

The zone of precarity and discourses of vulnerability: NEET in the UK

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Abstract: This article focuses on the way in which NEET has been used to conceptualise vulnerability among young people in the UK. It describes the origin and development of NEET, highlights the difficulties and ambiguities associated with the term, describes its prevalence and explores some of the issues that arise from attempts to capture precarious situations. While the need to capture the insecurity that characterises many transitional experiences is recognised, it is argued that in policy terms NEET is a flawed concept that tries to merge a heterogeneous mix of young people, some being extremely disadvantaged while others are able to exercise choices. It is argued that more imaginative ways are needed to hold policy makers to account and that there is a need to place a greater emphasis on stimulating demand for youth labour rather than focus on alleged skill deficits.

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1. Introduction

Not so long ago academics and government officials were happy to think of the youth labour market in terms of a simple dichotomy between employment and unemployment. Few were concerned with the 'grey' area between these two categories, even though there have always been groups of young people who have survived on the fringes of employment, facing difficulties getting a firm foot-hold in the world of work, moving between a series of unstable jobs and frequently spending periods without work. In a range of countries there have been recent attempts to rethink patterns of labour market engagement and to account for the experiences of those who come to occupy what we might characterise as the zone of precarity - a set of positions that lying between stable employment and recognised unemployment. The ways in which this zone of precarity has been conceptualised in the UK and Japan are embedded in different discourses and are based on different sets of assumptions. In this article I focus on the use of the term NEET as a way of conceptualising vulnerability among young people in the UK. I highlight difficulties and ambiguities associated with the term, describe prevalence and explore some of the issues that arise from attempts to capture precarious situations.

In the UK, NEET first emerged in the late 1980s as an acronym for those 'Not in Education, Employment or Training'. It was used as an alternative way of categorising young people's experiences, mainly as a result of changes in policy that disqualified those aged 16 and 17 from claiming unemployment related benefits. With very high rates of youth unemployment in the late 1970s and 1980s, the youth claimant count had become politically sensitive. Governments were accused of failing the generation of young people entering the labour market during a period of recession and fears were expressed that those who failed to develop work

habits at a young age may become unemployable in the long-term.

Since the 1970s various youth training programmes had been developed in the UK with the aim, firstly, of occupying workless youth and, later, providing opportunities for skill enhancement. In general these programmes were unpopular with young people who preferred 'proper' jobs to schemes and who resented having to work full-time for a training allowance that was set very close to the unemployment benefit level. Various attempts were made to exert pressure on young people to participate, largely through the withdrawal of benefits from those who refused training places. Despite the availability of training places (many of which were not linked to young people's own occupational aspirations and not perceived as leading to opportunities for subsequent employment), unemployment among young people and young adults remained relatively high until the late 1990s.

However, in official terms, in the UK youth unemployment ceased to be recognised in the late 1980s. From this point on, (and linked to the commitment to 'push' workless young people onto training schemes) 16 and 17 year-olds became ineligible for unemployment benefits and their status was recorded as 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET) rather than as unemployed. As a result, young people without work were not only deprived of the means to independent support, but were denied recognition as unemployed workers.

As a consequence of the official 'abolition' of youth unemployment, both researchers and Government officials started to adopt new ways of estimating the prevalence of labour market vulnerability among young people. A study of young people in South Glamorgan marked a watershed.

Here Istance and colleagues (1994) used the term Status A (later changed to Status Zero) to refer to a group of people who were not covered by any of the main categories of labour market status (employment, education or training).

Partly for political reasons and partly to clarify a concept whose meaning was not immediately clear, later researchers began to use the term NEET in place of Status Zero: a term that draws attention to the heterogeneous nature of the category and avoids the negative connotations of one that highlights lack of status. NEET is a heterogeneous category that includes young people who are available for work and are actively seeking employment. Also included are those who are not available or not seeking work. Groups such as the long term sick or disabled or those with responsibilities for the care of children or relatives may not be available for work. Some of those who are not seeking work may be pursuing other interests, resting, developing skills in an unpaid capacity through voluntary work or taking time to travel. Effectively it combines those with little control over their situation with those exercising choice, thereby promoting a state of confusion about the factors associated with an apparent state of disadvantage. The sub-groups contained within the NEET category have very different experiences, characteristics and needs. Groups of vulnerable young people who require distinct forms of policy intervention in terms of welfare or training provision are grouped with the privileged who may not require any assistance to move back into education or employment.

