriculum, and helps them decide what subjects they enjoy and what their career preferences are.

  – There is collaborative delivery between schools, with students moving around schools for different areas of the programme, and the curriculum is delivered both within and outside the classroom, giving young people access to a variety of learning environments and teaching approaches.

- **Youth schools** (Lithuania) – these schools are a good example of an international alternative curriculum programme, as they offer alternative provision to young people aged 12–17 years who have not adapted to the regular school system, lack motivation to complete their education, or who prefer a practical approach to learning. The schools aim to provide basic education, as well as enrich the personal experiences of young people, and prepare them for FE, and working and adult life. Cedefop (2010) reports that evaluations of youth schools indicate that approximately 95 per cent of participants wish to continue further learning or enter employment after leaving the programme. The factors considered to be successful in these schools include:

  – the curriculum can be tailored to the needs of the individual young person, and young people are motivated by being able to choose their own education pathway

  – learning combines both theoretical and practical approaches and is integrated with after-school, pre-vocational and work-placement activities

- learning takes place in a variety of locations, including classrooms, outdoors and other spaces both in and outside the schools, and is delivered both within and outside of school hours, as appropriate for the individual

- the small class sizes mean that young people receive more individual attention and are able to interact more freely with the teacher.

The literature suggests that vocationally-related qualifications and alternative programmes (examples of which are outlined in section 3.2) can be used to engage those young people at risk of disengagement from learning.

4. Discussion

This review has demonstrated that a wide and flexible curriculum offer can help to engage young people who are at risk of disconnecting with learning. Young people can become disengaged at key stage 3 and access to alternative, flexible provision can improve participation. Young people aged 14–16 years need to be supported to access provision that engages them and helps them to progress to suitable courses when they are 16. Successful approaches include offering guidance and access to the full range of GCSEs and vocational qualifications; providing taster or short courses; and offering alternative practical learning opportunities. A variety of high quality courses are also needed for young people aged 17–19 years. Provision for this age group will be particularly important when the changes in the age of participation come into force in 2013.

Schools need the flexibility to offer a curriculum that can be adapted to the needs of individual learners. This review has indicated that flexibility in the delivery and content of courses is crucial for engaging and sustaining the participation of young people who are at risk of disconnecting with learning. In the context of a current focus on academic attainment, and in order to improve participation and attainment, it is important that schools have the flexibility to provide a personalised curriculum to meet the needs of all young people.These changes will include a new National Curriculum in 2014, which aims to slim down the current curriculum so that it reflects the body of essential knowledge in key subjects and gives teachers the freedom to use their professional judgement to design curricula that meet the needs of their pupils.

The types of courses and qualifications that have had a positive impact on young people's engagement with learning have some common features. They need to be perceived by young people as relevant to their lives; combine theoretical and practical learning; and provide opportunities for learning in an informal atmosphere. They include courses such as apprenticeships which are viewed as beneficial for young people who are at risk of becoming NEET due to the blend of vocational training and employment they can provide. These types of qualifications can also ease the transition between education and work. There is evidence that young people's engagement with learning increases when they perceive curricula as relevant to their current and future lives. Many of the courses that have a positive impact on young people also provide opportunities for them to develop personal and social skills, which is particularly important for young people at risk of disconnecting with learning.

It is important that vocational options are available for these young people. High quality vocational courses can be motivating for some young people, helping them to see the relevance of learning and preparing them for post-16 transitions. There is also evidence that attending FE colleges or other training providers can help young people to make better and more informed decisions about post-school transitions. However, as the recent Wolf Review (2011) indicated, the vocational qualifications offered to young people must be high quality and offer a pathway into further or HE or employment. The Department for Education has recently published a list of non-GCSE qualifications that will be recognised in the key stage 4

performance tables. These include qualifications that are judged to be high quality, rigorous and provide the majority of learners with access to study and employment opportunities. This review has demonstrated that young people at risk of disconnecting from learning need a range of curricula and qualification options, but these courses must be high quality and provide genuine opportunities for progression to further learning or employment. For young people to engage with these courses, they need a teaching style that engages them and enables them to apply their learning to real scenarios from the world of work.

