

# Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training

**Paper to support oral evidence to the National Assembly for Wales' Enterprise and Learning Committee's Inquiry into Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEEETs)**  
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## Introduction

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1. ColegauCymru / CollegesWales welcomes the opportunity to provide written and oral evidence to the Enterprise and Learning Committee's Inquiry into People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs). ColegauCymru / CollegesWales is the national organisation representing the 21 further education (FE) colleges and two FE institutions in Wales.
2. Each college is unique in size and number and type of learners. The largest college enrolls over 20,000 students and the smallest around 1,500 students.
3. FE colleges are committed to widening access for all learners from the age of 16 (in many cases 14) up to 90 and beyond. Colleges enrol learners of all abilities. They have invested heavily in their student support services to ensure that students obtain high quality support and guidance. Many students have had their lives transformed by their experiences at college.
4. Colleges have a key role in supporting young people who are NEET – defined by WAG in *Skills That Work for Wales: A Skills and Employment Strategy and Action Plan* July 2008 as 'a young person between the ages of 16 and 19, who is either unemployed or economically inactive and not participating in education and training'. We welcome the fact that the Committee has widened the scope of its inquiry to consider young people up to the age of 24. ColegauCymru has long held the view that official support to people who are NEET falls away after the age of 19.

## The effectiveness of Welsh Government strategies in delivering outcomes for your people who are NEET

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5. ColegauCymru recognises the long-term impact on the Welsh economy and on the longer term life chances of young people who drop out of education, employment and training at a young age. Many of them lack qualifications. Evidence shows that those without qualifications find it much more difficult to find employment than those with qualifications.
6. It is estimated that there are around 14,000 (12% of school-leavers) who become NEET<sup>1</sup>, although this might be an underestimate. Research commissioned by The Prince's Trust in 2007 on 16-24 years olds concluded that 'almost one-fifth of young people in England, Scotland

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<sup>1</sup> *Delivering Skills that Work for Wales Reducing the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training in Wales* published in April 2008 estimated that there were around 12,000 NEET in Wales

and Wales are not in education, training or employment'. OECD data shows that the UK compares very poorly to other countries in this respect.<sup>2</sup> This figure can be expected to have increased as the Prince's Trust study was completed before the economic downturn.

7. Anecdotal evidence points to many young people working in the hidden economy or in unskilled temporary or piecemeal jobs, on the fringes of being NEET but not gaining access to education and training opportunities and who are not detected by official statistics.
8. Policies to bring many of these young people into the mainstream need to be innovative and radical. Traditional methods may not be suitable. Many of those NEET will have been persistently absent from school. Thus a key focus must be on seeking ways of working with at-risk young people in school: prevention rather than cure.
9. Vocational subjects must be viewed as 'core subjects' and made available to younger learners and to learners across the range of abilities.
10. ColegauCymru believes the following need to be put into place:
  - a wider choice and flexibility of programmes
  - ways of learning that promote independence, confidence and decision-making
  - a central learning core equipping young people for employment
  - a range of personal support through the work of learning coaches
  - personal support to overcome barriers to learning
  - impartial careers advice and guidance that seeks to put the interests of individual learners above those of the institution.
11. We agree that there must be a strong focus on raising the literacy and numeracy levels of NEETs. The national figures for illiteracy and innumeracy published in *The Skills That Work for Wales Action Plan* are in themselves alarming.
12. People lacking basic skills often develop various coping strategies, for example, avoiding situations where illiteracy will be highlighted. This can mean avoiding support services and employment. Offenders and ex-offenders also have disproportionately low levels of literacy and qualifications. The *Skills That Work for Wales Action Plan* outlines evidence that learning programmes can help offenders to secure stable employment.

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<sup>2</sup> Sandra McNally and Shqiponja Telhaj (April 2007) *The Cost of Exclusion*, The Princes Trust with the Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics.

