

Curriculum and qualification needs of young people
who are at risk of disengagement

A practical guide for headteachers



About The NFER Research Programme

Against a backdrop of economic recession, high youth unemployment and a sustained reduction in public funding, the task of supporting young people to make effective post-16 transitions into further education or employment is highly challenging. This document is based on a literature review produced under **The NFER Research Programme**, as part of the **From Education to Employment** theme. Four reviews have been conducted and collectively, they identify strategies for assisting young people at risk of becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET) to make effective post-16 transitions into further learning, or into employment.

All the reviews in the **From Education to Employment** series build on recent NFER research (Spielhofer *et al.*, 2009) identifying three discrete sub-categories of young people aged 16–17 who are NEET. These are:

- ‘open to learning’ NEETs – those young people who are most likely to re-engage in education or training, in the short term
- ‘sustained’ NEETs – those young people who can be characterised by their negative experience of school, involving high levels of truancy and exclusion, and low academic attainment
- and ‘undecided’ NEETs – those young people who may be similar in some respects to those who are ‘open to learning’ NEET, but are dissatisfied with the opportunities available to them and their inability to access what they want to learn or train in, and/or in their preferred ways of doing so.

About this document and the literature review on which it is based

This document offers practical guidance for school leaders based on findings from the NFER publication *Review of the curriculum and qualification needs of young people who are at risk of disengagement*. This literature review explores what the research evidence tells us about the curricula and qualifications which are most likely to encourage those young people who are at risk of becoming disengaged (and thus becoming NEET) to stay on, instead, and continue with their education and training.

The nature of this topic means that the research evidence, and thus this guidance, pertains to secondary schools. However, there is some indirect relevance for primary schools and their heads, in that such ‘risk’ of disengagement can often be deeply-rooted in a young person’s whole educational experience.

Ofsted Common Inspection Framework

In conversation with school leaders, this guidance has been mapped where possible against the current Common Inspection Framework for Schools, effective as of January 2012. This mapping is shown in shaded boxes at the right-hand side of each bullet-point (where such a connection is relevant), using the following abbreviations:

AoP: achievement of pupils at the school

QoT: quality of teaching in the school

B&S: the behaviour and safety of pupils at the school

QLM: the quality of leadership in and management of the school

OE: overall effectiveness

The numbering given (for example 41:1, etc.) after the abbreviation indicates the particular paragraph and bullet-point in the Ofsted Framework that applies to that statement in this guidance, as appropriate.

Curriculum-related approaches

Pedagogies

• Styles of teaching and learning used in your school can have as much impact, for better or worse, on those young people who are at risk of disengagement as the knowledge and skills that they learn. Help them to engage more effectively in their own learning (and the processes involved in that) as early as possible in their time at your school. Do that consistently throughout their time in your school, too – in part through encouraging the constructive teaching-related approaches listed in the next bullet-point.	[AoP 41: 2 & 6; QoT 42:8 – and 43; OE 46: 1, 2 & 5]
• Teaching tactics for building and sustaining young people's engagement include: • creating and sustaining positive learning environments • developing professional relationships with pupils that help them feel they matter, and keep them 'on track' • showing them respect by treating them like adults wherever possible, and listening to their views (see the following section for more on this) • ensuring they remain 'on target' – through providing, for instance, one-to-one work on catching-up if absent, or managing their learning workload generally • being flexible in approach (for example, in maintaining interest levels by varying teaching methods) • appealing to young people's interests and making them relevant to life (for example, future careers) wherever possible.	[AoP 41: 2 & 6; QoT 42: 1 & 8 – and 43; QLM 45: 1-3; OE 46: 1, 2, 5 & 6]
• Listening to learners about curriculum and qualifications can be valuable in a number of ways, offering you feedback from the 'end-users', and encouraging their greater participation, understanding, and confidence. Examples of where this could happen might include decision-making processes, such as the creation of their own individual learning plans. Amongst the positive outcomes observed where this happens are strengthened motivation and commitment to their own learning, and improved behaviour. These come with the increase in responsibility and choice. Sometimes, this can be a key route back into the mainstream for those who already are, or are becoming, disengaged.	[AoP 41: 2 & 6; QoT 42: 1, 8 & 10 – and 43; B&S 1 & 5; QLM 45: 1, 2 & 6; OE 46: 2, 4, 5 & 6]
• Deploying the appropriate staff in your school's classrooms is important. Teachers who are seen by pupils to be experts in their field, and who then share that expertise through an apprenticeship-style approach, are especially valued by young people – in contrast to those who mainly employ traditional schooling practices, such as simple facilitation or transference of knowledge.	[AoP 41: 2 & 6; QoT 42: 3, 6, 8, 9 & 10; QLM 45: 1-5; OE 46: 1, 2, 5 & 6]