In order to meet young people's needs, coordinated involvement from multiple providers is sometimes required. The evidence indicates that many young people benefit from access to learning in different venues such as FE colleges or workplaces. Currently, teachers with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) can teach in FE colleges but the FE equivalent, Qualified Teaching and Learning Skills (QTLS) is not recognised in schools. Therefore it may be necessary to use training providers outside the school such as FE colleges and work-based learning providers to meet young people's needs. One of the 2011 Wolf Review's key recommendations is that FE lecturers and professionals should be able to teach in schools, ensuring young people are being taught by those best suited to teaching vocationally-related qualifications. This could help to facilitate high quality vocational teaching in schools.

This review demonstrates that the delivery of courses is critical in engaging young people. Innovative teaching approaches can help young people who are at risk of disengaging to enjoy learning and increase the likelihood of them completing their courses. Successful approaches include: involving young people in their learning; listening to and acting on young people's views about their preferred ways of learning; and adapting teaching approaches to meet individual young people's needs. Positive and supportive relationships with teachers and teaching assistants can also help these young people to enjoy their courses and remain engaged. Additionally, there is evidence these young people need smaller group sizes and additional support if they become overwhelmed by their workload or fall behind. Indeed, the content of the curriculum is often less important for young people than positive, constructive teaching approaches and supportive learning environments.

Experiencing success helps young people to feel motivated. Young people who experience success are more likely to enjoy their courses, stay engaged and gain their qualifications. Some young people need opportunities to achieve success in a more flexible way. This review has indicated that courses that allow participants to build up course units over a period of time can help to give them a sense of success and direction. The option to re-take parts of courses is also valued.

Finally, it is important that all young people are supported in making positive post-16 transitions. Access to high quality IAG is important for these young people, especially for those who are undecided about their futures. It can lessen the risk of dissatisfaction with their choice and reduce the likelihood of them dropping out of courses. Young people are best supported in their decision making about education through impartial, personalised IAG (McCrone and Filmer-Sankey, 2012, Nelson and O'Donnell 2011). Timely and appropriate guidance helps young people to develop positive attitudes to learning and to find education, training or employment opportunities. The importance of this provision is reflected in recent

legislation which makes schools responsible for securing access to independent, impartial careers advice for their students.

4.1 Implications for The NFER Research Programme

This review has identified curriculum-related approaches that could help young people at risk of disconnecting from learning to enjoy their courses and remain engaged. It has provided an overview of the curriculum content, teaching approaches and learning environments that most engage young people. Our review of the available evidence reveals a gap in the literature on whether there are any particular curricula or qualifications that encourage these approaches to be used with young people. The literature often refers to specific programmes and support strategies for young people at risk of becoming 'sustained' NEET and who need intensive support to re-engage with learning. This is likely to be because these young people are easier to identify, there are specific programmes designed to engage or re-engage them, and the barriers to their engagement are complex and significant. The research evidence rarely refers solely to young people who are likely to re-engage in the short to medium term and need less intensive support, so there was less evidence on curricula or qualifications for young people who are 'open to learning' or 'undecided' about their futures but at risk of disengagement.

