

## Summary

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



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## 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 is highly challenging.

This literature review is one of four produced by the NFER, as part of the From Education to Employment research programme. Collectively, they identify strategies for assisting young people at risk of becoming NEET to make effective post-16 transitions into learning or employment. The reviews build upon recent NFER research (Spielhofer *et al.*, 2009) identifying three discrete sub-categories of young people aged 16–17 who are NEET.

- ‘Open to learning’ NEETs – young people most likely to re-engage in education or training in the short term.
- ‘Sustained’ NEETs – young people characterised by their negative experience of school, high levels of truancy and exclusion, and low academic attainment.
- ‘Undecided’ NEETs – young people similar in some respects to those who are ‘open to learning’ NEET, but dissatisfied with available opportunities and their inability to access what they want to do.

This review explores what the evidence tells us about the curricula and qualifications that are likely to encourage young people at risk of becoming disengaged to stay in education and training.

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### Curriculum-related approaches

The literature review highlighted three factors associated with the learning experience that may influence young people at risk of disengagement from learning.

#### Pedagogies

For some students, the way in which a course is taught allows them to engage in learning more effectively. Suggested constructive teaching practices include: creating a positive learning environment; showing learners respect by listening to their views and treating them like adults; maintaining close direction to ensure learners remain on task; and having a flexible approach, for example, varying teaching methods to maintain interest.

A number of ways in which teachers can provide practical support were also highlighted: smaller class sizes; use of teaching assistants; supporting learners with increased workload; impartial and personalised information, advice and guidance (IAG); and catch-up tuition for learners who have missed lessons.

A positive relationship between young people and their teachers was seen as a key factor in maintaining participation for learners at risk of disengagement from learning, as they require consistent positive interaction and individualised support.

#### Curriculum content

Curriculum content 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. The literature recommends a number of curriculum improvements: provide a wider, richer curriculum offer; improve the vocational offer; provide a flexible and more personalised curriculum; improve the delivery of the current curriculum content; and make the entire curriculum as relevant to the world of work as possible.

#### Learning environments

The literature distinguishes between two aspects of the learning environment.

The physical environment – evaluations of a number of learning programmes which take place outside of the school environment (such as within a further education (FE) college or in the workplace) indicate that young people are positive about their experience and feel that it facilitates their engagement with learning, as well as improving their confidence, motivation and maturity.

The learning atmosphere – a warm, supportive and secure learning environment where learners feel valued, respected and safe, and experience positive relationships with peers and teaching staff, may be more important than the physical environment in determining young people’s engagement with learning. The evidence suggests that young people consider non-school learning environments, with their more informal approach, as better placed to provide this type of atmosphere.

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

### Vocational qualifications

When looking for particular curricula or qualifications to facilitate the approaches suggested in the literature, the evidence was limited. However, there was a general consensus that vocational qualifications can be useful in engaging young people, leading to enhanced engagement with learning, improved personal and social skills, and a greater understanding of the world of work. Furthermore, when this learning took place outside of the school environment, this was seen to provide better preparation for the transition to further learning at age 16. The most successful vocational qualifications have certain characteristics: a curriculum with industry value; practical and unit-based assessment approaches; more varied and creative teaching approaches; and incremental progression through qualifications.

### Alternative curriculum programmes

The literature reviewed also highlighted several alternative curriculum programmes that have reportedly impacted positively on young people’s engagement with learning, through using many of the suggested curriculum-related approaches.

**Apprenticeships** – seen as one of the most successful alternatives to classroom-based education, and increasingly one of the main learning routes for those aged 14–19. They are seen to be successful because they offer access to a work-related learning environment, combine practical and theoretical learning, provide opportunities to develop personal, social and employability skills, and provide a potential route into employment.

**Increased Flexibility Programme** – a national programme where FE colleges and training providers work in partnership with schools to offer vocational qualifications to young people at key stage 4. This practical style of learning reportedly led to improvements in young people’s motivation, engagement and preparedness for working life.

**SkillForce programme** – a programme offering young people the opportunity to study a range of vocational qualifications during school hours. The informal teaching approach, small group sizes and opportunity to gain accreditation promoted enhanced personal and social skills, and improved attitudes to school.

**Reach programme** – a local programme in Wolverhampton offering an alternative Level 1 curriculum for young people at key stage 4, leading to either a BTEC or ASDAN Level 1 qualification. The varied curriculum, and range of learning environments and teaching approaches are seen to contribute to the programme’s reported success.

**Youth schools** – these Lithuanian schools offer alternative provision for those aged 12–17 who have not adapted to the regular school system, lack motivation or prefer a practical approach to learning. The small class sizes, tailored curriculum, combined theoretical and practical approaches to learning, and varied locations for learning have reportedly led to 95 per cent of participants wishing to continue in further learning or enter employment (Cedefop, 2010).

### Summary and next steps

The evidence has shown that a wide and flexible curriculum offer can help to engage young people who are at risk of disconnecting with learning. Schools must be able to offer flexibility in the delivery and content of courses to engage and sustain participation, with teachers having the freedom to use their professional judgement to design curricula that meet the needs of their pupils.

The types of courses and qualifications that are seen to impact positively on young people’s engagement with learning should be perceived by young people as relevant to their lives, combine theoretical and practical learning, and provide opportunities for learning in an informal atmosphere. High-quality vocational qualifications, which offer genuine opportunities for progression to employment, should be available to help prepare for post-16 transitions.

Access to learning in different venues and innovative teaching approaches are also beneficial, along with access to high-quality personalised IAG.

This review has identified curriculum-related approaches that could help young people at risk of disconnecting from learning to remain engaged, and provided an overview of the curriculum content, teaching approaches and learning environments that are most likely to engage young people. However, there was limited evidence on whether there are any particular curricula or qualifications that encourage these approaches to be used with young people. Much of the literature is concerned with how the curriculum and qualifications can influence young people's engagement with learning, but rarely makes links with those young people who are 'open to learning' or 'undecided' about their futures but at risk of temporary disengagement from learning. This suggests a current 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 identify young people who are 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEET
- the trialling and evaluation of specific strategies that aim to support those who are 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEET
- 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.

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## References

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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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**National Foundation for Educational Research**

The Mere, Upton Park,  
Slough, Berks SL1 2DQ

T: 01753 574123

F: 01753 691632

E: [enquiries@nfer.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@nfer.ac.uk)

[www.nfer.ac.uk](http://www.nfer.ac.uk)