In many respects, the youth employment policies that emerged in the UK and other countries from the 1980s onwards were framed as responses to growing unemployment (the youth unemployment 'crisis' occurred

sometime later in Japan), but actually carried an implicit recognition that the nature of vulnerability was changing. Simple dichotomous divisions between employment and non-employment, between inclusion and exclusion, no longer provided the basis for an adequate, and comprehensive, set of approaches to the complexity of modern labour markets. In the UK the confused thinking that characterised NEET reflected a general confusion about the shape of the modern labour market and about the ways to identify vulnerable young people.

2. Framing the debate about work and non-work

In essence, the heterogeneous nature of NEET has shaped the confusion that has underpinned political and popular debate. For 16 and 17 year-olds who had left full-time education and who lacked employment, the UK Government 'guaranteed' to provide training opportunities. As such, there has been a tendency to regard young people who are NEET as uncooperative or as preferring to remain inactive. Undoubtedly some of those without jobs had decided not to avail themselves of opportunities for education or training; for some of these being NEET could represent a choice. Equally, the 'guaranteed' provision of training was not always honoured and that the sorts of training offered frequently failed to meet specific career aspirations.

The confusion over the characteristics of NEET was compounded by changes to the age range to whom the term was applied. Early work by Istance and colleagues (1994) explicitly referred to 16 and 17 year-olds who were ineligible for unemployment benefits but who were eligible for youth training programmes. Such an approach was logical in that those under the age of 18 are covered by a set of policies that do not apply to older age groups. Later definitions have extended the age range to cover 18 and even

19 year-olds which, in effect, merges groups covered by distinct policies. Whereas 16 and 17 year-olds are not eligible for unemployment benefits, 18 and 19 year-olds are, and while members of the younger age group who are without work qualify for immediate training intervention, the older age group must remain unemployed for six months in order to qualify for training.

Among UK policy makers, contemporary debates about NEET tend to be linked to the social exclusion agenda. With a strong link between NEET and various indicators of disadvantage (poor qualifications, residence in areas of high deprivation etc) NEET has been understood in structural terms; as an outcome largely experienced by those lacking in social and human capital. These views about the NEET group have led to policies that, in structural terms, focus on supporting access to education, employment and training and the identification of needs and barriers. These interventions are also underpinned by a belief that those who are NEET may lack motivation.

Academic debates about NEET are often linked to the growing complexity of youth transitions, the weakening of full-time routes through education and training and the growth of part-time and mixed patterns of participation. These developments make it hard to identify those experiencing difficulties in the labour market, especially when young people move rapidly between different statuses without spending long periods without work. In these terms, NEET facilitates a recognition that those who are not in employment, education or training are not all unemployed in a traditional sense, but may also be following alternative lifestyles, reflecting on careers or taking time out to take care of other priorities. In this context the usefulness of NEET as a category is

somewhat compromised through the ways in which disadvantaged people who may lack the resources to navigate transitions or exercise choice are combined with more privileged young people who are able to exercise a significant degree of choice regarding the ways in which they manage their lives.

3. The prevalence of NEET and vulnerable work forms

One of the merits of introducing new categories to map the zone of precarity is that they should generate knowledge about the prevalence of precarious form of labour market engagement and about the characteristics of those vulnerable to exclusion. Yet while it should be relatively straightforward to calculate the size of the NEET group or the numbers occupying the zone of precarity, there are a number of complicating factors. In the UK there is little agreement about the best way to quantify the NEET group while in Japan different conventions have applied with distinctions being made between NEET and broad and narrow definitions of freeters. In essence, freeters include those holding or seeking part-time or non-standard forms of employment whereas, in sharp contrast to the UK definition, in Japan the unemployed are not included in the NEET group (Inui, 2005). There are also differences between the countries relating to the age groups covered and, in the UK, a debate about whether NEET is a static measure that can be enumerated cross-sectionally or whether it is a dynamic concept that requires longitudinal measurement (Istance *et al.* 1994; Croxford and Raffe, 2000; Bynner and Parsons 2002; Furlong, 2006).

Bynner and Parsons regard NEET is a concept which must 'reflect the dynamics of young people's lives' (2002: 297) and therefore requires longitudinal analysis. Because the prime interest in NEET relates to a need

to identify patterns of disengagement, Bynner and Parsons used a definition that required those classified as NEET to have been outside of education, employment and training for at least six months between the ages of 16 and 18. The dynamic approach is more in tune with theoretical perspectives on youth transitions that stress complexity and non-linearity (Furlong *et al.*, 2003) and can help distinguish those in danger of marginalisation from those exercising lifestyle choices or exploring career options. However, while this approach makes a lot of sense theoretically, it is not one that has found much currency in policy circles.