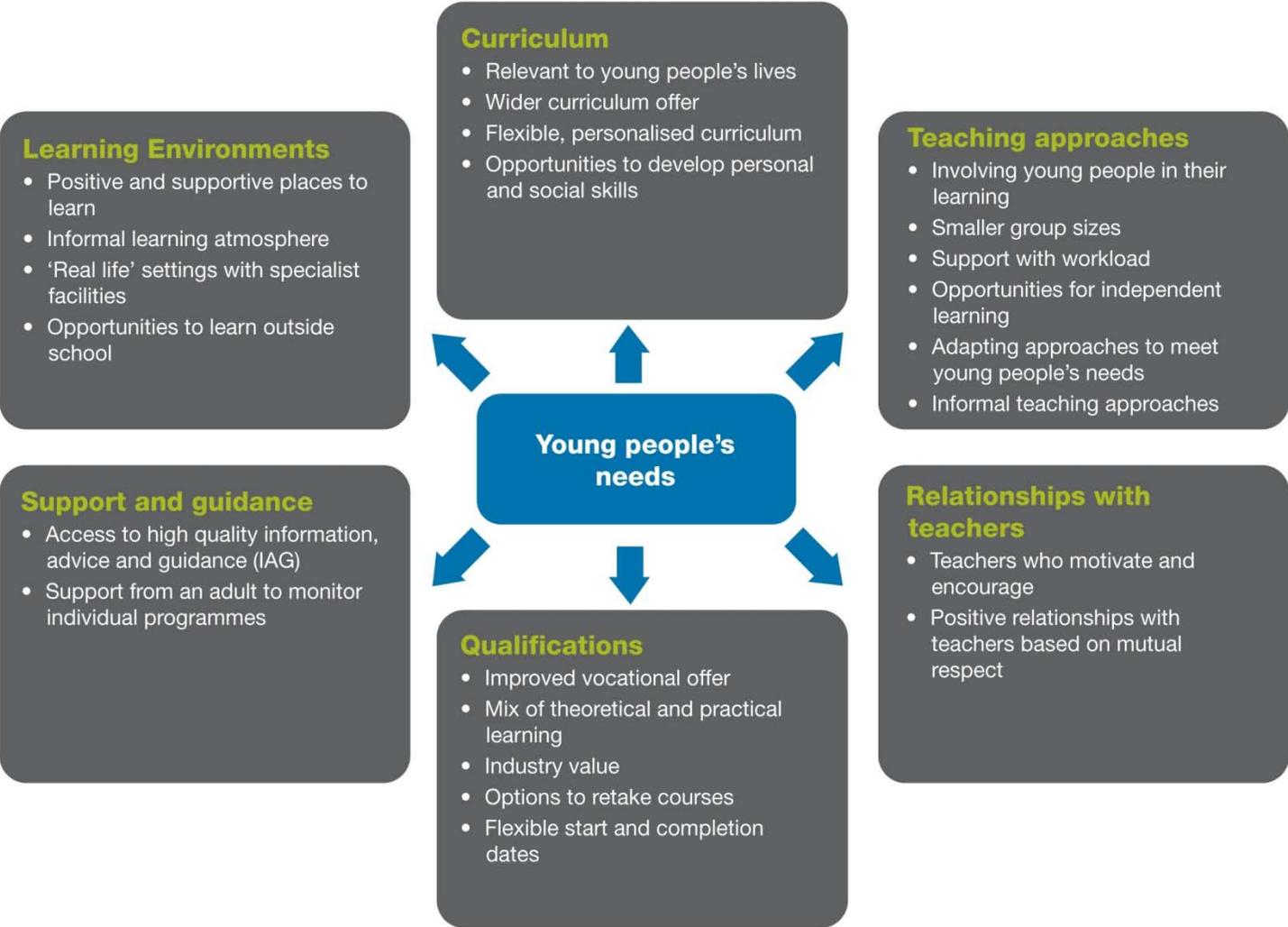Further research could explore effective strategies for accessing courses and qualifications and the most effective curriculum-related approaches (such as offering different learning environments, a more flexible vocationally-related curriculum and a more positive, constructive and supportive approach to teaching and learning) for engaging or re-engaging those who are 'open to learning', or 'undecided' young people who are NEETs.

5. Where next?

In this review, the curriculum- and qualification- related needs of 'open to learning' and 'undecided' young people have been considered together. Further research is needed to distinguish between the most successful approaches for these different types of young people who are at risk of temporarily disconnecting from learning. In order to address these gaps in the evidence, research to identify the characteristics of these young people and to identify effective curriculum- and qualification-related strategies to engage and re-engage those who are 'open to learning' and 'undecided' about their futures is required. Key features of the *From Education to Employment* strand of The NFER Research Programme will be: the development and implementation of indicators that can assist in the identification of young people who are 'open to learning' and 'undecided' NEET; the evaluation of specific strategies that aim to support these groups; and the validation and dissemination of good practice. This programme of research will allow us to identify successful strategies to help these young people to remain engaged or to re-engage in education, employment or training.

