

# BULLETIN

## The Youth Labour Market in Cumbria

Significant changes have occurred in the pattern of post-compulsory destinations of young people in England over the past few decades, the most important of which has been the increasing proportion of school leavers remaining in full-time education beyond school leaving age. As a result, employers are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit suitably qualified 16 year olds as the majority are remaining in education; those who are available do not have the required skills or work attitudes. A recent IER study presents an analysis of the education and labour market experiences of young people aged 16 to 19 years in Cumbria<sup>1</sup>. To date, very little attention has focused on the Cumbrian youth labour market.

### Cumbria – a region of constraints and opportunity

Educational participation in England may now have peaked. Figure 1 shows that educational participation rates in England, Cumbria and the North West have levelled out. Participation for 16 year olds is similar to that for England, although that for 17 year olds is higher in Cumbria.

Figure 1 may also highlight that during the favourable labour market we have enjoyed since the late 1990s, some young people who may have remained in full-time education in the early 1990s when the economy was in recession are now entering the labour market at 16 and 17. Compared to other Europeans there is still a strong desire amongst young people in the UK to leave school soon after the end of compulsory schooling.

Several initiatives have been instigated to encourage 16 to 19 year olds to continue in education, the most innovative of which, the Educational Maintenance Allowance, pays eligible young people in selected pilot areas a weekly allowance to remain in post-16 formal education. This will be a nationwide initiative from September 2004.

However, Government supported training is not a preferred option for many young people, as the declining numbers testify. The fall in Cumbria has been lower than in England and this is probably related to the high proportion of manufacturing employers in the county who tend to be the traditional providers of Government supported training.

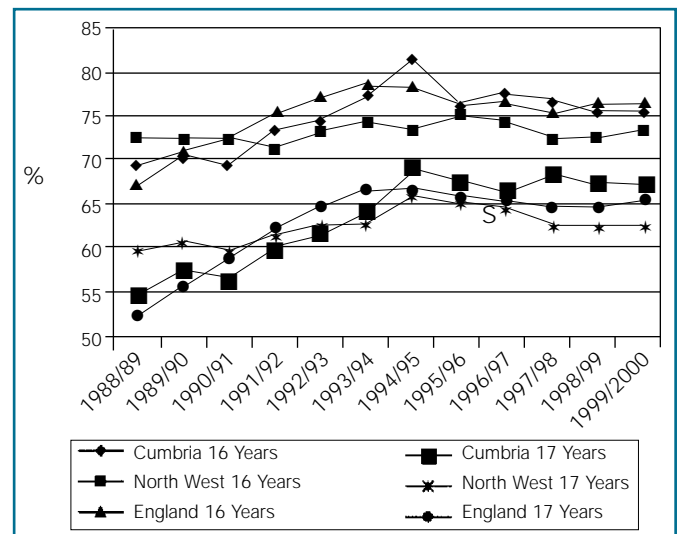


Figure 1. Participation in Education, 16 and 17 year olds in Cumbria, North West and England, 1988-2000 (%)

Over this period, in common with other parts of the UK, Cumbria's youth population has contracted. Whilst this suggests increased education and employment opportunities for all young people, the fate of the less qualified has worsened, primarily as a result of a decreasing demand for unskilled labour, changing skill demands and greater competition from qualified labour.

Moreover, when young people leave initial education, a high proportion of their jobs are part-time and temporary and in many cases poorly paid and low skilled. Some young people 'swirl' through a sequence of such jobs, interrupted with

<sup>1</sup> The research summarised in this Bulletin was funded by the Cumbria Learning and Skills Council. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not necessarily be attributed to the Cumbria LSC. The study, 'The Youth Labour Market in Cumbria: Employer and Young People's Perspectives' by Angela Canny and Robert Lindley, was published by the Cumbria LSC in September 2002. Contact: [r.m.lindley@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:r.m.lindley@warwick.ac.uk). Angela Canny has now moved to the University of Limerick ([angela.canny@mic.ul.ie](mailto:angela.canny@mic.ul.ie)).

periods of unemployment, employment programmes and periods of inactivity. As a result, young people are staying longer in the parental home.

This study showed that one of the biggest issues facing organisations working with young people in Cumbria is that aspirations and expectations are rooted locally.

Young people choose local education and training courses rather than travel to courses which may be better suited to their abilities and aspirations. Poor transport is a key barrier to those looking for education, training or jobs outside their local area.

The importance of social networks is one reason why some young people remain in their local area - leading some to become caught in a cycle of low paid and insecure local jobs.

On the other hand, given the relatively limited education infrastructure, most of those who stay on for higher education leave the area because of the perceived lack of educational and skilled occupational opportunities.