• Positive relationships with trusted adults within your school community can be a central and crucial tool for helping to maintain engagement and participation. This is particularly the case for female pupils, those who are early leavers, and learners who are identified as being particularly vulnerable. A small number of staff with particular responsibilities for connecting with these groups in your school can be a very effective approach. One-to-one advice, guidance and mentoring can also be very influential, for all pupils. However, do note that young people can differ in their choice of adults from whom they seek guidance, and in their reasons for doing so. One size (or style) is unlikely to fit all, in this respect.	[AoP 41: 2 & 6; QoT 42: 8 – and 43; B&S 44: 1 & 3; QLM 45: 2, 3, 5 & 6; OE 46: 1, 2, 5 & 6]
• A number of other pedagogical support strategies are especially helpful, if you can deploy them. Amongst these are: • allowing greater degrees and frequencies of teacher-pupil interaction through smaller class sizes, allowing more of an individual response over more extended time-periods – and thus helping foster personal support and care, as well as better development of collaborative activities for learning (a ratio of 1:10 is suggested as the optimum ratio) • using teaching assistants helps to create more supportive and inclusive learning communities – sometimes through volunteers such as parents (but note that they need the skills to encourage cooperation and collaboration amongst the pupils rather than to have any particular subject expertise) • supporting learners to manage their workload better, as they take greater responsibility for their learning – and risk being daunted, discouraged and finally, detached (female Young Apprentices have been found to struggle more in this respect) • offering catch-up tuition to those pupils who miss lessons for any reason, and might find themselves in a downward spiral of ‘getting further and further behind’.	[AoP 41: 2 & 6; QoT 42: 3, 5, 7, 8 & 10 – and 43; B&S 44: 1 and 5; QLM 45: 2 & 3; OE 46: 1-4]

Curriculum content

• Alongside the ‘delivery’ aspect, ‘content’ is also a vital aspect of curriculum, of course. It plays its own key part in determining how much the young people in your charge will enjoy, and engage with, their education. And that in turn has a major effect on the likelihood of your pupils making the transition to further learning, and then into employment.	[AoP 41: 2 & 6; QoT 42: 1 – and 43; QLM 45: 1, 3 & 4; OE 46: 1, 3, 5 & 6]
• You should therefore look to make a number of potential improvements to broaden and enrich your school’s curriculum offer. This is a major recommendation from the research, and the greater the range of subjects and routes that can be made available, the better. Look to increase choice within, and between GCSEs and vocational qualifications, and to provide tasters and other short courses to boost the understanding of the available options. This wider choice ties in with the benefits of more decision-making responsibility for individual pupils.	[AoP 41: 2 & 6; QoT 42: 1 – and 43; QLM 45: 1, 3 & 4; OE 46: 1, 3, 5 & 6]

- Most particularly, find all the possible ways you can of enhancing and enriching the vocational offer.
- This then will help provide a flexible and more personalised curriculum, as far as possible (bolstered by appropriate and timely information, advice and guidance (IAG) – see below). That's especially vital at key stage 4, since the end of key stage 3 is known to be a particular disengagement point. Some of the flexibility can come in the form of allowing some pupils to taking a year out of the National Curriculum at that point, and using a carousel of longer-term tasters, projects and short courses.
- Look to improve the delivery of the current curriculum's content, through adaptation and 'injecting character' to increase enthusiasm and motivation; some of the methods here could involve integrating the arts and humanities more into vocational subjects, or building greater amounts of kinaesthetic and practical learning through project-based and community-based contexts.
- 'Make the connections' throughout your entire curriculum offer, so that your young people can see it as relevant to their current and future lives, and most particularly, the real world of work.
- This comes in part from contextualising their learning channels in ways such as enterprise and entrepreneurial education, work pairings and work experience, all of which can help pupils to respond positively, and increase the chances you have of tailoring the curriculum effectively to their particular needs.
- Finally, some other possibilities you can consider include: offering second chances to achieve qualifications, and/or allowing qualifications to be built up from units, where possible; reduce key stage 3 to just two years and increase key stage 4 in turn to three years to enable more in-depth teaching and learning and allowing greater room for enrichment activities and broadening.

[AoP 41: 2 & 6; QoT 42: 1 – and 43; QLM 45: 1, 3 & 4; OE 46:1, 3, 5 & 6]

Learning environments

- The first facet of this is the actual physical situation, or situations, in which your young people learn. Finding new and varied settings (such as in the workplace, within the community, or as part of other organisations such as training providers and colleges) is an approach that is likely to help them feel positive about learning, as well as to engage more genuinely and strongly. It should help them to gain 'soft skills' such as maturity, motivation and confidence – with all the attendant potential benefits that those can bring, too, in related contexts. (Take care to do so with appropriate sensitivity to the possibility of disrupting peer-groups and relationships that bolster the confidence and security of those who are at risk of disengagement, however.)
- Secondly, there's the more intangible but highly-valuable matter of the 'learning atmosphere'. Is that generally seen as being warm, supportive and secure for all pupils in your school? Do your young people feel valued, respected, and safe? Are there sufficiently positive relationships, with both their peers and your staff?

