

and the large shift from the manufacturing to the service sector, that occurred throughout the 1970's and 1980's there has been a sharp decline in the availability of jobs for early school leavers. Participation in post-compulsory education and training has risen steadily, with 87% of 16 year olds currently participating in some form of education or training, although participation rates fall steeply with age thereafter (DfES, 2005a) (2).

The UK has also witnessed large increases in participation in higher education, where there has been considerable success in achieving expansion, with the aim of achieving 50% participation by 2010. Despite these general increases in educational participation, participation at the post compulsory level remains well below the level desired by government, with lower levels of achievement among a minority of young people and significant levels of educational disengagement at an early stage. Participation in post-compulsory education and training in the UK is strongly linked to levels of attainment at examinations at age 16 (GCSE's) and females now outperform males at all levels of education in the UK, both in terms of qualifications (Table 1) and levels of participation.

Table 1. **Attainment at age 16 in England & Wales:
Percent achieving 5+ GCSE's at Grades A-C (2004)**

	%
Males	49
Females	59
White	55
Black	34
Asian (All)	55
- Indian	72
- Pakistani	37
- Bangladeshi	45
- Other Asian	65
Other Ethnic	59
Not Stated	48

Source: Youth Cohort Survey, Cohort 12, Sweep1

Although in many EU national contexts the subject of educational disadvantage is strongly linked with ethnic minorities in the UK this relationship is not straightforward. Although some racial groups experience educational disadvantage certain ethnic groups outperform British Whites (Table 1). On average young people from a Black or Pakistani/Bangladeshi ethnic background achieve lower levels of attainment than British Whites, whilst those from Indian or Chinese backgrounds have the highest level of attainment of all ethnic groups. Different levels of attainment among ethnic groups may be partially a reflection of variations in socio-economic composition. Analysis of attainment at age 16 shows that after controlling for deprivation the higher levels of success among Indian and Chinese pupils for both the deprived and non-deprived groups remains above average. Among the deprived population White British, those from Traveller, Irish Heritage and Roma backgrounds have the lowest levels of attainment, whilst those from a deprived Black ethnic background perform slightly better than comparable whites, the performance of the non-deprived Black population is

(2)
Figures apply to England only.

also well below the national average. The underachievement among young Blacks is seen to be most acute among Black Caribbean males (DfES, 2006).

Unemployment among young people in the UK experienced a dramatic rise from the mid 1970's and continued at a high level during the 1980's due to successive recessions and economic restructuring associated with the decline of the manufacturing industries. Since then, it has fallen dramatically both as a result of increasing educational participation combined with a recent period of relative economic stability with slow but sustained economic growth. In Spring 2004 overall unemployment reached its lowest rate since 1975, with levels of unemployment among young people typically following the adult rate albeit at a higher level. Current levels of unemployment are lower than the EU average (Table 2), with a Labour Force Survey (LFS) unemployment rate of around 12% among 18-24 year olds although it is significantly higher among 16 and 17 year olds who have left education (25% LFS), who represent about 6 per cent of the age cohort.

Table 2. **ILO unemployment Rates United Kingdom (October to December 2005)**

	%
All 16-17 Years Olds	25.0
Males (16-17 Years)	27.7
Females (16-17 Years)	22.3
All 18-24 Years Olds	11.8
Males (18-24 Years)	13.6
Females (18-24 Years)	9.8

Source: ONS Labour Force Survey

Whilst it is common for young people of all educational levels in the UK to experience a spell of unemployment during the initial transitions from education to employment, albeit of relatively short duration, longer-term difficulties in the labour market tend to be perceived as concentrated among the least qualified, this is supported by analyses of people of working age which shows a direct relationship between educational level and unemployment rates. ⁽³⁾ Analysis of long-term unemployment in Spring 2003 (defined as over 12 months) shows younger workers (18-24 years) for both men and women, are less likely to be subject to long-term unemployment. For men 38% of men aged over 50 and over were unemployed for 12 months plus, while for 18-24 year old men the respective figure was 15% (Begum, N. 2004).

Reflecting the pattern of the labour market as whole, and contrary to the picture in much of the rest of Europe, in the UK unemployment is slightly higher among young males compared to females, among 18-24 year olds 13.6% and 9.8% respectively. In terms of ethnicity, some ethnic minority groups experience above average levels of unemployment in particular Blacks and those from Pakistani/Bangladeshi backgrounds.