Figure 1 summarises the evidence on effective strategies to meet the curriculum- and qualification-related learning needs of all young people. It is suggested that these needs are particularly relevant for learners who are 'open to learning' or 'undecided' about their futures. Common themes are: the need for positive teaching approaches that adapt to meet young people's needs; supportive and informal environments to learn where young people can achieve success; supportive relationships with teachers; high quality advice and guidance; and the availability of high quality curricula and qualification options (including vocationally-related options) that give young people opportunities to progress to their choice of further learning or employment.

Figure 1 – The curriculum and qualification-related learning needs of young people

Curriculum
- Relevant to young people's lives
- Wider curriculum offer
- Flexible, personalised curriculum
- Opportunities to develop personal and social skills

Learning Environments
- Positive and supportive places to learn
- Informal learning atmosphere
- 'Real life' settings with specialist facilities
- Opportunities to learn outside school

Teaching approaches
- Involving young people in their learning
- Smaller group sizes
- Support with workload
- Opportunities for independent learning
- Adapting approaches to meet young people's needs
- Informal teaching approaches

Young people's needs

Support and guidance
- Access to high quality information, advice and guidance (IAG)
- Support from an adult to monitor individual programmes

Relationships with teachers
- Teachers who motivate and encourage
- Positive relationships with teachers based on mutual respect

Qualifications
- Improved vocational offer
- Mix of theoretical and practical learning
- Industry value
- Options to retake courses
- Flexible start and completion dates

References

Anderson, K., Brophy, M., McNeil, B. and Potter, D. (2010a). *Opening the Door to Apprenticeships: Reaching Young People who are Disadvantaged and Disengaged from Apprenticeships. Paper 1: Setting the Scene.* London: The Young Foundation [online]. Available: http://www.youngfoundation.org/publications/reports/opening-door-apprenticeships-february-2010 [18 May, 2012].

Anderson, K., Brophy, M., McNeil, B. and Walsh, H. (2010b). *Opening the Door to Apprenticeships: Reaching Young People who are Disadvantaged and Disengaged from Apprenticeships. Paper 2: Reflecting on Ways Forward.* London: The Young Foundation [online]. Available: http://www.youngfoundation.org/files/images/OpeningDoors2_FINAL.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Archer, L., Hollingworth, S. and Mendick, H. (2010). *Urban Youth and Schooling: the Experiences and Identities of Educating 'At Risk' Young People.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.
Birdwell, J., Grist, M. and Mrago, J. (2011). *The Forgotten Half: a Demos and Private Equity Foundation Report.* London: Demos [online]. Available: http://www.demos.co.uk/files/The_Forgotten_Half_-_web.pdf?1300105344 [18 May, 2012].

Burgess, M. and Rodger, J. (2010). *14-19 Qualifications Strategy Research* (DfE Research Report 055). London: DfE [online]. Available: [18 May, 2012].
Canduela, J., Elliott, I., Lindsay, C., Macpherson, S., McQuaid, R.W. and Raeside, R. (2010). 'Partnerships to support early school leavers: school-college transitions and winter leavers in Scotland', *Journal of Education and Work,* **23**, 4, 339–362.

Cedefop (2010). *Guiding At-Risk Youth Learning to Work: Lessons from Across Europe* (Cedefop Research Paper No. 3). Luxemburg: Office of the European Union [online]. Available: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/5503_en.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Cotton, T. (2007). 'From voice to choice: an evaluation of a project to develop effective learning in schools through creativity.' Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Institute of Education, London, 5-8 September [online]. Available: www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/168137.doc [18 May, 2012].

Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2011). *National Learner Satisfaction Survey: Further Education Research Study Report* (BIS Research Paper Number 21). London: BIS [online]. Available: http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/further-education-skills/docs/n/11-711-nlss-further-education-system-research-study.pdf [18 July, 2012].

Department for Education (2011a). *The Framework for the National Curriculum: a Report by the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum Review*. London: DfE [online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-00135-2011 [21 July, 2012].