### The nature of young people's employment

The decline in manufacturing has led to the loss of apprenticeships which were previously an important route to employment, particularly for males. Young people are now more heavily concentrated in retail, sales, hotels, restaurants, personal, social and community activities as well as customer service. Many are in low skilled elementary occupations.

The shift to services employment has led to an expansion of part-time and other non-standard forms of employment and it has been unqualified young people who have been most disadvantaged by these trends. Organisational restructuring has also acted against them. The traditional bureaucratic organisation with its graded career structure has been replaced by flatter organisations with fewer opportunities to progress up the career ladder.

Cumbria also lacks specialism in key higher value service sectors such as finance and computing, being heavily dependent on tourism, a sector characterised by its low skilled activity and poor commitment to education and training. These factors are not conducive to attracting inward investment. As a result, aspirations tend to be further embedded locally to a much greater extent than elsewhere in the UK.

### An employer's perspective

Just over half of the 103 companies interviewed were part of a larger organisation whose high skilled and graduate jobs tended to be located at head offices outside the county.

Most Cumbrian employers depend on local young people for labour and most said their entire young workforce live in the district. Consequently, some employers have problems recruiting the suitably qualified whilst young people are reliant on local jobs. In areas heavily dependent on tourism, youth employment is primarily in hotels and restaurants, which offer few long-term career opportunities and jobs tend to be seasonal. Also, most companies are small and not noted for their provision of education or training.

When companies were asked to specify the three most important skills required for non-management staff, the most frequently mentioned were customer service, communication and interpersonal skills. Computer/IT skills were not considered important by those companies employing young people, although they were rated highly by those who do not employ young people. Formal qualifications were considered more important amongst companies which do not employ young people.

When asked to assess young men, only a small number of employers felt their skills were good. Young men were not as well rated as young women, which suggests they may not be fully aware of the skills which are now required. It may be the case that some young men fail to recognise that many of the industrial jobs which were available to their fathers no longer exist.

Employers felt there were better job and career opportunities for young women than for young men in Cumbria. However, they find it hard to retain young people because young people become bored or want better-paid work. This may indicate a gap between their aspirations and the realities of the labour market given their skills and qualifications.

Generally, employed young people displayed a high level of commitment and satisfaction with their job, but recognised that poor promotional opportunities existed in their current employment.

### Activities and aspirations of young people

Over 200 young people were interviewed: the sample covered Year 11 students, those in post-compulsory education; those in work-based training; employed young people and those not in education, employment or training.

When Year 11 students and those in post-compulsory education were asked what they intend to do after this academic year, the majority intended to remain in education, although males were more attracted to work-based training or employment.

Of those in work-based training, more young men had left education at an earlier age compared to females, the majority with only Level 2 qualifications. Females were significantly more likely to have attained Level 3 qualifications.

Connexions was important when young people were asked how they found out about their current work-based training. All expressed satisfaction with their training although many were dissatisfied with the training allowance, which may be one reason why some young people drop out of training.

Turning to young people in employment, most of those who left school at or before age 16 did so with Level 2 qualifications or below. This highlights the low attainment of employed young people and suggests a significant proportion are at risk of becoming marginalised in the labour market.

Those who found it hardest to gain jobs were young people without pro-active family members or whose parents were unemployed. The situation was made worse if they also had no contact with Connexions. Employed young people may not be fully aware of Connexions as a means of accessing information

on job vacancies so Connexions may have to target parents to encourage more young people to make use of its services.

When young people not in education, employment or training were asked what they would like to do next, young men were most likely to want to get a job while young women were more likely to want to pursue education. Those who wanted to return to education or work-based training recognised the long-term value of gaining qualifications or learning a trade whilst those who intended to obtain employment aspired to relatively low level jobs.

### Making careers decisions

All young people in post-compulsory education and work said they received helpful advice, while those not in education, employment or training were not so sure. Females were more likely than males to say they had received helpful advice. Those who indicated they received helpful advice highlighted the importance of Connexions. Parents, guidance teachers and other teachers and tutors were also considered important sources of advice and information but the Internet was not.

Connexions was most important as a source of advice and information for those in work, work-based training and young people not in education, employment or training. Parents were most important for those in Year 11 and those not in education, a job or training. Family members were slightly more important for males than females whilst the advice of friends was also significant.

The research suggests the need for closer co-operation between parents, Connexions and local schools and colleges, particularly in ensuring parents have accurate and up-to-date information on education, job and career information.