(3)
Unemployment: by highest qualification, Spring 2003. ONS: Labour Force Survey

3. Policy approach to educational disadvantage and the labour market

At a broad policy level the focus has been on raising educational achievement to ensure international competitiveness, centred around a policy discourse on building skills for the knowledge economy. Employability and social exclusion policies have focused very much on the supply side, aiming to tackle the perceived skills deficits of young people. At the lower end of the attainment spectrum there remains a minority of young people who leave school with minimal levels of qualification success, at a level perceived to be below that required for employability in the modern labour market and employer groups have frequently criticised a deficit in basic skills among school leavers. The government aims to tackle low post-16 participation and has set itself a target of increasing participation at age 17 from 75% to 90% over the next ten years. There is also a particular concern with a group of young people often referred to as 'Status Zer0' or the preferred term among official discourses in the UK of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) as well as the comparatively high levels of teenage parenthood. The term 'Status Zer0' was first coined following research conducted by Istance et al (1994) and was used to refer to 16 and 17 (4) year olds who were not in education, training or employment, following changes that were made to welfare benefits in 1988, which meant that this age group were no longer entitled to receive unemployment benefits and therefore officially denied the status of unemployed.

UK policy in relation to disadvantaged youth is not only linked to concerns over educational underachievement and unemployment, but reflects wider policy concerns over criminality among young people, and their risks of long-term social exclusion and welfare dependency. The strategy is concerned with reducing disadvantage through ensuring employability with an analysis that stresses the importance of education and training, and one that balances young people's welfare rights with responsibilities. For example, stringent conditions are applied to access welfare benefits and Active Labour Market Policies include sanctions for non-compliance or insufficient job search efforts. Although the 'New Labour' government in the UK has no explicit policy in reducing class based inequalities, debates over inequality have tended to be conducted in the context of social exclusion agendas and building a world-class economy. The political response has often been framed in terms of poverty is not an excuse for educational underachievement and if some can succeed, so can others. Never the less increasingly educational strategy documents have explicitly acknowledged the link between poverty and educational attainment and considerable policy efforts have been placed on preventative approaches aimed at tackling disadvantage in the pre and early years of schooling.

(4)
In the UK the official discourse refers to NEET and in this case they refer to a wider age range of 16-18 year olds.

The work of the Social Exclusion Unit, a policy think tank based within the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has been an influential body in promoting a more coherent holistic approach to policy aimed at disadvantage youth, rather than the largely disjointed approach to policy

across different government departments that had tended to predominate in the past. In particular its influential report produced in 1998 'Bridging the Gap', provided a detailed research based analysis of the NEET group and subsequently led to the development of the Connexions Service in England (See below).

Personal advisers and local partnerships formed between a range of agencies have been at the heart of the delivery of many of the new policy developments, advisers providing one-to-one support and a single point of contact for disadvantage young people, with the aim of brokering additional services according to their clients needs through a range of local inter-agency partnerships involving the public, private and voluntary sectors.

Increasingly policy reforms have attempted to build policy on evidence-based practice, and major programs have only been rolled out nationally following local pilot projects and thorough research evaluation. This has led to an evolutionary policy approach, with the continual reformulation of policy as difficulties or other issues have emerged. In particular, this has resulted in greater flexibility at the local level, albeit set within the boundaries of centrally national prescribed policy frameworks. Target setting in the form of clearly specified quantitative indicators and the sharing of best practice have been other major features of recent policy, although the overemphasis on the former has sometimes been criticised in creating too much focus among practitioners in the achievement of targets rather than promoting a more individualised approach.

Before taking a more detailed assessment of two of the major policy developments aimed at tackling youth unemployment and educational disadvantage, the New Deal for Young People and the Connexions Service a number of other related recent developments in policy in the UK that are aimed at reducing disadvantage are worthy of comment.

Successive reforms have been made to the qualification system in the UK in order to promote and cater for educational expansion and have led to the development of a qualification framework that offers diverse and flexible patterns of attainment with coherent routes for progression within the vocational, general and academic post-compulsory educational provision. During the compulsory years in England students follow a National Curriculum up to the age of 16, they progress through compulsory education in year groups and students rarely repeat or skip school years. Recent attempts have been made to reduce the level of prescribed subjects within the National Curriculum in order to allow the option for more vocational options in the 14-16 curriculum. Concerns have been expressed that the curriculum has focused too much on the more able majority of pupils at the expense of the lower attainment group. At the post-sixteen level despite numerous reforms, the UK has continued to struggle to establish a quality and coherent system of work-based vocational training, which continues to be perceived of low status in relation to the general or academic routes. Although influenced by, but not solely confined to concerns over the more

disadvantaged group, a major review of educational provision for the 14-19 age group has recently been undertaken, which led to the White Paper '14-19 Education and Skills' published in February 2005 (DfES, 2005b).