Department for Education (2011b). *NEET Statistics: Quarterly Brief November 2011* (Statistical Release OSR 25/2011). London: DfE [online]. Available: http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STR/d001040/osr25-2011.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Edward, S., Weedon, E. and Riddell, S. (2008). *Attitudes to Vocational Learning: a Literature Review*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government [online]. Available: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/233621/0063966.pdf [18 May, 2012].

GHK Consulting Ltd (2009). *Identifying Effective Practice in Raising Young People's Aspirations*. Coventry: Learning and Skills Council [online]. Available: http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/lsc/national/nat-raising_aspirations-re-24sep2009-v1-1.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Golden, S., McCrone, T., Wade, P., Featherstone, G., Southcott, C. and Evans, K. (2011). *National Evaluation of Diplomas: Cohort 1 - the Second Year* (DfE Research Report 125). London: DfE [online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RR125.pdf [21 July, 2012].

Golden, S., O'Donnell, L., Benton, T. and Rudd, P. (2006). *Evaluation of Increased Flexibility for 14 to 16 Year Olds Programme: Outcomes for the Second Cohort* (DfES Research Report 786). London: DfES [online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RR786.pdf [23 July, 2012].

Golden, S., O'Donnell, L. and Benton, T. (2010). *Evaluation of the Young Apprenticeships Programme: Outcomes for Cohort 3: Final Report*. Coventry: Young People's Learning Agency [online]. Available: http://www.educationandemployers.org/media/12907/ypla-final_report_evaluation_of_the_young_apprenticeships_programme_outcomes_for_cohort_3-re-may11-v1.pdf [14 February, 2012].

Gracey, S. and Kelly, S. (2010). *Changing the NEET Mindset: Achieving More Effective Transition Between Education and Work*. London: Learning and Skills Network [online]. Available: http://www.educationandemployers.org/media/8433/changing%20the%20neet%20mindset%20-%20lsn.pdf [15 May, 2012].

Gutherson, P., Davies, H. and Daszkiewicz, T. (2011). *Achieving Successful Outcomes through Alternative Education Provision: an International Literature Review*. Reading: CfBT Education Trust [online]. Available: http://www.cfbt.com/evidenceforeducation/pdf/5671_AEP(Report)_v3.pdf [15 May, 2012].

Hallam, S., Rogers, L. and Rhamie, J. (2010). 'Staff perceptions of the success of an alternative curriculum: Skill Force', *Emotional & Behavioural Difficulties*, **15**, 1, 63–74.

Hayward, G., Wilde, S. and Williams, R. (2008). *Rathbone/Nuffield Review: Engaging Youth Enquiry. Consultation Report.* London: Nuffield Foundation [online]. Available: http://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/Rathbone%20and%20Nuffield%20Review%20-%20Engaging%20Youth%20Enquiry.pdf [9 February, 2012].

HM Government (2011). *Building Engagement, Building Futures: Our Strategy to Maximise the Participation of 16-24 Year Olds in Education, Training and Work (2011)* [online]. Available: http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/building%20engagement%20building%20futures.pdf [18 May, 2012].

HM Inspectorate of Education (2010). *Learning to Improve the Lives and Aspirations of Young People in Scotland: an Aspect Report on the Provision in Scotland's Colleges for Young People Requiring More Choices and More Chances.* Livingston: HMIE [online]. Available: http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/2174/1/mcmcar.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Lloyd-Jones, S., Bowen, R., Holton, D., Griffin, T. and Sims, J. (2010). *A Qualitative Research Study to Explore Young People's Disengagement from Learning.* Cardiff: Welsh Assembly Government [online]. Available: http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dcells/publications/100715disengagementreporten.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Lynch, S., Kettlewell, K., Southcott, C. and McCrone, T. (2011). *Outcomes for the First Cohort of Diploma Learners* (DfE Research Report 162)*.* London: DfE [online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RR162.pdf [23 July, 2012].

Lynch, S., McCrone, T., Wade, P., Featherstone, G., Evans, K., Golden, S. and Haynes, G. (2010). *National Evaluation of Diplomas: the First Year of Delivery* (DCSF Research Report 220). London: DCSF [online] Available: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DCSF-RR220.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Marson-Smith, H., Golden, S. and McCrone, T. (2009). *Widening 14-19 Choices: Support for Young People Making Informed Decisions.* Slough: NFER [online]. Available: http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/SMD01/ [18 May, 2012].