13. The WAG consultation document on NEETs (see note 1) identified three broad categories of NEET. These are
- a. core NEET – those with social and behavioural problems or other more complex needs including those who come from families where worklessness is an accepted norm
  - b. floating or ‘at-risk’ NEET – young people who lack direction, motivation and tend to have spells of being NEET in between attending school or further education courses or low wage, low skill employment with little or no training opportunities. Can and mostly do have the problems/barriers listed in (a) but perhaps at different levels meaning they are more willing to engage with support
  - c. transition/gap year NEET – those young people who have chosen to take time out before progressing to further or higher education opportunities and are likely to return to education, training or employment, but it is not always clear when this will occur. Such ‘transition periods’ are often short-term and mean that NEET status for this group is a relatively benign experience not requiring government intervention.
14. The response to *Skills That Work for Wales* also identified other groups such as ethnic minority women, those with learning difficulties, those with physical impairments, offenders and ex-offenders.
15. Young people who are ‘core NEET’ require more sustained investment and support than those who are going through a period of transition. Particular attention will need to be given to transforming the attitudes and behaviour of those young people to help them cope with the disciplines of the workplace, which will equip them to take up a broad range of jobs.
16. Improving opportunities for young people who are NEET requires sustained investment. Colleges recognise that young people who are NEET require support and guidance well above that provided for other more motivated learners who may have the benefit of supportive families and who feel comfortable in an education/training environment.
17. ColegauCymru recognises that the needs of young people who are NEET are diverse and that policies to address the issues need to reflect the different circumstances faced by young people. There needs to be a strong emphasis on meeting individual learning needs.

18. While ColegauCymru accepts that 16-19 year olds are a key target, it is important that the range of support envisaged for this age group does not disappear at the age of 20. Many people who are NEET will require continued support in their twenties and thirties and it important that policies are drawn up to tackle to problems of older people who are NEET.

### **Welsh Government's engagement with the Department of Work and Pensions and Job Centre Plus in Wales in ensuring coherent policy response to address circumstances of young people who are NEET**

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19. ColegauCymru recognises that WAG is seeking to develop its relationship with the Department for Work and Pensions and Job Centre Plus. In December 2009, John Griffiths, then WAG Deputy Minister for Skills, announced the setting up a joint Labour Market Framework with the DWP. The statement committed WAG and DWP to work together to develop new programmes for implementation in Wales to improve employment opportunities. A Joint Employment Delivery Board, comprising senior officials from WAG and DWP, has been set up. It has an operational and delivery focus.
20. In February 2010, the Minister for Children, Education and Lifelong Learning launched a joint Labour Market Framework setting out its ambitions including reducing the number of people who are unemployed or not economically active. In April 2010, the Joint Employment Delivery Board published the joint Operational Plan for Wales 2010/11 which:
- focuses actions on the delivery of programmes to tackle youth employment in Wales
  - enables all disadvantaged groups to enter the labour market through diversity of programme delivery
  - provides the skilled workforce that employers need.
21. ColegauCymru welcomes the setting up of the Joint Employment Delivery Board which will bring together policies of WAG and DWP. It is too early to assess the impact of the new Board or its Joint Operational Plan.
22. Colleges in Wales have reported that they have found difficulty in winning contracts from DWP to support disadvantaged learners. Some colleges have reported that these contracts are awarded to organisations which cover both sides of the Wales/England border. Some clarification as to how colleges in Wales can bid for DWP contracts would be welcome.

**The extent that Welsh Government's economic development employment strategy (e.g. Economic Renewal Programme) addresses issues affecting 16-24 year olds (and specifically those over 18) who are NEET**

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23. WAG initiatives such as ReAct<sup>3</sup>, ProAct<sup>4</sup>, and the Pathways to Apprenticeships Programme<sup>5</sup> have undoubtedly helped businesses and many people of all ages who have found themselves at risk of becoming NEET. These three programmes are, however, temporary. They need to be continued or successors found in order to provide stability to those at risk of losing their jobs or already unemployed.
24. ColegauCymru supports the recommendations in the recent annual report from the Wales Employment and Skills Board (WESB) published in May 2010. Volume 4 of its report covered Youth Unemployment. The report recommended a whole-government multi-departmental response to tackle youth unemployment, which included the identification of a wider budget for action, simplification of the means by which youth employment is tackled and further flexibility in the relationship between UK funded support (such as through DWP) and Welsh priorities.
25. It also argued that every young person should have a planned and personalised package of support so as to meet the diverse needs of disengaged young people by the time they have been unemployed for six months. Personal support is expensive but crucial, especially for young people who may not have support at home.
26. It is also essential that there are sufficient numbers of well trained learning coaches and others with appropriate skills giving support to young people over housing, finances and drug misuse. Those giving support must themselves be entitled to a clear career path with continuing professional development opportunities to ensure that they perform to the highest standards.
27. ColegauCymru accepts the WESB conclusion that disengagement from mainstream society, often reflected in poor performance at school, is a key problem for some young people. The Board recommends an overall Youth Engagement Strategy in receipt of stable funding, aimed at tackling disengagement at a pre-school leaving age. It recognises that