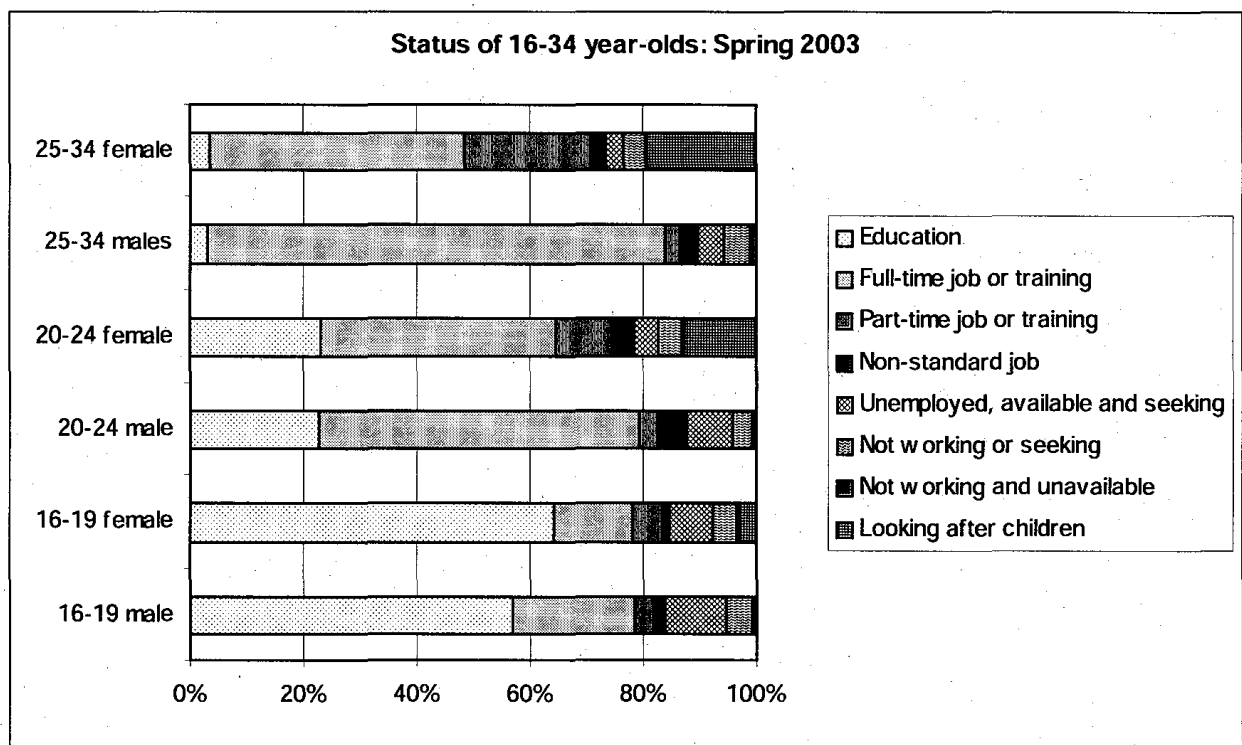
Inevitably, the ways in which NEET is defined will directly affect the numbers of young people who are regarded as vulnerable: a longitudinal approach such as that used by Bynner and Parsons (2002) will provide information on a relatively small group with deeply entrenched vulnerabilities whereas a 'snapshot' approach may reveal a much larger group, some of whom are active in the shaping of their transitions or deliberately taking time out to pursue other interests or priorities. Using static definitions, official statistics based on yearly averages put levels of NEET among 16-19 year-olds at around 9 per cent in England and Wales and at about 14 per cent in Scotland. A dynamic definition based on a qualifying period of six months results in a NEET group of about half that size who are more strongly disadvantaged (Bynner and Parsons, 2002; Furlong, 2006).

In order to provide a UK measure of NEET that is comparable to Japanese calculations, the British Labour Force Survey of spring 2003 is used and an attempt made to ensure some replicability. Spring data was used to avoid the short-term peaks of NEET/unemployment that is evident during the summer and into the autumn. Throughout I make the distinction between

16-19 year-olds, 20-24 year-olds and 25-34 year-olds, largely because each group is subject to a different set of policy interventions, but also to match Japanese conventions. Although in the UK NEET is a term that includes those who would be regarded as unemployed, for compatibility with Japanese data, sub-groups have been separated in ways that facilitate comparisons with the various definitions used in Japan.