McCrone, T. and Filmer-Sankey. C. (2012). *A Review of Careers Professionals' Involvement with Schools in the UK* (NFER Research Programme: From Education to Employment). Slough: NFER [online]. Available: http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/RCPI01 [23 July, 2012].

Nelson, J. and O'Donnell, L. (2011). *Approaches to Supporting Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training: a Review*. Slough: NFER [online] Available: http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/RSRN01/RSRN01_home.cfm?publicationID=672&title=Approaches%20to%20supporting%20young%20people%20not%20in%20education,%20employment%20or%20training%20-%20a%20review [18 May, 2012].

O'Donnell, L., Golden, S., McCrone, T., Rudd, P. and Walker, M. (2006). *Evaluation of Increased Flexibility for 14 to 16 Year Olds Programme: Delivery for Cohorts 3 and 4 and the Future* (DfES Research Report 790). London: DfES [online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RR790.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (2010). *Reducing the Numbers of Young People Not In Education, Employment or Training: What Works and Why*. London: Ofsted [online]. Available: http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/reducing-numbers-of-young-people-not-education-employment-or-training-what-works-and-why [21 May, 2012].

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2010). *Off to a Good Start? Jobs for Youth*. Paris: OECD [online]. Available: http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/off-to-a-good-start-jobs-for-youth_9789264096127-en [22 May, 2012].

Rhodes, C. (2011). *Youth Unemployment Statistics*. London: House of Commons Library.
Simmons, R. and Thompson, R. (2010). *NEET Young People and Training for Work: Learning on the Margins*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham.
Spielhofer, T. and Walker, M. (2008). *Evaluation of Skills for Work Pilot Courses: Final Report*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government [online]. Available: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/213863/0056853.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Spielhofer, T., Benton, T., Evans, K., Featherstone, G., Golden, S., Nelson, J. and Smith P. (2009). *Increasing Participation: Understanding Young People Who Do Not Participate in Education or Training at 16 and 17* (DCSF Research Report 072). London: DCSF [online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DCSF-RR072.pdf [22 May, 2012].

Tunnard, J., Flood, S. and Barnes, T. (2008). 'One in ten: key messages from policy, research and practice about young people who are NEET', *Forum 21*, **3**, 46–53.
Walden,G. and Troltsch, K. (2011). 'Apprenticeship training in Germany – still a future-orientated model for recruiting skilled workers?' *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, **63**, 3, 305–322.

Wolf, A. (2011). *Review of Vocational Education: the Wolf Report.* London: DfE [online]. Available: http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/The%20Wolf%20Report.pdf [12 May, 2012].

Further reading

Audit Commission (2010). *Against the Odds: Re-engaging Young People in Education, Employment or Training*. London: Audit Commission [online]. Available: http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/nationalstudies/communitysafety/againsttheodds/pages/default_copy.aspx [18 May, 2012].

Axford, N., Berry, V. and Little, M. (2006). 'Enhancing service evaluability: lessons from a programme for disaffected young people', *Children & Society*, **20**, 4, 287–298.

Burke, T. (2010). 'Accreditation: too much credit', *Children & Young People Now*, **1 February.**

Callaghan, D. (2007). 'Less hard to reach', *Community Care*, **1672**, 28.

Callanan, M., Kinsella, R., Graham, J., Turczuk, R. and Finch, S. (2009). *Pupils with Declining Attainment at Key Stages 3 and 4: Profiles, Experiences and Impacts of Underachievement and Disengagement* (DCSF Research Report 086). London: DCSF [online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DCSF-RR086.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Cooke, E. and Barnes, T. (2012). *On the Path to Success: Promoting Engagement in Learning at KS3*. Totnes: Research in Practice [online]. Available: [22 May, 2012].

Cowen, G. and Burgess, M. (2009). *Key Stage 4 Engagement Programme Evaluation* (DCSF Research Report 084). London: DCSF [online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DCSF-RR084.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009). *Small Steps ... Meaningful Change: a Selection of Case Studies from the Extra Mile Phase 1 Secondary Schools 2008-09*. London: DCSF.