The proposals contained in the White Paper represent a major reform of the 14-19 curriculum and assessment and is to be phased in over a 10 year period. Many of the proposals contained within the White Paper focus on those young people who face barriers to learning; such as those who drop out because existing qualifications and learning styles do not suit them, those with personal problems outside of school and those with specific learning difficulties. It has proposals to ensure a greater focus on English and Mathematics to ensure all young people are equipped with the expected standards in these basic skills by the age of 14. Some of the proposals however have been criticised for failing to follow the original working groups recommendations to break down the vocational and academic divide by replacing existing qualifications with a single unified Diploma available over four levels (Tomlinson, 2004). Instead the proposals propose to retain the academic examinations (GCSE's and A Levels), but aim to provide alternative specialised diplomas in 14 vocational areas covering each occupational sector of the economy, available at three different levels and developed in conjunction with employers. The flexibility over the duration of study, which currently tends to be restricted to age cohorts will be increased to reflect the different pace of learning styles.

Economic incentives have also been used to encourage young people to remain in education in the form of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA). This is a means tested allowance based on the family household income and was recently expanded to cover vocational training as well as school-based education. The Allowance is aimed at 16-18 years who are studying a post-compulsory educational course and has three levels dependent on household income and is available to all those with a household income under 44,000 Euro. Around half the age population should qualify for a payment of between the equivalent of 15 and 45 Euros each week. Dependent on their progress young people can receive up to a further total of 740 Euros in additional bonuses over the duration of their course. (For an evaluation of EMA's see Middleton et al, 2003).

A number of strategies have also been introduced to tackle disadvantage associated with a young persons ethnic background. In particular, in 2001 the Prime Minister commissioned a Strategy Unit to look into the reasons behind Ethnic Minority employment disadvantage. The Strategy Unit report led to a number of detailed recommendations including the creation of a cross-departmental Ethnic Minority Employment Task Force, which was established in 2003 and incorporates Government ministers and other key stakeholder groups. Although the remit is not specific to young people the Task Force aims to monitor progress in relation to reducing discrimination across different government departments and implement a range measures to provide greater support for ethnic minorities education and employment outcomes (Ethnic Minority Employment Task Force, 2004). Although this represents a commitment on the part of national government to tackle

discrimination among ethnic groups, and progress has made in implementing the recommendations of the Strategy Unit it is too early to assess the quantitative impact of the ongoing strategy in reducing ethnic minority disadvantage.

4. The Connexions Service

The Connexions Service in England was developed following the 'Bridging the Gap' Report, which was an assessment of 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training (NEET) conducted by the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU, 1999). The report identified two main sets of factors associated with non-participation, educational underachievement and disaffection, and family disadvantage and poverty.

Connexions was developed as a mainstream programme and is aimed at 13-19 year olds and its introduction coincided with a reform of the old careers guidance and youth service. Prior to its introduction there had been major concerns about the ineffectiveness of the proliferation of agencies working with young people at risk from social exclusion and a lack of coordination of these services. In this respect, the Connexions Service represented an attempt to tackle the issue of educational disadvantage through a holistic joined up policy perspective. While the policy departmentally falls under the remit of the Department of Education and Skills there is a broader concern with young people's transition to the labour market and social inclusion. Underpinning the overall aims of the Connexions Strategy is a desire to increase the level of skills among young people and improve on the UK's comparatively poor performance in terms of post-compulsory participation in education and training. There are also a number of more specific policy concerns within the Connexions strategy, in particular a concern to reduce the number of 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training (NEET), reducing teenage parenthood and impacting on young people's involvement with crime (DfEE, 2000). The underlying theme behind Connexions is that if young people become disconnected from schooling and further education, and therefore the labour market, they are likely to pose significant problems in terms of crime, family breakdown, teenage pregnancy as well as being a significant drain on the welfare state.

At the heart of this service is a new occupational profession of Connexions Personal Advisers. The aim of the role of Personal Advisers is to provide a single point of contact for the delivery of support to young people across a wide range of issues, and therefore the role is not solely restricted to providing advice on education or the labour market. The programme objectives are both broad and narrow and this is reflected in the fact that although it is a universal service aimed at all 13-19 year olds, a three-tier level of support is provided depending upon young people's individual's circumstances. As a service it aims to provide general career, education and training advice for the majority of young people with minimal intervention, with more specific intervention for those deemed most at risk. For those whom are deemed at risk of disengaging from education more in-depth

guidance is provided, while among those with multiple problems it aims to provide intensive and sustained support. Personal Advisers have been recruited from a range of professions including the former Careers Service, youth and social workers.