In spring 2003, in the region of eight in ten young men in each of the three age groups were in education, standard full-time employment or training. Whereas the picture was similar for young women in the 16-19 age group, older women were significantly less likely to be in education or standard full-time employment or training (Figure 1). Part-time employment (which in the UK usually refers to those who work less than 30 hours per week) was very low among males with no more than 4 per cent of any age group working on this basis. Among women part-time employment ranged from 5 per cent among the youngest age group to 22 per cent among the oldest. Relatively few full-time workers were employed on a non-standard contracts (fixed term and agency work) ranging from 1 per cent to just under 5 per cent¹. In the UK there is still a legal assumption that employment carries legal protection against arbitrary dismissal and will be continuous unless the firms' needs change significantly or the employee is negligent or incompetent. However, the first six months of employment with a firm tends to be regarded as probationary with the employee having no redress against unfair dismissal. Non-standard contracts are those explicitly framed as short-term, fixed, contacts with a specified end date. The numbers employed on-standard contracts tended to be highest among 20-24 year-olds. Unemployment ranged from almost 11 per cent among 16-19 year-old males to 3 per cent among 25-44 year-old females. There was little variation across the age ranges or genders in the numbers who were

Figure 1



neither working nor seeking work: ranging from 3 to just less than 5 per cent. Those who were not working and unavailable due to reasons other than childcare were extremely low: less than half a per cent. Withdrawal from the labour market due to childcare responsibilities was very low among males while among females it increased with age: from 3 per cent of 16-19 year-olds to 19 per cent of 25-34 year-olds.

In the remainder of this section, we focus more closely on each of the three age groups and attempt to identify the main characteristics of those not in education, full-time standard employment or training.

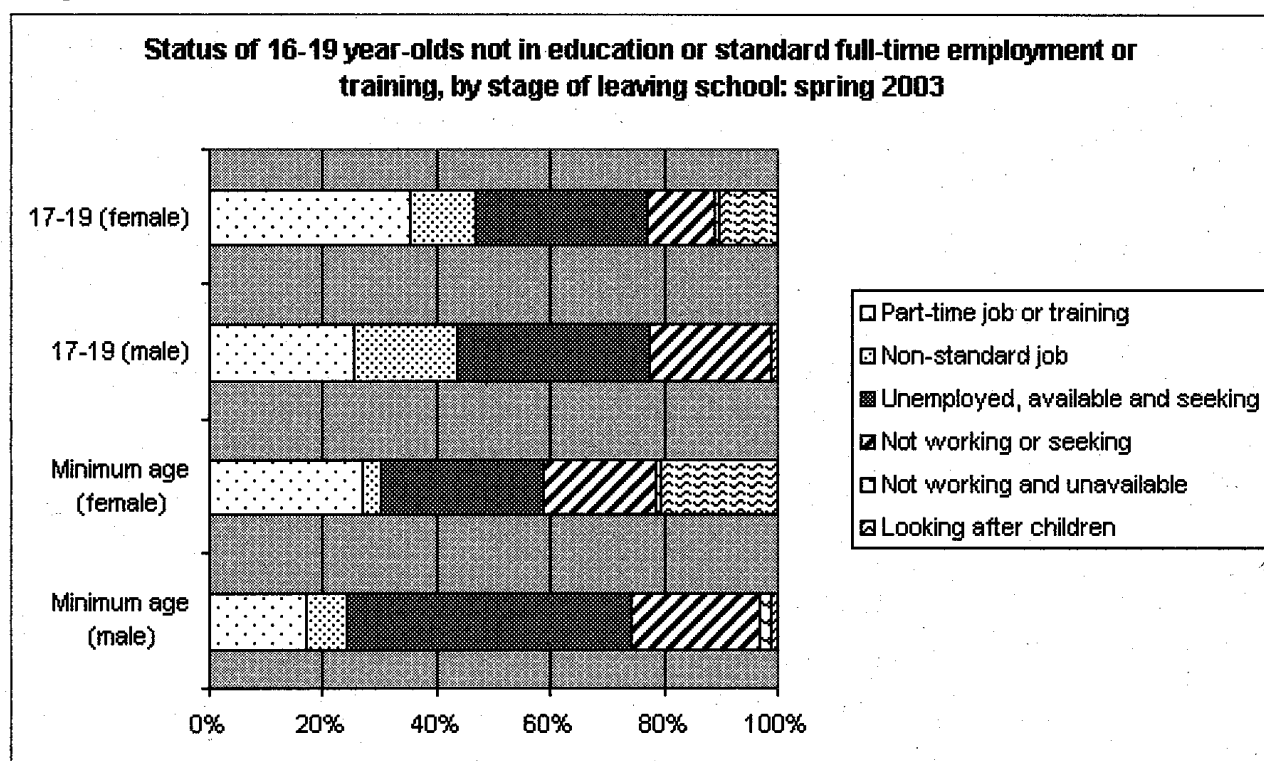
16-19 year-olds

Among 16-19 year-olds, those who had left full-time education earliest opportunity (age 16) were less likely to be in employment or training and more likely to be unemployed, unavailable or not seeking work than were those who had experienced a period of post-compulsory education (leaving