Department for Education (2010). *The Importance of Teaching: the Schools White Paper 2010* (Cm. 7980). London: The Stationery Office [online]. Available: http://publications.education.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/CM-7980.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Department for Education (2011). *Review of the National Curriculum in England: Summary Report of the Call for Evidence*. London: DfE [online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-00136-2011 [18 May, 2012].

Department for Education (2012a). *NEET Statistics: Quarterly Brief February 2012* (Statistical Release OSR 06/2012). London: DfE [online]. Available: http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STR/d001058/osr06-2012.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Department for Education (2012b). *Raising the Participation Age (RPA)* [online]. Available: http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/youngpeople/participation/rpa [18 May 2012].

Fordham, G., Batty, E., Cook, B., Knight-Forham, R. and Pearson, S. (2010). *Improving Attainment? Interventions in Education by the New Deal for Communities Programme*. London: Department for Communities and Local Government [online]. Available: http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/1462891.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Gallagher, E. and Cameron, G. (2008). 'Second chance school: Loughshore Educational Resource Centre', *Education Today*, **58**, 4, 24–33.

Golden, S., O'Donnell, L. and Rudd, P. (2005). *Evaluation of Increased Flexibility for 14 to 16 Year Olds Programme: the Second Year* (DfES Research Report 609). London: DfES [online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RR609.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Grist, M. and Gheetham, P. (2011). *Experience Required: a Demos and V Report on Capability Building and Work-Readiness* [online]. Available: http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Experienced_required_-_web.pdf?1307027227 [18 May, 2012].

Hayward, G. and Williams, R. (2011). 'Joining the big society: am I bothered?', *London Review of Education*, **9**, 2, 175–189.

International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks Archive (INCA) (2012). *Review of the National Curriculum in England: Report on Subject Breadth in International Jurisdictions* (DfE Research Report 178A). London: DfE [online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RR178a.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Ipsos Mori (2011). *National Learner Satisfaction Survey: Further Education Research Study Report* (BIS Research Paper No. 21). London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [online]. Available: http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/further-education-skills/docs/n/11-711-nlss-further-education-system-research-study [18 May, 2012].

McCrone, T., Wade, P., Featherstone, G., Southcott, C., Golden, S. and Haynes, G. (2011). *National Evaluation of Diplomas: Cohort 2 - the First Year of Delivery* (DfE Research Report 126). London: DfE [online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RR126.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Meschi, E., Crawford, C. and Vignoles, A. (2010). *Post-16 Educational Choices and Institutional Value Added at Key Stage 5*. London: DfE [online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/CEE-Post-16-educational-choices.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (2006). *The Young Apprenticeships Programme 2004-07: an Evaluation*. London: Ofsted [online]. Available: http://www.educationandemployers.org/media/8469/the%20young%20apprenticeships%20programme%202004-07%20-%20ofsted.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (2008). *Good Practice in Re-engaging Disaffected and Reluctant Students in Secondary Schools*. London: Ofsted [online]. Available: http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/good-practice-re-engaging-disaffected-and-reluctant-students-secondary-schools [18 May, 2012].

Rogers, L., Hallam, S., Shaw, J. and Rhamie, J. (2009). 'The integration of an alternative curriculum: skillforce', *British Journal of Special Education*, **36**, 3, 131–139.

Ross, A. (2009). *Disengagement from Education Among 14 - 16 Year Olds* (DCSF Research Report 178). London: DCSF [online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DCSF-RR178.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Ross, A., Green, R., Brown, V., Pickering, K., Schoon, I. and Vignoles, A. (2011). *The Impact of KS4 Vocational Courses on Disengaged Young People's Engagement with Education 15-18* (DfE Research Report 165). London: DfE [online]. Available: http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/13223/1/DFE-RR165.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Russell, L., Simmons, R. and Thompson, R. (2011). 'Ordinary lives: an ethnographic study of young people attending Entry to Employment programmes', *Journal of Education and Work*, **24**, 5, 477–499.

