

The Value of Youth Work: supporting young people with their journey into employment

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Lorraine Thompson

Introduction

It is well documented that being outside education, employment and training for significant periods of time during youth and early adulthood can have serious consequences. Education and training are essential for successful transition into adulthood and those from more disadvantaged backgrounds need substantial support before they can begin to address employability skills (Simmons et al, 2014). This policy brief presents findings arising from a roundtable event, held in November 2022, which discussed research and practice evidencing the value of youth work in supporting young people in their journey to work. The event ensured the voices of young people, practitioners and other key stakeholders (government officials, public sector, business and community/voluntary sector representatives) were heard. The event was conducted under the Chatham House Rule allowing for anonymity and open discussion. This brief offers key recommendations resulting from the findings.

Background

While figures for 2022 indicate a welcome upward turn in employment rates this does not necessarily translate to positive outcomes for young people. For the period July to September 2022 there were an estimated 17,000 young people aged 16 to 24 years in Northern Ireland (NI) who were not in education, employment or training (NISRA, 2022). This was equivalent to 8.8 per cent of all those aged 16 to

24 years in Northern Ireland (NI). The proportion of young people who were not in employment, education or training in the UK was 11.9 per cent. Of these 17,000 young people, 11,000 were estimated to be not in employment, education or training and economically inactive (not looking for work and/or not available to start) according to the definition adopted in the Labour Force Survey.

The past 15 years has seen a number of significant global and national challenges which have negatively affected young people's entry into employment. The economic crash in 2008, the uncertainty of Brexit and the Covid-19 global pandemic have all caused economic disruption (Grant Thornton, 2020, p.11). 'Skills for a 10X Economy' (DfE, 2022, p.15), the NI Skills Strategy, states that there are several demographics who were particularly vulnerable to a negative economic impact from the pandemic, these included those in flexible forms of employment, young people generally and those with low or no qualifications. These extrinsic factors have only served to compound the barriers to progressing in education and into the labour market, which include lack of confidence; low/no qualifications; poor mental health; care experienced; homelessness and addictions (DfE, 2018). The impact of unemployment combined with the impact of the past few years has had a scarring effect on some young people (The Prince's Trust, 2022, p.7). The Prince's Trust

NatWest Youth Index findings published in 2022 showed young people who face disadvantage and unemployment consistently report having worse wellbeing, with a quarter reporting they always feel anxious. It also identified young people's overall happiness and confidence has hit its lowest point in the thirteen-year history of the survey and almost half (48%) of all young people reported experiencing a mental health problem (The Prince's Trust, 2022). In the context of the cost of living crisis currently being experienced in the UK, those furthest away from the labour market and who are on benefits are at risk of destitution unable to afford to feed themselves or to keep warm (The Trussell Trust, 2022, p.7).

In recognition of the need to combat poverty and enhance social inclusion the European Social Fund (ESF) invested in youth provision across NI. It has funded programmes that address development needs and economic inactivity with young people who are not in education, employment or training. This funding is due to end in March 2023. Data from Department for Economy (DfE) ESF Managing Authority (2022, cited in YouthStart, 2022) on the 16 ESF funded youth provisions showed all performance targets were exceeded with 16,052 young people supported against a target of 15,000. Progression to employment and further training/education targets were exceeded by 163.44 per cent and 128.84 per cent respectively, with 9706 young people progressed. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), from their inspection visits of ESF projects, rated the quality of provision good or better in 97 per cent of projects and outstanding in 45 per cent of projects (ETI, 2018, p.111). Five of the ESF youth providers were youth work charities, whose core delivery methodology is through youth work and a number of other ESF youth providers also employed youth workers and used youth work approaches (YouthStart, 2022). The youth work approach adopts flexible and innovative methods, develops trusting relationships between

the youth worker and young people, starts with a strengths-based approach building on existing skills and talents and utilises group work processes to facilitate learning and contributes to young people's personal, social and skills development. The youth work approach has been shown to be an effective method to work with young people in preparing them for employment and supporting them to progress into and sustain employment. (YouthStart, 2022).

One example demonstrating the value of youth work has been the pilot programme delivered by YouthStart which is a partnership, initially of five, youth work charities (with two more organisations joining the consortium later in 2022)¹. YouthStart was funded through the UK Community Renewal Fund to recruit, train and support 125 economically inactive young people, aged 16-25 years, from across 4 key geographic regions - the North West, Antrim area, Greater Belfast, Newry and Armagh. The YouthStart programme engaged and supported those young people furthest from the labour market, prioritizing those with low or no qualifications, poor mental health and living in challenging circumstances (debt, family breakdown, poverty, homelessness, addictions etc). An independent evaluation found the programme to have exceeded its targets in terms of numbers of young people it engaged with and qualifications achieved, as well as significant soft skills, learning and development for participants (Hewitt, 2022).