Aside from providing generalised career advice to the majority, among those at risk of disengaging the aim is to provide holistic support to those with multiple problems and end the fragmentation of services for young people at risk. Personal Advisers provide a single point of contact for an individual young person and broker advice or support from a range of other agencies depending upon the young persons needs. In other words, if Personal Advisers cannot directly assist a young person the idea is that they broker advice from other related agencies. In this respect, Personal Advisers have a generic role in that they need to be knowledgeable about local provision across a range of services such as education and training, housing, welfare benefits and a range of health issues. Advisers are based within different locations including: schools, colleges, specialist Connexions Centres or 'One-stop-shops' and outreach work in the community is also common.

Although overall responsibility and the funding for Connexions lies within the remit of the Department of Education and Skills, it is delivered at the local level by 47 Connexions partnerships across England. Partnership working at the local level is seen as central to the work with an expectation of involvement of the statutory, public and voluntary sectors. These local partnerships are intended to be responsive to local needs and are either led by newly formed private companies or through Local Authorities. They consist of a high level board of directors who are responsible for strategic planning that include representatives from the main statutory, public, private and voluntary communities involved in youth support, while Local Management Committees oversee the day to day delivery of the programme. Aside from the local aspect of the programme a centrally run Connexions Direct Service also provides a range of other services to young people. There is a web-based information point that provides information on a range of issues (Careers, education and training, health, housing, rights, money, personal relationships etc), and Connexions Direct Advisers are available seven days a week from 8am until 2am to provide confidential advice to young people utilising a range of communication media (Telephone, SMS, on-line chat). If deemed appropriate Connexions Direct Advisers may refer callers to Personal Advisers based in their own local area.

The introduction of the Connexions Service represented a radical change in the structure and delivery of guidance services for young people in the UK. It is a highly complex programme both in terms of structure and delivery and highlights some of the challenges in developing a cross-sectoral or holistic approach to disadvantaged youth policy (Walther et al, 2005). Aside from this holistic approach there are many other good practice elements built into the design of the programme. These include involving young people themselves in its design and delivery, learning and sharing from best practice, and encouraging personal advisers to be reflective in the work that they do.

The programme has been subject to an intense range of centrally set performance targets, as well as evaluations and research programmes at both the local and national levels. One of the main government targets was reduce the numbers in NEET by 10 per cent between 2002-2004. The official estimates of the number of 16-18 year olds in the NEET group at the start of this period was 10 per cent, since then, over the target period it fell by 14 per cent, although there were significant local variations (DfES, 2004c). Questions have however been raised over the difficulties in attributing this directly to Connexions, rather than other broader changes within the education and training system and other socio-economic factors.

Other evaluations and research into the Connexions service have revealed a range of issues. Overall the research has shown that the programme is viewed positively both by young people and other stakeholders involved (DfES 2004a; DfES 2004b; Deakin et al, 2004; Joyce & White, 2004) as well as assisting in a significant improvement in inter-agency working. The success of the programme is seen as dependent on the effectiveness of local partnerships and the evaluations have highlighted in some cases difficulties in overcoming traditional boundaries of work between agencies and other cases a resistance to holistic working practices. In addition there have been a number of problems in implementing the programme, with problems of the recruitment and resourcing of the number of Personal Advisers required. This particularly impacted upon the universal aspect of the service and evaluations have indicated that general careers guidance to the majority has become patchy and problematic, as Advisers focus on the most disadvantaged groups. Personal Advisers and young people have also often reported a lack of time to deal with issues effectively due to the high level of caseloads (Auditor General, 2004; Hoggarth & Smith, 2004).

Other criticisms that have emerged relate to the way in which deep structural inequalities within the UK are rendered invisible through the way in which Connexions addresses social exclusion at the individual level (Colley & Hodkinson, 2001) and the implicit surveillance role of the strategy whereby partner agencies are intended to share information to help track and identify those that might be deemed at risk. This has led to concerns about civil rights issues and some agencies have been reluctant to share information citing Data Protection legislation (Coles et al, 2004).

