

## EUROPEAN AGENDA FOR ADULT LEARNING

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### Employability Skills for Young Unemployed Adults

#### 1. Context – the challenges

Whilst official figures show that youth unemployment has been steadily declining since reaching its peak in 2011, research published by Impetus PEF in May 2016 suggests that significant numbers of young people continue to be not in education, employment or training (NEET). The analysis shows that an average of 1.3 million young people, or 17% of the age group, spend six months NEET. Of these young people, around 10% are estimated to be spending twelve months out of education, employment or training.

A young person who experiences a period NEET will, on average, lose up to £50,000 in earnings over their working life. In addition, research shows that young people who are NEET are at higher risk of regular periods of unemployment during adult life; teenage pregnancy and earlier parenting; persistent youth offending resulting in custodial sentences; insecure housing and homelessness; and mental and physical health problems.

Evidence also shows that particular groups of young people are more likely to be NEET than others. This includes:

- Young adult carers.
- Disabled young people.
- Young people who have been in local authority care.
- Young parents.

As the wider labour market improves, young people who experience particular forms of disadvantage often find themselves getting left behind and unable to access opportunities to develop the skills they need for work and for life. These young people can become trapped in a cycle of disadvantage that often pervades throughout their life.

#### 2. Factors that contribute to youth unemployment

The changing structure of the UK economy affects young people's access to the labour market. Whilst there are emerging skills gaps and shortages, there are also fewer entry level jobs available for young people – a consequence of this is that it is difficult for many young people to take their first step onto the careers ladder. In addition to challenges presented by the structure of the labour market, research shows a number of other factors affect a young person's likelihood of being unemployed.

This includes:

- **Education and training**

A range of research has found a strong link between a young person's level of education and their likelihood of experiencing unemployment. In 2015, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) published '*Empirical research on Youth Transitions to, and within, the labour market*'. This research found that young people who had extended their education, rather than entering work immediately after compulsory education, were less likely to be affected by unemployment, and made successful and sustainable transitions into the workplace in their mid-20s.

BIS' 2015 research findings confirmed earlier findings that the level of qualification a young person has achieved is a good predictor of future labour market success. This research also found that targeted, small scale, employment-focused programmes are most effective at enabling young people to progress into employment. This finding was echoed by the UKCES in their 2015 publication, *Catch 22 16-24*, in which they argued that education and employment opportunities should be more integrated in order to better prepare young people for work. This research highlighted the need for employers to take a leading role in ensuring that the UK's skills requirements are addressed.

- **Recruitment methods**

Research shows that the recruitment methods adopted by employers can affect young people's access to the labour market. For example, UKCES (2015) found that 'word of mouth' and personal recommendations remained the top recruitment method for UK employers when recruiting young people, with 24% recruited this way. This significantly restricts access to work to young people with the 'right' networks. Particular groups of young people – such as young adult carers and young people who have grown up in local authority care – are less likely to have parents, families and wider support networks who can support them into employment.

In addition, UKCES (2015) found that employers tend to recruit young people to elementary and sales positions, and do not provide training for staff at these levels. This can lead to career stagnation, with many young people competing for low paid and insecure jobs. As a result, many young people who are able to secure employment, often find themselves trapped in a cycle of low-pay, no pay and insecure work with little prospect for progression.

- **Work experience**

Research consistently highlights a lack of work experience as a key issue which employers face when attempting to recruit young people. According to UKCES (2015), 66% of employers look for work experience in job applicants, compared to 49% who identified academic qualifications as important and 50% who looked for vocational qualifications. However, the same research found that work experience opportunities were not

extensive or consistent across regions, even though this was the key area employers looked for in young job applicants. When looking at access to work experience, UKCES found that Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have the highest proportions of employers offering work experience opportunities, with most English regions (except London), lagging behind.

The current labour market context, and the factors that contribute to youth unemployment, highlight the need for focussed approaches that enable some of the most disadvantaged young people to engage with employers, gain experience of the workplace and understand what they can do to improve their chances of securing employment.

### 3. L&W's Work as UK Coordinator

#### **What skills and attributes are employers looking for in young recruits? How can young people develop skills for employability?**

These questions were the key focus on L&W's 'employability skills for young unemployed adults' project, delivered throughout 2012-15 as part of L&W's role as UK Coordinator of the European Agenda for Adult Learning.

We frequently hear reports that employers think young people are not well prepared for the world of work. This leaves many feeling demoralised and confused about what employers are actually looking for. To help address the challenge, L&W worked with learning providers in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to train and support unemployed young people to carry out face-to-face research interviews with a range of local employers. The purpose of the interviews was to identify what an 'employable young person' looks like from an employer's perspective.

By bringing unemployed young people and local employers together, the project supported young people to develop a range of skills and improve their chances of getting a job and progressing in work. Young people got to hear firsthand what skills, qualities and experience are most important to employers. Employers benefitted too – supporting young people with their job search and perhaps meeting a future employee! The research found that when recruiting a young person employers are looking for:

- Positive attitude – employers want young people to be 'sparky', they want them to show enthusiasm, commitment and energy.
- 'Soft skills' – the basic personal skills that enable young people to 'get on well at work, such as communication, time management, team work and problem-solving skills - which are transferable to different jobs.
- 'Hard skills' – many of which are job specific, but employers place particular value on literacy, numeracy and IT skills, which are considered important for almost all jobs.
- Qualifications – even though employers recognise that not all the qualities they are looking for can be measured through qualifications, they are valued by employers.

- Experience – a range of different types of experience, particularly work experience and volunteering.

The key output of this project is the '[What Employers Want](#)' website, which provides a range of information and resources for use by both young people and providers who support young people to gain skills for employment.

During the current phase of work, L&W is delighted to be working with the following organisations to deliver What Employers Want with groups of young adult carers and young people who have been in local authority care:

- Drive Forward Foundation, London
- Barnardo's CareFree Service, Leicestershire
- Sheffield Futures

#### 4. Questions to the Forum

- Are there particular groups of young people who could benefit from the What Employers Want approach?
- Which networks does L&W need to link with in order to enable more groups of young people to engage with What Employers Want?
- What resources of materials would enable support organisations to deliver What Employers Want?

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