While organisations using the youth work approach do so to meet the specific needs of young people there is evidence of a wider economic benefit to society. Frontier Economics (2022) carried out research in England which determined there to be £5.7bn of direct economic value of the youth sector with another estimated £3.2bn of indirect economic value. Of this £3.2bn, £0.8bn was deemed to be from increased employment and education.

¹ YouthStart was initially a consortium of five youth work charities: The BYTES Project, Northern Ireland Youth Forum, Springboard Opportunities, The Prince's Trust and YouthAction Northern Ireland (lead) with Include Youth and Start360 joining the consortium later in 2022.

Roundtable Discussion

Context

Participants were asked to discuss the context and significant changes that effect young people's journey to work. The 2008 economic crash, the Covid-19 pandemic and the current cost of living crisis were all named as significant pressures both for individual young people and for youth work organisations delivering employability services. It was highlighted that the rise in the cost of living has been long in the making. While cost of living is a current concern for wider society it has always been an issue for those furthest away from the labour market. Economic inactivity was a persistent issue for many long before the 2008 crash. Participants attributed this to how society is organised, acknowledging there are those in society who have always faced economic deprivation. Lack of opportunities and financial insecurity has often been, as one participant termed "an accident of birth and circumstance" where there is failure to address longstanding education and economic inequalities. Certain demographics were identified to be at a disadvantage in trying to access meaningful employment including care experienced young people, newcomers, young parents, those with addictions, those with experience of the criminal justice system, those with negative experience of the education system or those from families referred to as the 'working poor'. It is often these young people who find it difficult to get on the 'first rung of the ladder' in terms of employability. As a result, historically and perhaps currently, these young people are stereotyped. As one youth work manager highlighted, the Jobs and Benefits Office historically to refer to these young people as 'status zero' and social workers would have written and deemed the young person as 'unemployable' on referral forms to their service.

Some youth workers shared how young people's needs are ever changing and have found young people are often presenting with greater complexities such as trauma, addiction, mental health illnesses, health risks, homelessness and poverty. For others, their issues may not be considered as complex, but they still need support with low self-esteem, confidence, social isolation and social skills.

Youth organisations have adapted and changed to respond to these pressures and the changing needs of young people. Youth workers and managers expressed how their organisations have developed robust programmes that provide wrap-around support as well as developing employability skills to achieve positive outcomes with young people. They recognise that as providers they need to invest in the work force and make sure services remain relevant.

Young people's journey into work

The young people attending the event emphasised the importance of employment to them, pointing out that finding work is empowering and gives purpose, stating "It's a reason to get up in the morning". All the young people shared the efforts they have been making to increase their employability or to maintain their current employment. One young person described their journey into work as 'inspiring'. Another shared they had a rough life and hardships in early years as a child and as a teenager and felt getting into their youth employability programme was a lucky break resulting in a move into a "good job", they said "to get that opportunity and get to the other end - it's night and day when you think where I started to where I am now".

Young people's journeys into employment are not without struggles and barriers along the way and there was acknowledgment from the young people that they needed *tailored* help and support. For some their aim is to gain essential skills, one young person shared she came from a different country and needs to gain qualifications in order to gain employment. Two young people shared that even though they had achieved degrees they found it hard to get a job in the field in which they studied. One ended up working in retail which isn't the career they want but they needed money to pay bills. For some young people their only option is to move away from the country to get employment in the field they are interested in. The importance of continuing support and opportunity for progression was also highlighted - while gaining employment is a large part of the journey there needs to be support to help maintain employment and access job

security and stability. Young people cannot go from intensive support helping them to gain employment to feeling abandoned or lost when they do get a job.

The value of youth work

“Getting on the ladder, how do you find where the opportunities are, you need the support, encouragement, they [youth worker] will say you may find this hard but you can do this.” All the young people who spoke at the event shared the importance of having youth workers supporting them with their journey; the relationship between young people and youth worker is key. Managers talked about the value of having youth workers who are enthusiastic, who understand the young person’s needs, providing a safe place for young people to come in to and having conversations which build the young person’s confidence. It was acknowledged that sometimes young people aren’t ready for the world of work and youth workers need to work at the pace of the young person. Youth workers recognise that there will be relapses on the young person’s journey, but they help the young person to keep going, build resilience and consistently believe in their potential. Young people expressed their appreciation of their youth workers, especially in how they treat them with respect, *“...even the staff the way they speak with you and communicate they are looking after us, it’s not just a job, they talk to us if we’re having hard times. You feel they care about you and it makes you feel better, and makes your mental health better.”*