between the ages of 17 and 19). Specifically, compared to later leavers, males were nearly twice as likely to have been unemployed (21% compared to 12%) while females were nearly twice as likely to have been unavailable for work (11% compared to 6%). Virtually none of the females with extended education were looking after children, yet eleven per cent of minimum age leavers had childcare responsibilities. The relationship between educational qualifications and employment status tells a similar story: those with no qualifications were more than twice as likely as those with A levels (broadly equivalent to a high school diploma) to have been unemployed and far more likely to have been unavailable or not seeking work or to be caring for children. The Labour Force Survey does not contain information on social class of origin or household income, but in a UK context educational qualifications and stage of leaving school represent very good proxies for class. Those from lower working class families are significantly over-represented among minimum aged leavers and among those with no qualifications. The relationship between disadvantage and labour market outcomes are also highlighted by the experiences of different ethnic groups. Black males and females, for example, were more than twice as likely than their white peers to have been unemployed.

Focusing on those who were not in education, full-time standard employment or training, one in two males who left school at the minimum age were unemployed, but just three in ten females. However, four in ten females were either not seeking employment or were looking after children (Figure 2). Among those who left education later, rates of unemployment were similar for females but lower for males. However, far fewer females were not seeking work or looking after children.

Figure 2



In many ways these findings are unsurprising as a high proportion of minimum aged leavers and young people with poor qualifications (usually the same group) will have come from less advantaged families. Unemployment and rates of teenage pregnancy are known to be higher among disadvantaged groups. Yet while differences are small, academic debates have tended to suggest that the educated middle classes, whose parents can provide financial support and who may encourage their children to reflect on their futures, are over-represented among those who reduce levels of labour force participation for life-style related reasons (e.g du Bois Reymond, 1998). This is not supported by our evidence.

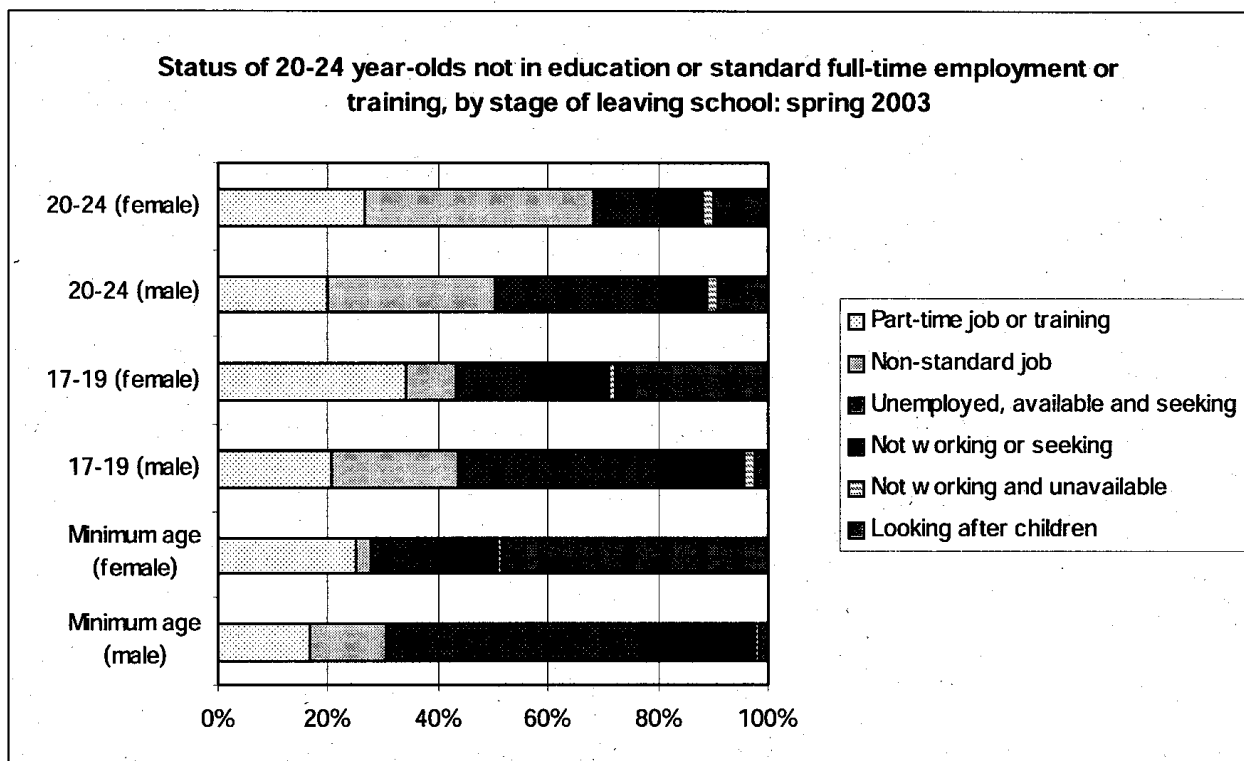
20-24 year-olds

By age 20 to 24, young people have had a greater opportunity to become established in the labour market. At this stage, a higher proportion are in education, full-time standard employment and training and levels of unemployment are significantly lower. At the same time, clear patterns of