Scottish Executive (2006). *More Choices, More Chances: a Strategy to Reduce the Proportion of Young People not in Education, Employment or Training in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive [online]. Available: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/129456/0030812.pdf [18 May, 2012].

Shaw, H., Hayes, S. and Welsh, K. (2011). 'Getting young people into education, employment or training, what works?' Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of London, 6-8 September.

Simmons, R. and Thompson, R. (2011). 'Education and training for young people at risk of becoming NEET: findings from an ethnographic study of work-based learning programmes', *Educational Studies*, **37**, 4, 447–450.

Stokes, H. (2006). 'How drama can engage young people at risk of leaving school early', *International Journal on School Disaffection*, **3**, 2, 23–26, 32.

Thomas, J., Vigurs, C.A., Oliver, K., Suarez, B., Newman, M., Dickson, K. and Sinclair, J. (2008). *Targeted Youth Support: Rapid Evidence Assessment of Effective Early Interventions for Youth at Risk of Future Poor Outcomes* (EPPI-Centre Report No. 1615). London: Institute of Education, Social Science Research Unit, EPPI-Centre [online]. Available: http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=-50EN1r_WDE%3d&tabid=2417&language=en-US [18 May, 2012].

Thompson, R. (2010). 'Teaching on the margins: tutors, discourse and pedagogy in work-based learning for young people', *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, **62**, 2, 123–137.

Appendix

This review uses specific terminology to describe the robustness of the evidence appraised for the themes under discussion. The terminology used is outlined and explained below:

Strong evidence

In order to make statements about there being a 'strong' evidence base on a particular theme, we seek to ensure that a number of studies have been produced that concur in their findings. We expect these studies to be sufficiently large in scale (for example adopting adequate sample sizes to enable robust statistical analysis), or based on sufficiently in-depth case studies to allow a full explanation of findings. Typically, 'strong' evidence will include quantitative and qualitative research.

- **Quantitative research** that 'measures' impact. Such studies usually adopt experimental or quasi-experimental designs (QEDs) involving baseline and follow-up surveys, or treatment and control group designs, as well as statistical analysis.

- **Qualitative research** that provides data on perceptions of impact. The most reliable studies of this type are those that have conducted a number of in-depth case studies, across a number of locations, drawing on the views of a wide range of stakeholders, and 'triangulating' those views in order to assess the degree of agreement, or dissent, among different individuals in varying locations.

Moderate evidence

The same types of evidence as those cited above are included in this category. The distinction between a theme being described as having a 'strong' or a 'moderate' evidence base is related to two points.

- **The weight of evidence** – themes with 'moderate' evidence are likely to have only a small number of studies (typically two to three) that concur in their findings. There may also be some studies that present a contradictory view.

- **The quality of evidence** – themes with 'moderate' evidence may include studies with rather small sample sizes (for example, QED studies based in only one or two schools), or qualitative studies that have drawn on the views of certain, but not a full range of, stakeholders.

Impressionistic evidence

As this title suggests, this category includes evidence that is based on the observation or opinion of practitioners, or upon a case-study in one organisation only, for example. Very often, we find impressionistic evidence of one particular benefit within a study that was established to evaluate an entirely different benefit. Such findings cannot be dismissed entirely, but they tend to be anecdotal, subjective or descriptive in nature.

Our thanks

The authors would like to express thanks to many NFER colleagues, without whose support it would not have been possible to produce this report. Firstly, our thanks to Sarah Maughan, Director of Research at NFER, and the rest of The NFER Research Programme team, Tami McCrone, Joana Lopes and Julie Nelson, for their conceptual guidance on all stages of the work. Secondly, we thank Pauline Benefield, Information and Reviews Director at NFER, and her colleagues Hilary Grayson, Emily Houghton and Amanda Harper, for undertaking all searches for the review. Finally, we would like to thank Pat Bhullar and Alison Jones for their efficient administration of the review, and for formatting and referencing this report.

The NFER Research Programme

From Education to Employment

The NFER Research Programme

This Programme was set up in 2011. Funded by NFER and partners, 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*.

RCAQ