When asked about job attributes, a job with interest and variety, pleasant work colleagues, security and training were considered most important. Not considered important were a job which would enable them to move out of Cumbria; a job which allows them to work with their hands and one that has regular 9-5 working hours. This suggests a flexible attitude towards work amongst young people.

Young people in education, particularly those in post-compulsory education, considered it important to get a job which offered opportunities to move out of Cumbria. This suggests this group was more aware of the lack of opportunities in the local labour market for the highly qualified.

Employed young people were the most likely to consider it important to get a job that pays well. The majority believed that Cumbria offers good education and training opportunities for those not in education.

Young people not in education, employment or training said it was difficult to find a well paid job in Cumbria and were most likely to feel that local employers did not like to employ young people who had left school early.

In contrast, young people in post-compulsory education believe they will have to move out of Cumbria to progress in their career.

### Implications for Policy

Four interlinked issues should be considered when discussing the youth labour market in Cumbria:

- lack of scale in education and training;
- infrastructure such as transport;
- attitudes and behaviour of young people and employers;
- access to information.

Tackling social exclusion and marginalisation amongst young people in Cumbria requires a multi-faceted approach which embraces all the above.

Specific targeting of small employers is required to inform them of the benefits of training and lifelong learning. This could be achieved through partnership between local schools, colleges and learning providers in offering education and training tailored to local business needs.

To ease transport costs for young people wanting education or employment outside their area, consideration should be given to the introduction of youth travel subsidies.

A concerted effort should be made to encourage small employers to embrace information technology for business and learning. This could suit small employers where it may be difficult to give young employees time off work to attend education and training courses.

Greater collaboration between employers and learning providers is required to design company-specific education and training and delivery methods best suited to individual employers. Schools, colleges and learning providers should make course and learning material accessible on the Web.

Employers need to be made more aware of current initiatives in Cumbria, particularly 'Learn Direct' for computer-aided learning. Encouraging employers to engage with learning is a key element of Cumbria Learning and Skills Council's Workforce Development Team. The findings from this research lend support for this initiative.

Local business partnerships may switch employers on to training/learning and produce economies of scale when providing locally-based education and training. Employers need to be educated about the importance of education and training for both themselves and their staff, particularly in keeping up-to-date with new developments.

Careers education and information should be more focused on educating young people, particularly males, about the skills employers are demanding of their staff and on informing young people about a broad range of jobs and careers within and outside Cumbria.

It is evident that teaching generic skills and positive work attitudes must form part of all initial training. Formal education offers the best opportunity to impart important skills such as communication, teamworking, motivation, initiative and self-confidence.

Employers should be encouraged to invest time and resources on training and development as they may currently have unrealistic expectations about the skills of young people. They should also be encouraged to provide mentoring, access to

education and training and create a learning and supportive environment within their companies.

The close contact between Connexions and employers suggests this may be one of the best avenues through which employers could be encouraged to engage with education and training. There may be a need for more monitoring of employers of young people, particularly those with poor or no qualifications, to ensure adequate education and training are provided for their young employees.

Results of the surveys suggest a large majority of employers and young people value the services offered by Connexions. This strong foundation should be nurtured, supported and extended, although specific issues Connexions may need to consider include:

- Employed young people should be encouraged to keep in touch with Connexions, particularly those in precarious employment as they probably have no access to external advice about employment rights or information on local education and training.
- Effort should be tailored to take into account that some young people prefer or need to take smaller or more steps up the education and training ladder. While attaining Level 3 qualifications may be a worthy Government target, some young people may require a lot of help to reach this. Foundation level training that builds the confidence and teaches basic work skills should be encouraged.
- A small number of young people are unsure about what to do, particularly males and those not in education, employment or training. They may require a great deal of advice, support and encouragement from personal advisers and school/college guidance teachers.
- The disparity between the wages an employed young person earns and the income his or her work-based training counterpart receives needs to be addressed. There may also be a case for increasing the training allowance for under 18 year olds to reflect the average wage which employed young people receive.
- Parents must be informed of the options open to young people, new initiatives and their educational/training and employment rights.

### Keeping perspective

The majority of young people in Cumbria, regardless of status, were committed to a positive outcome, which suggests that, if given information, advice, support and encouragement, they will play their part in building a successful local economy.

However, young people in post-compulsory education - by implication the most qualified - were the least likely to remain in Cumbria.

Overall, the future prospects of young people probably depend as much upon the training of employers as on the training of young people. Only by moving more enterprises up the value-added spectrum will it be possible to offer the kinds of jobs requiring intermediate or higher level skills that provide the motivation for individuals to train and to engage in lifelong learning.

Other publications arising from a wide range of IER research on local or regional labour markets include:

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