There is also value in how employability programmes also connect young people with other young people. One young person who is a newcomer to NI said, *“For me, one of the things that make me human is making friends, meeting new people and I really appreciate that.”*

Wrap-around and tailored approach

A common theme in the discussion was that not all young people have the same starting point to their journey and one size doesn’t fit all, but the youth work methodology has the capacity to support all young people on their individual journey and respond to their particular needs and goals. Youth work organisations adopt a tailored approach often providing one to one support to develop

employability skills such as writing C.V.s, interview skills, identifying where their career interests lie and gaining qualifications. One young person compared this with their experience in school saying, *“You are able to do learning and help freshen up your C.V. and do interviews. At school you don’t get the time to do that and there’s 40 other people need the help, whereas [name of organisation] is more one to one. You got more out of it and you could ask more questions. One to one is a benefit - more personal.”*

As well as developing skills directly related to employability, youth work organisations go above and beyond to offer wrap-around services which help to address the other pressures and challenges in a young person’s life. As one manager said, *“If someone has nowhere to lay their head that night you need to address that before you can deal with employability.”* One young person shared that, due to going through a hard time and having mental health issues, she had to leave her job, she explained she was *“there physically but not mentally”* but had no support in the job to help with this and subsequently left. She was able to go back to her youth organisation and the youth workers on the programme gave her support. She said, *“The programme saved me from the really hard time I was going through. I was about to be homeless and my youth worker helped me find somewhere to live.”*

This flexible and tailored approach, focusing on employability alongside the other aspects of a young person’s life is vital for young people’s progression into and maintaining employment. By recognising one size doesn’t fit all, youth work identifies what will work for each young person and assist them to move forward on an equal footing.

Voice of young people

The participants attending the event commented on how moving and inspirational it was to hear the stories directly from the young people. The importance of the young people’s voice was acknowledged and there were suggestions that key decision makers, funders and politicians should hear directly from young people to get a sense of the challenge and what works. Youth workers highlighted that co-production and youth led programmes contributed

to the success of employability programmes they deliver. They consider this to be the major difference between formal and informal education, involving young people in planning their own journey is essential for success.

Foundational skills not soft skills

Many of the participants stressed their frustration with the use of the term ‘soft skills’ and ‘soft outcomes’ such as confidence, self-belief, self-esteem and resilience. While it is recognised that young people need employability skills and qualifications, it was argued that so-called ‘soft skills’ lay the foundation on which other skills are built for young people to be able to gain employment and to maintain it. As one youth worker outlined, “*Soft skills – they’re actually hard skills – demonstrating confidence, developing self-efficacy, demonstrating leadership, taking on roles, testing themselves out, they’re strong skills.*” These can be the hardest skills to develop and the hardest outcomes to achieve and to measure but are crucial to young people moving into employment.

Youth work organisations provide a core service

There was a strong argument made by many at the event that youth work should be recognised as much more than ‘plugging a gap’. While it was recognised youth work is often considered to be filling a gap, particularly when there is a lack of leadership within communities and when there is no Government, their work is a core service. Youth work contributes greatly to achieving policy outcomes, for example within the Children and Young People’s strategy and the Programme for Government. Youth work is on a footing with services provided through education or social services. Youth work addresses and levels inequalities and multiple deprivation. One manager said, “*Youth workers put themselves down – we more than fill a gap, soft outcomes – it’s more than that. The impact is huge. It can be described as transformative. We work with the hardest to reach. We minimise the impact of the past but maximise their future.*” There was a call for government to recognise this and to get better at recognising the value of youth work and to fund the core of what youth work organisations are doing.

Evidence of impact

Participants acknowledged the need for the impact of youth work to be better measured and evidenced. While there have been evaluations and research conducted and published, it isn’t necessarily widely shared. The impact needs to be communicated to an audience wider than the youth sector. There was recognition that there needs to be robust research, including longitudinal evidence carried out. Any existing evidence demonstrating the success and value of youth work and employability should be collated and disseminated, particularly with government and funders.

Multisectoral connections

Youth workers have been instrumental in bridging communication and creating understanding between employers and young people. One youth worker shared her approach in meeting with the employer prior to the young person commencing work which helps smooth transition into the job role. The youth worker can explain to the employer about particular challenges such as the young person might not give eye contact, may be working on social skills or may have literacy issues. The youth worker might get employers and the young people together to facilitate conversation and help challenge the perceptions both have of the other. Another youth worker shared how she would help problem-solve some issues after the young person has started their job. There can often be misunderstandings and miscommunication or the young person is afraid to ask for help.