disadvantage were evident in relation to the NEET group. Levels of unemployment among early school leavers and those with no qualifications were above average - particularly among males with no qualifications where one in five (20%) were unemployed and seeking work. Relatively few were unavailable or not seeking work, although it is clear that poorly qualified males and females were particularly likely to be unavailable or not seeking (14% and 15% of unqualified males and females respectively, compared with 3% of males and females with the equivalent of high school diplomas). More than one in two (52%) poorly qualified females were looking after children.

Focusing on those not in education, full-time standard employment or training, there is a clear difference in the experiences of males and females (Figure 3). Among the males, irrespective of the stage at which they had left education, between a third and almost a half were unemployed and seeking work, although among those who left school earliest one in five were neither working nor seeking work. For females, the situation was very different with a minority being unemployed and seeking work: levels were relatively unaffected by stage of leaving education. For those females who left education at the minimum age, almost one in two were unavailable for work due to constraints linked to childcare responsibilities compared to just one in ten of those who left between the ages of 20 and 24. Between one in ten and one in five females were unavailable or not seeking work for reasons unrelated to childcare duties, with later leavers being most likely not to be looking or to be unavailable. This, in part, is likely to reflect a process of transition among those who had recently left education. Among both males and females, levels of participation in non-standard employment were highest among those educated longest, perhaps reflecting the prevalence of contract work in the early stages of professional careers.

Figure 3



25-34 year-olds

Patterns of employment among 25-34 year-olds are very similar than those discussed for 20-24 year-olds and are again highly polarised along gender lines. For males, unemployment was highest among those with no qualifications (10% among the unqualified compared to 4% among those with the equivalent of high school diplomas) with relatively large numbers of the unqualified either not seeking work or not being available for work (22% of unqualified males compared to 3% with high school diplomas). Among the females a high proportion of unqualified school leavers were not seeking work due to childcare responsibilities (53% compared to 16% with high school diplomas).

The statistics drawn from the UK Labour Force Survey do not permit a very detailed analysis of those who are not in education, employment or training: we have only basic information on their characteristics and

nothing on their core attitudes and values. However, we have been able to show that those not in education, full-time standard employment and training tend to be unemployed in a conventional sense or constrained by childcare responsibilities. Moreover, in the main, those not in education, employment or training can be regarded as disadvantaged rather than representatives of a privileged group exercising choices to reject conventional options. Given this evidence, it is hard to justify the explanatory emphasis that the government and the media place on poor work ethics and weak agency. The confusion generated by the promotion of a heterogeneous category like NEET, in which different categories of experience are combined, can help encourage the transfer of blame to young people while underplaying the significance of deprivation and limited opportunities.

4. Insecurity: an alternative perspective

With the youth labour market being characterised by a high level of precarity, it can be argued that the traditional focus of worklessness as the measure, *par excellence*, of disadvantage is a relic of a past era. As it stands, one narrow and outdated concept (unemployment) has now been replaced with another inadequate category (NEET) which fails to provide an imaginative basis for policies towards vulnerable youth. Yet it is important to move beyond a focus on worklessness to capture insecurity, underemployment and poor quality work more generally.

Non-linear transitions, which often result in young people being churned between a series of low quality jobs, have become more common (Furlong *et al.*, 2003) and vulnerable young people do not necessarily encounter regular periods of joblessness. Casual work has become increasingly prevalent, especially in the low skill sectors of the economy (Furlong and Kelly, 2005),

and young people can experience a series of short-term, poor quality jobs without being recognised as vulnerable by those responsible for providing careers advice. In the context of a political economy of insecurity, a broadly focused set of policies would encompass all of those in precarious positions or lacking advanced skills, irrespective of whether they were currently NEET or in employment or training. Neither the UK nor Japan operate policies that target the dispersed nature of vulnerability in modern labour markets.