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<sup>3</sup> ReAct is aimed at people who have been made redundant

<sup>4</sup> ProAct is aimed at companies whose financial circumstances during this challenging economic period leads them to consider laying off staff or putting them onto short time working

<sup>5</sup> the Pathways to Apprenticeships Programme provides the college-based part of an apprenticeship

behaviour such as absenteeism that is learnt and tolerated at school level is likely to continue in later years

### **The status of arrangements/negotiations for current/future European Structural funding for NEETs policy delivery in Wales**

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28. Colleges have for many years received funding for European projects aimed at those most in need. These have been important in tackling disadvantage. However in the new round of EU supported projects, only one or two colleges have been successful in their bids.
29. Some European money has been invested in WAG schemes such as ProAct and PTAs. Funding for work-based learning is funded from Europe. Other funding has been diverted to support higher education initiatives such as the development of foundation degrees, in which colleges are engaged.

### **The effectiveness of agency collaboration/partnership working in addressing NEETs issues in Wales and whether there is duplication of effort in this area**

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30. ColegauCymru agrees with the conclusions of the WESB annual report that agency collaboration/partnership needs to be better organised and handled. WESB recommends multi-agency working but with a lead agency approach to minimise complexity and overlap. The Joint Employment Delivery Board should move towards the concept of a 'pooled budget' to enable funding to become more simplified and more straightforward.
31. In its evidence to the NEETs strategy document ColegauCymru said:

*Having one organisation take the lead responsibility for young people who are NEET is sensible. Currently, the plethora of different organisations dealing with young people who are NEET<sup>6</sup> may lead to confusion and duplication. The lead organisation should have responsibility for assessing the position in their area, determining the support available, clarifying who does what, and, of critical importance, regularly monitoring progress and making changes where necessary. This last point is crucial as the lead organisation should be able to reflect on progress and, if necessary, make changes.*

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<sup>6</sup> Agencies identified in NEETS consultation document para 2.2 included local authorities, educational institutions, Children and Young People's Partnership organisations, Careers Wales, statutory and voluntary Youth Services, young offender teams, housing providers, JobCentre Plus, the police and youth justice services as well as numerous third sector.

*The lead organisation should be adequately resourced and have the statutory power to take decisions which cut across other agencies where this might be deemed necessary.*

## **The implications of the current Welsh Government's Review of Careers Services in Wales on implementation of NEETs policies.**

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32. The report of the Review of Careers Services has not yet been published. However, ColegauCymru supports all age career service which provides independent advice and guidance to young people and adults. Young people at school need to be given advice on opportunities for education and training which are appropriate to their own needs and reflect developments in the economy and are not influenced by the institution providing education and training.
33. ColegauCymru recognises the importance of Young People's Partnerships (YPPs) working closely with the Careers Service. However, the YPPs do not have in membership the wide range of agencies that can impact on NEETs. FE colleges, with their experience in providing second chance opportunities to learners, their wide range of vocational courses and their excellent guidance and support services, have an important role to play in providing support for NEETs.
34. The Youth Service also has a key role to play. It needs to be placed on a statutory footing and given a key interventionist role to work with young people younger than 16 and post-16.

## **Conclusion**

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35. ColegauCymru welcomes the WAG's initiatives to reduce the numbers of young people who are NEET in Wales. These policies have to go hand in hand with the WAG's commitment to raise skills levels in Wales, improve literacy and numeracy levels and to increase the employment rate amongst adults of working age.
36. The curriculum for young people who are NEET has to be flexible to meet their circumstances. They need to be able to build up their confidence and to be equipped with skills that will prepare them for employability. Financial support should seek to encourage participation. They also require extensive support and guidance from highly trained professional staff.
37. FE colleges have a central role to play in delivering the learning opportunities needed by NEETs.