A number of participants highlighted the need for a mapping exercise to be carried out. Businesses and employers can’t get people to apply for jobs, they can’t get the right talent for the jobs. The other side of the coin is young people can’t find jobs they are interested in. One participant posed the question “*How do we connect those two groups, how do we conduct a mapping/matching exercise?*”

The setting up of JobStart by the Department for Communities was cited as a good example of acting on the learning from listening to young people and the youth sector, where flexibility was built into the

programme as was one of the recommendations from youth workers. It was requested this should be the default approach when developing new strategies. There was acknowledgement that addressing employability should not just be about commissioning the third sector but should be about working in partnership with schools, FE colleges, the Careers Service and the business sector in order to achieve the best outcomes for young people. There was recognition that ETI, through inspections of ESF funded employability programmes, were listening more and acknowledging their success. There was a call for all departments to listen to youth work providers in a similar way.

Future delivery and funding

The YouthStart initiative has demonstrated the value and benefits of collaboration. The seven organisations have been able to share and use best practice. By not working in competition, they are not duplicating efforts and are making public money go further. This approach should be showcased and encouraged.

Some managers highlighted the difficulty of trying to achieve end outcome targets which can impact the quality of provision and take focus away from the young person's journey or progression. However, there was recognition that some funders are interested in the journey and understand not all young people will make the same progress during the programme. Funding needs to be flexible so that the youth work provision can be flexible. For example, one youth worker highlighted the need to be able to deliver level 2 qualifications, as level 1s do not get young people into employment. There needs to be flexibility and funding to deliver at least level 2 and even level 3s. Youth workers and managers would argue that, while young people could access level 2 qualifications at FE colleges, a significant number of the young people find it difficult to maintain attendance and engagement at mainstream provisions because they haven't built up routine and structures and need intensive youth worker support.

There was great concern that youth work organisations are currently facing a gap in service delivery with the end of European Union funding and a delay in the Shared Prosperity Fund from the UK government. This will lead to losing staff and skills within organisations. It was emphasised that the young people will be affected and lose out on their journey. One manager stressed, *"We need policy makers and investment, to recognise these tried and tested approaches – look at what ETI has said about the organisations and projects – but with the withdrawal of EU funds there is going to be a gap. The young people, especially those furthest away from the labour market are going to fall through the nets. We need collective action together – we need to bring the noise."*

Hope

It was evident when listening to the young people's experiences that they have hope. They want to progress and they want to address the barriers they face. They all had aspirations to move to the next step on their journey. Youth workers want to honour their effort. They want the best for the young people but need recognition that the youth work methodologies they adopt do work and they need investment which will allow long term delivery of programmes and enable them to offer the wrap-around, flexible service which supports young people into employment.

Summary of findings

- The impact of the pandemic and the current cost of living crisis will be detrimental to young people who are already furthest away from the labour market if they are not able to engage effectively with youth work employability services.
- Young people need decent and stable employment to give them a purpose in life and to ensure they do not fall into a poverty trap, unable to feed themselves or keep themselves warm.
- Youth work serves to develop employability skills through wrap-around and tailored support. The relationship between the young person and the youth worker is instrumental in providing the support needed for young people to gain employment.
- Youth work needs to be seen as more than 'plugging the gap' and recognised as a core service. There should be recognition that so-called 'soft skills' are foundational skills.
- Evidence of the impact of youth work should be robust and shared beyond the youth sector.
- There is a need for multi-sectoral connections and a matching of employers' need for talent and skilled employees and young people's need for employment.
- Youth work employability programmes need investment which allows for flexibility and long-term service provision.

Recommendations

- Youth employability programmes should be awarded appropriate investment and long-term funding. Programmes should be funded to offer level 2 qualifications.
- Establish a co-commission model across the NI Assembly which includes representation from economy, health and education for developing strategies and commissioning of services in relation to addressing young people and employment. This model should replicate the approach taken to develop JobStart and should seek to understand the needs of and listen to the recommendations of youth workers, young people and employers.
- A mapping/matching exercise should be carried out, involving a conversation between businesses, employers, youth providers and all other relevant players to identify the needs and gaps in the workforce and to establish how best to ensure young people get access to appropriate employment opportunities.
- Initiatives such as YouthStart, should showcase the work and benefits of collaboration partnership working.
- Robust research on the impact of the youth work approach and employability should be carried out and existing evidence collated. Evidence should be shared beyond the youth work sector.

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About the author:

Lorraine Thompson is a freelance facilitator, evaluator and researcher with expertise in youth work policy and practice, conflict transformation and social justice.



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

T. 028 9097 3034 E. info@ark.ac.uk



T. 028 9036 6339 E. info@ark.ac.uk