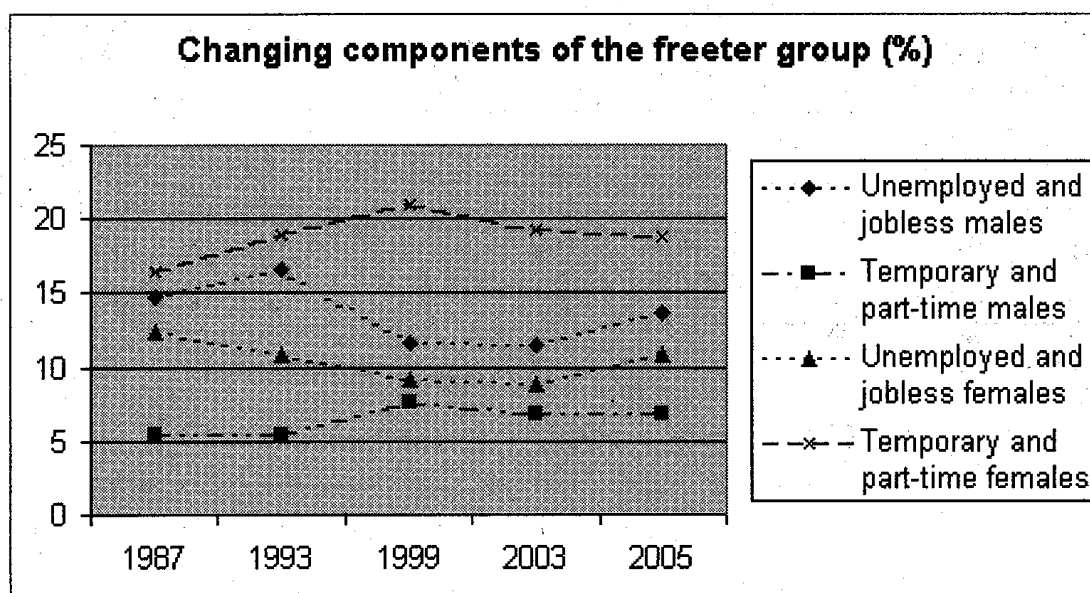
From a research perspective, there is no consensus about the most effective way to identify young people who are in insecure forms of employment. The great difficulty is to operationalise a distinction between those who are insecure and those who desire flexibility. A young person who holds a series of short-term jobs may have little control over their situation and may desire long-term employment. On the other hand, someone may move jobs frequently as they enjoy variety or as a way of building up a broad portfolio of work experiences. Analysis of patterns of movement tells us relatively little unless we also have access to information about the views of workers.

The most common ways of mapping insecurity is to use length of tenure as a key variable. Paugam (1995), for example, regards those who have changed job or had a period of unemployment in the last year as unstable. Furlong and Kelly (2005) also rely on information on job tenure, justifying the approach in terms of the absence of legal redress for unfair dismissal for those who have been in a particular job for a relatively short period of time. In the UK, relatively few young workers hold temporary contracts. In 2003, 14 per cent of 16-19 year-old males and 13 per cent of females were employed on a temporary basis. Among 20-24 year-olds, the figure was

slightly lower at 10 per cent for males and females, while among 25-34 year-olds just 4 per cent of men and 6 per cent of women had temporary contracts. Among the youngest age group, around six in ten employees had been in their current job for less than a year and therefore lacked legally-backed job security. Among the 20-24 year-olds, a small majority had been with their present employer for over a year (around six in ten), rising to eight in ten workers in the 25-34 age group.

To examine trends in insecurity, an attempt was made to replicate the classification of 'freeter' which is used in Japanese statistics but has no UK equivalent. Differences in statistical sources made it impossible to arrive at a precise replication, but, in-line with Japanese conventions we excluded women with childcare responsibilities from the numbers in part-time and temporary work² and excluded students. As it was not possible to identify unemployed people who were only seeking temporary or part-time employment, we separate the unemployed from those working in part-time and temporary jobs. In Figure 4 trends in the components of the groups regarded as freeters are reported showing changes between 1987

