

The coalition is still failing the forgotten 50% of young people

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It's an anxious week for many British teenagers. A-level results are published and for many this could be a crossroads moment.

Young people in the UK are right to worry about their exam results; qualifications have a big impact on life chances. Higher-level qualifications boost earnings and employment prospects, and cut the likelihood of being dependent on state benefits in the future.

This is particularly true for those with university degrees, making it even more worrying that there is such a huge gap between the support given to those making the transition to work via higher education and those going via other routes. The GCSE to A-level to university path is well supported by teachers and understood and respected by employers and parents. While getting a job after graduation can still

be a daunting prospect for some, university career services, tailored open days, and opportunities for internships and graduate schemes all help. Plus, attending university often means creating social networks that can help support the move into employment through information sharing and informal opportunities.

The transition from school for those not planning to attend higher education (the "forgotten 50 per cent") is less straight-forward. Apprenticeships can be a good route for combining work and training, and for forging links with industry. However, the quality is variable across sectors, and while numbers of apprentices have been increasing, the growth has largely been driven by apprentices over the age of 25. Recent polling shows many young people aren't engaged with apprenticeship routes: less than half have heard of the National Apprenticeship Service, only 1 in 5 believe apprenticeships can lead to well-respected careers, and almost half think apprentices are just sources of cheap labour. In further education, other vocational routes are multiple, confusing and susceptible to change. While some vocational qualifications prepare their learners well for future employment, too many have limited labour market value – failing to open doors either to employment or higher-level education. And vocational routes in many sectors are less valued or understood than general qualifications by potential employers.

It'll be particularly tough for those leaving school for employment this summer. The last two decades have seen young people's chances of employment decline relative to those of older workers, and since the recession young people have disproportionately felt the hit. One in four employers didn't hire a single person under-25 last year. On average, young people in the UK are spending two and a half years out of work. And those with low or no qualifications are three times more likely to be unemployed than their higher-skilled classmates.

In England the gap between education and employment is too wide, meaning too many young people are falling through and joining almost a million young unemployed. One third of young NEETs (those not in education, employment or training) don't claim benefits, so are effectively lost to the system. Those who find themselves seeking guidance at the job centre are placed in an adult system, which doesn't focus on young people's specific needs. The incentives too often focus on getting jobseekers into any job quickly, rather than encouraging young people to gain longer-term skills and the foundation for a future career. The Work Programme isn't working, and only kicks in too late. And where young people are finding work, it's too often on precarious, short-term contracts, meaning they cycle in and out of the benefit system. The system is setting up these youngsters for a low-paid, insecure and patchy employment future.

It doesn't need to be like this. In the Netherlands, for example, the education system provides a far clearer transition route into work for those not going to university. The majority of young people take

vocational pathways, which narrow into specific job-related training as they get older. Both academic and vocational pathways are well understood by young people and employers, in part because employers participate more actively in setting the curriculum. In 2011, only 1 in 20 young people with intermediate qualifications were unemployed, compared to 1 in 5 in the UK.

Where Dutch youths need support from public services, they aren't lumped in with adult job seekers. Those under 27-years-old are treated as a separate group from adult unemployed. The priority is for young people to be supported into secure employment, meaning broader social issues (housing, parenthood, addiction, mental health and so on) are tackled alongside job seeking. The priority is up-skilling, training and education rather than work first. In fact up to the age of 23 there's a minimum standard of education, and young people are required to return to school to achieve this standard in order to access benefits.

In many areas unemployment services for under-27s are in completely separate buildings, known as "youth desks", which house a variety of youth-focused services. Young people needing advice, benefits or guidance don't even need to enter the same building as adult job seekers. And while adult job seeking is largely done online, young people have lengthy face-to-face interviews. What the Dutch system acknowledges is that those starting out in the world of work will need tailored, holistic and supported guidance to help them make a good transition.

In the UK, we need a better approach for those young people who don't want to take an academic path and we can learn much from the Dutch system. There should be high quality vocational options and, for those without basic qualifications, pre-vocational training. Those young people accessing public services and benefits need to be treated as a separate group from adult jobseekers, taking into account broader needs. For many, benefits should be tied to a 'learn first' offer, supporting young people into training with good links into employment.

Today's young people will be thinking anxiously about their future in the upcoming days. The government needs to think more about young people's future, too.

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