• **The New Deal for Young People**

One of the other major reforms that has been introduced in the UK is the 'New Deal for Young People', it focuses on an older age group than Connexions, focusing on those aged 18-24 years. It was launched by the 'New Labour' government as one of its flagship policies when it came to power in 1997. It was the first of a series of major welfare to work reforms that aimed to tackle unemployment and reduce social exclusion and a perceived culture of welfare dependency, in-line with what has been termed the 'third way' political objectives of the social investment state (Giddens, 1998). The main aim of the programme was to increase the employability of

the young unemployed, help them into jobs and to reduce long-term dependency on welfare benefits.

The proposals were in line with the recommendations of the EU Lisbon summit whereby all young people aged between 18 and 24 in the UK are required to enter the 'New Deal for Young People' following a period of 6 months continuous unemployment. The programme was initially funded through a one-off tax on the privatised national utilities such as gas, water, telecoms and electricity that had been privatised by the previous Conservative administration and is supplemented by EU funding through the European Social Fund (ESF).

In the UK all persons over 18 years old are independently entitled to basic unemployment benefits or social assistance in the form of the 'Job Seekers Allowance', regardless of previous contributions through paid work or family circumstances. With the introduction of the New Deal for Young People, following 6 months unemployment participation in the programme became mandatory, and those who fail to cooperate can be sanctioned through the withdrawal of their welfare benefits. To give some idea of the scale of the programme total participation in Great Britain during March 2005, was 72,790 persons and the national budget for 2004 amounted to £170 Million (€246 Million).

The programme consists of three key stages a 'Gateway' period, the 'New Deal Options' and a 'Follow Through' period. On entry to the New Deal each participant enters the Gateway, which is designed to last up to four months. Here each participant is allocated a 'Personal Adviser' who provides personalised guidance and assists in the drawing up of an action plan tailored to the needs of the individual's personal circumstances and to provide help with job search and vocational guidance. Many young people leave the programme during this Gateway phase and successfully enter unsubsidised employment, but for those who fail to find employment within the specified period they are then required to enter the next stage of the programme the New Deal options. There are four New Deal Options: A period of six months subsidised work experience with a participating employer, who is paid a subsidy of £60 per week (€86) towards wages; a full-time education or vocational training option attending a course of up to a year which leads to a nationally recognised qualification (up to the equivalent UK level of ISCED 3), which is intended to address those with limited educational qualifications or deficits in basic skills; or to take a place on a voluntary work programme or on an environmental task force. Those entering the voluntary or environmental task force options receive an additional payment of £15.38 (€22.50) in addition to their unemployment benefit.

The 'Follow Through' stage provides continuing support for the young people while they are in one of the New deal options in order to aid completion of the option and further support is provided from Personal Advisers if they return to unemployment after the New Deal.

Certain young people with specific disadvantages are entitled to enter the programme prior to the normal 6-month unemployment requirement and since its initial conception as a programme for young people, New Deal provision has been developed to cater for a range of other groups including lone parents and the disabled, although in these specific cases participation is voluntary. The duration young people spend on the New Deal is largely dependent on their success of finding unsubsidised work, around one in ten young people leave the New Deal before they even have a first interview with an adviser, a small majority leave during the 4-month Gateway period, with around one in five leaving the programme from the 'Follow Through' at the end of the options.

In assessing the effectiveness of the New Deal for Young People, much of the research evaluation relates from the first two years of operation and the early impact of the programme. During this period, analysis of the outflows from unemployment indicate a reduction of between 35,000 and 40,000 in unemployed youth, with no clear adverse effect on other groups of workers and an estimated 15,000 in jobs as a result of the New Deal (White & Riley, 2002). Overall the macro evaluations indicated a welfare gain to the economy as a whole, after taking account of a reduction in benefit payments and higher taxation raised through employment, this was worth about £3 (€4.40) for every £5 (€7.32) spent, with an annual cost for each person in employment estimated to be between £3,000 (€4,392) and £7,000 (€10,238) (White & Riley, 2002).