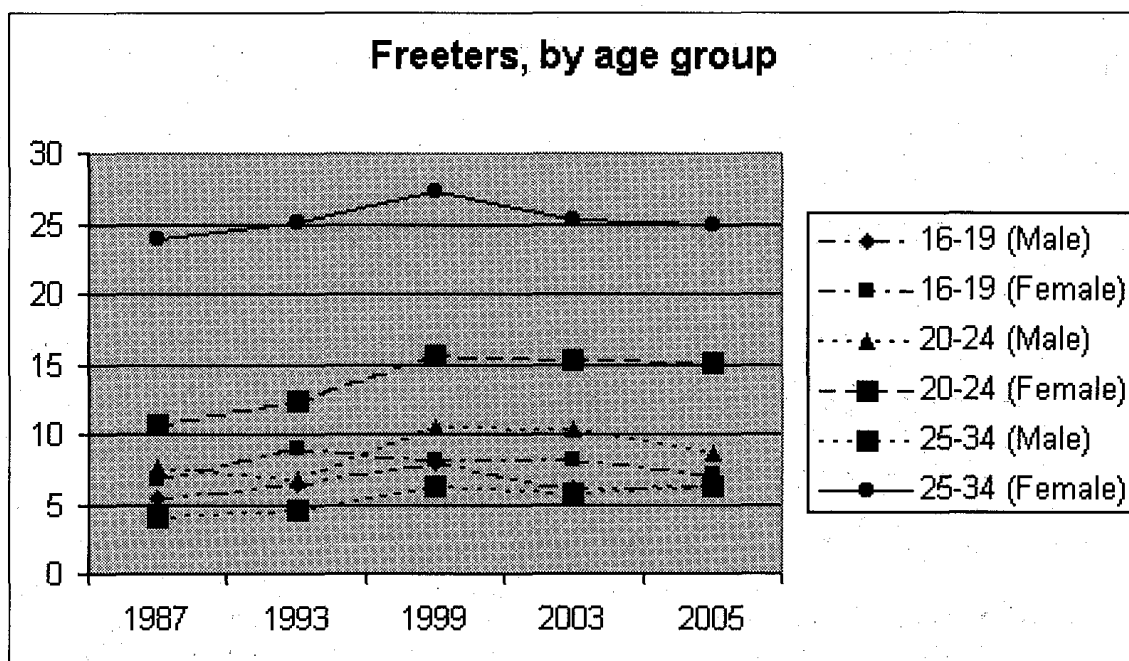
Figure 4



and 2005. Overall, levels of unemployment fell between 1987 and 2003 with an increase evident between 2003 and 2005. Over the term there was a slight increase in the percentage in temporary or part-time employment, although had students not been excluded these figures would have risen more sharply.

Looking specifically at freeters (excluding the unemployed) by gender and age group (Figure 5) there are clear gender related differences. Among the males the greatest proportion of freeters are within the 20-24 year-old age group and likely to be associated with transitions from further and higher education. Here it is likely that ex-students retain the part-time jobs they held while at college and university until they secure permanent employment. Among the females, in all age groups, the proportion of freeters is far higher, especially among 25-34 year-olds where some will hold part-time jobs through choice to fit in with other responsibilities.

Figure 5



5. Conclusion

In the UK, there is a strong policy focus on young people who are NEET with some imaginative initiatives having been developed to try and reach a group who are often regarded as disconnected. A reduction in the numbers of young people who are NEET is seen as an important precondition for breaking cycles of poverty and tackling social exclusion with targets having been set to cut NEET levels. The problem here is that NEET is an extremely heterogeneous group and contains people who are NEET for a wide variety of different reasons and who have a variety of needs. Some will require skill development while others are already well qualified. Some will face specific barriers, such as poor health or disabilities or require affordable childcare. A few may not be seeking employment, sometimes for very legitimate reasons. Reducing NEET therefore a range of approaches that involve identifying needs and then providing tailored solutions.

Politically, the current targets for NEET do not result in adequate levels of accountability. There will always be a (large) group of people who will be NEET fleetingly, who will be absorbed into education, training or employment without the need for specific interventions - the rate at which this group are absorbed will largely be determined by economic conditions rather than by the success of interventions. Other NEET subgroups may benefit from assistance, some requiring little more than advice while others may need intensive support. The problem is that we have no way of assessing the extent to which government policies are helping to reduce the numbers of people who are in danger of long-term exclusion or, conversely, whether the success of schemes in moving young people out of NEET is largely confined to those least at risk (many of whom would have made unassisted transitions).

Policies towards the NEET group tend to address supply and demand factors, although historically greater emphasis has been placed on supply even when the problem is mainly to do with a reduction in levels of demand for young workers. Changes in the labour market that have led to demands for a young labour force with different types of skills and with greater levels of general education and have reduced traditional opportunities for those from working class families who were once able to secure unskilled or semi skilled jobs in manufacturing industry. In turn, the government has been able to highlight a skills deficit, arguing that youth unemployment is largely a consequence of inadequate skills and poor general education. Undoubtedly there is a strong case for investment in education and training to prevent marginalisation and to ensure that young people are able to fulfil their potential. On the other hand, it is important to recognise that both in the UK and Japan, a greater emphasis needs to be placed on creating opportunities and promoting secure jobs with adequate pay and good conditions. Mapping labour market insecurity and identifying vulnerable groups is central to this process and is a mechanism through which politicians can be held to account for their actions.

Notes:

- 1 Overall, nearly 8 per cent of 16-34 year-olds are employed on temporary contracts. However, most of these were primarily engaged in education or were working part-time. In the tables that follow, those in education or in part-time employment have this status recognised rather than their temporary status.
- 2 It is not possible to unambiguously identify all women in part-time jobs with childcare responsibilities.

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