[AoP 41: 2 & 6; QoT 43; QLM 45: 3-5; OE 46: 1-3, 5 & 6]

[AoP 41: 2 & 6; QoT 42: 1, 3, 5, 7, 8 & 10 – and 43; B&S 44: 1-3, 5 & 6; QLM 45: 1-7; OE 46: 1-6]

- You should consider the implications of the research evidence which shows that, for a significant proportion of young people, those more informal settings outside the normal school context are more often seen as offering the ideal learning atmosphere.

[AoP 41: 2 & 6; QoT 43; B&S 44: 1 & 6; QLM 45: 3 and 4; OE 46: 1 and 6]

Information, advice and guidance

- Don't underestimate the potential positive impact for your pupils of a steady and consistent supply of impartial and personalised information, advice and guidance, throughout the whole of the learner's journey through your school.
- In particular, this means sufficiently detailed information on future course options (regarding content and structure, for instance, or the practical issues involved), assisting them to make appropriate decisions that can help reduce the chances of dissatisfaction and early drop-out.
- Your staff, as a whole (as well as guidance professionals themselves), therefore need to be adaptable and knowledgeable about the range of alternatives available (and linkages between their subject specialism and possible future careers) – and/or be able to refer young people to those who can further inform or support them best in this regard.

[AoP 41: 5 & 6; QoT 42: 8 – and 43; QLM 45: 1, 3, 4 & 5; OE 46: 1, 3, 5 & 6]

[QoT 42: 1 & 8 – and 43; QLM 45: 1, 3, 4 & 5; OE 46: 1, 3, 5 & 6]

[QoT 42: 1 & 8 – and 43; QLM 45: 1, 4 & 5; OE 2, 3, 5 & 6]

Vocational qualifications

Despite the considerable and continuing flux over vocational qualifications, there is clear consensus about how useful these can be for engaging young people in learning – and for improving their personal and social skills as well as their occupational ones. Furthermore, when you can arrange for this to take place outside the conventional school environment, it's also seen to prepare young people better for progressing at age 16 into further learning.	[AoP 41: 5 & 6; QoT 42: 1, 8, 9 & 10 – and 43; QLM 45: 1, 3 & 4; OE 46: 1, 5 & 6]
- Although selecting the right vocational qualifications to offer can be difficult, you should bear in mind that the most successful ones have certain features. Look for 'industry value' - the courses that will prepare them properly for the world of work and demonstrate regularly the real relevance in their learning; - practical and unit-based assessment; - more varied and creative teaching approaches, encouraging independent learning - incremental progression through staged qualifications and levels.	AoP 41: 3, 5 & 6; QoT 42: 1, 8 & 9 – and 43; QLM 45: 3; OE 46: 1-3, 5 & 6]

Alternative programmes

Boosting your pupils' likelihood of carrying on after 16 can also be achieved through a range of different programme options. Probably the best-known of these alternatives is that of apprenticeships, which not only tend to fulfil the qualities mentioned above, but also carry the potential for employment within them.	[AoP 41: 2, 5 & 6; QoT 43; QLM 45: 1 & 3; OE 46: 1, 5 & 6]
- Other 'fresh pathways' that you could consider adopting, or using as models for new and creative solutions include: - the 'Increased Flexibility' kind, where there is partnering with further education colleges and work-based learning providers - Skillforce, and similar 'third-sector' offerings from voluntary and community organisations - other locally-designed collaborative provision which uses systems like ASDAN and BTEC. One example of that last type is Wolverhampton's 'Reach' programme; and another example may even be the Lithuanian 'youth schools' model, specifically aimed at disengaged younger learners.	[AoP 41: 2, 5 & 6; QoT 43; QLM 45: 1 & 3; OE 46: 1, 5 & 6]

This guide is based on a review from The NFER Research Programme which is available for free at www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/RCAQ01/

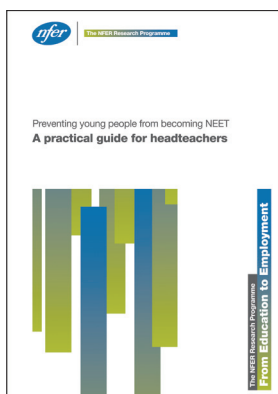
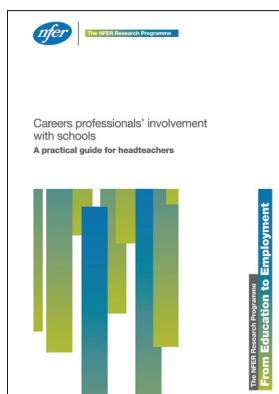
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The NFER Research Programme

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*.

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