Results of qualitative research with participants, employers and those involved in the delivery of the programme show the scheme is viewed positively (O'Connor et al, 2001; O'Connor et al, 2000; Elam and Snape, 2000). New Deal advisers, like Connexions advisers represent one of the more innovative aspects of the programme and overall they have been well received by young people, however the relationship between the young person and the adviser has been found to be crucial to young people's good or bad assessment of the programme (Millar, 2000). The main success of the programme has been assisting those who are job ready with additional assistance in job search and careers advice. Although many of these young people are likely to have found jobs without assistance, the macro evaluation however has found that some jobs were directly created through New Deal and there was a reduction in the period spent unemployed. The programme has been less successful in helping those with multiple barriers to employment and success has also been disappointing in relation to ethnic minority groups. The conditions in the local labour market are also relevant for the success of the programme (Hoogvelt & France, 2000; Turok & Webster, 1998) and the programme overall has experienced a relatively buoyant period in the UK's economic history. Never the less a significant proportion of young people do not gain jobs through the New deal and there is evidence that many were entering the programme for a second or third time (Finn, 2003). Recognising the variation in local conditions that may impact on the success of the programme, recent developments have led to greater flexibility at the local level, whereby there is more discretion and increased budget flexibility for District managers to decide what training or

support is needed to address local problems and meet individual needs. A number of additional initiatives have also been added in pilot areas to assist those with specific or multiple problems associated with employability (DWP, 2004). 'StepUp' for example, is a one year subsidised job placement targeted at high unemployment areas and there are other initiatives aimed at those with a history of drug-use, ex-offenders, homelessness or alcohol problems

Some criticisms have emerged in relation to the inappropriate placement of young people in the New Deal options and a perhaps undesirable hierarchy has also emerged within the options, with young people favouring the subsidised Employment and Education or Training options, over the Voluntary or Environmental options, which have become perceived as a last resort for those who cannot be placed in one of the more preferable options. With the high demand among young people for the employment option, one of the challenges has been to promote greater employer involvement in the programme and various attempts have been made to achieve this with mixed success.

The Full-time Education and Training options have also experienced some difficulties. One of the challenges has been developing the adequate provision of appropriate courses, with sufficient flexibility that is required in order for young people to be able to enter and leave a course dependent on the period they enter New Deal, rather than according to normal periods of study (Tavistock Institute, 1999). Course provision has therefore tended to focus on relatively short-term courses focusing on basic skills and prevocational provision and there have been difficulties over completing some vocational courses over the prescribed maximum of 52 weeks for which funding is available. Some better-qualified young people also resent the fact that they cannot use the option to gain higher-level skills as the provision is generally restricted to courses equivalent to ISCED 3 or below (Millar, 2000).

The mandatory participation and the use of benefit sanctions has been another controversial aspect of the programme, It has been argued these sanctions are only applied in the most extreme cases, but in total around 13,000 young people in Great Britain are sanctioned each year, mainly for failing to attend a place on a training scheme or employment programme or for losing a place through misconduct (DWP, 2005). Some however have argued that the New Deal sanctions may actually be counterproductive there is little evidence to support the view that unemployed young people lack the determination to find work and without strong family support the withdrawal of benefits may leave young people few options other than the engagement of crime or the informal economy (Furlong et al, 2005).

5. Conclusion

For the past several decades the UK has put considerable efforts into raising post-compulsory participation in education and dealing with issues surrounding youth unemployment. While many of these initiatives in the past

have proved outstanding failures, in recent years there has at least been a serious attempt to tackle some of the issues associated with disadvantaged youth, and one that is based upon evidence-based practice. While some of the results of evaluations have shown some positive developments and also display elements of good practice, they have operated at a time when the UK economy has been relatively buoyant. However there is less evidence to show how it is improving the situation of the least qualified and those from the most disadvantaged families, although the parallel efforts of tackling disadvantage at the pre and early years of schooling will take some time to show whether they impact on long-term outcomes.

Virtually all of these initiatives have focused on the supply-side, and in this respect implicitly put the emphasis on young people's lack of appropriate skills, lack of job readiness or their unrealistic aspirations. Contrary to such a premise the vast majority of young people in the UK show a great readiness to enter the world of work, and certainly compared to many of their Southern European peers are very quick to downgrade their occupational aspirations, often entering occupations for which they are well over-qualified in order to get an initial foot on the employment ladder. Such a policy approach fails to acknowledge the deep-seated inequalities in UK society and the regional and local distribution of employment opportunities. In one particularly critical review over UK policy since the 1970's, Roberts (2004) argues that educational expansion in itself may be part of the problem and how new initiatives such as the Connexions and the New Deal have done little to reduce young people's risk of unemployment. Although he acknowledges unemployment rates among 18-24 year olds are lower now than they were in the early 1990's, he highlights how the pace of decline among this age group has been slower than the workforce as a whole. Instead he argues for a return to job creation programmes, the one solution with a proven track record, but one he concedes will be dismissed under 21st century conditions, where such artificial measures will be perceived as blunting the countries competitive edge in a globalising economy.

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