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Agency and agencies: the role of intermediaries in young people's transitions into employment

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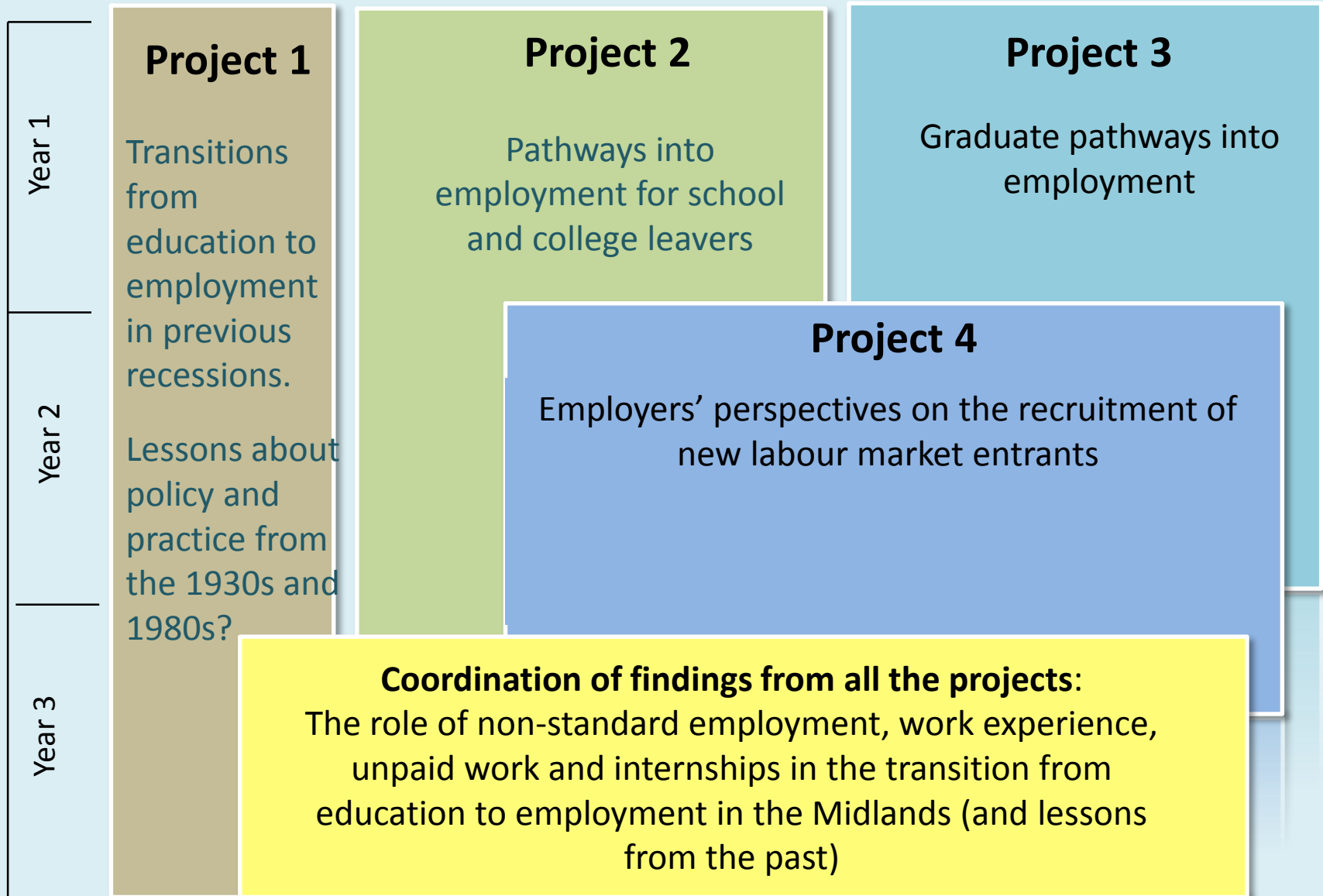
The current youth labour market

- High levels of youth unemployment and under-employment;
- Increasing emphasis of the need for evidence of ‘employability skills’ prior to labour market entry.
- Increasing insecurity of employment, with growing polarization between ‘career jobs’ and precarious or fragmented employment.
- Expansion in higher education participation (but shift of costs to learners = debts for most).
- Policy emphasis on STEM and vocational skills.

Opportunity structures

- *Demise of the youth labour market*: post 1980s recession, no return to the norm of moving from school to a job (- 75% of 18 year olds in work in 1976; 40% in 2009, current rate??).
- Variations in opportunity structures facing young people in different neighbourhoods / local labour market areas.
- Very little focus on the *demand-side of the labour market* when looking at transitions of young people into work.
- *Local demand* matters most for the least qualified – and particularly for young people.
- The growing importance of intermediaries.

Precarious pathways from education to employment for young people



The impact of intermediaries on young people's access to opportunities

- In the transition from education to the labour market or further training or education:
 - Careers advisers and other staff in schools, colleges, universities and local services.
- As job-seekers:
 - JobCentres;
 - High Street and online recruitment sector agencies.
- In early career development:
 - General recruitment agencies;
 - Specialist recruitment agencies;
 - Online platforms and social networks

Our Questions

- How far do young people have access to unbiased information and guidance that enables them to make well-informed choices about the employment and training options available to them?
- and
- How far do the services available to them increase or restrict their ability to exercise agency, in the meaning of taking control of their careers and life-chances?

Variations in quality of provision of careers guidance

“It was just basically to say ‘Have you applied for college yet?’, because our school didn’t offer sixth form at the time, so they were like ‘Have you applied to college? Yes? Have you had an interview yet? Yes? Well ,you’re good to go’ - and that was about it!”. (Leanne,)

“They were kind of pushing us more to go to college .I had a little part-time job in school as well, just a retail job after work. I used to go two hours, two days a week, so I was just thinking to myself ‘Maybe just go straight into trying to find a job?’ - but no: it was more they was trying to push us more into college “ (Stacey, of Connexions interview at 16).

“I felt like they focused more on the people that wanted to go to uni and the ones that wanted to get an apprenticeship or job were just kind of pushed to the side in last minute situations” (Natalie, female, 18)

“I had teachers [who] would get angry with me ‘cause I said that I wasn’t going to uni” (Charlotte, female, 18)

“Apprenticeships were always aimed at people who weren’t going to get into university” (Jane, 21, level 3 logistics apprentice within automotive manufacturing company, Birmingham)

Restricted awareness of options

- *“Once I was in sixth form they did provide a lot of information. They were really helpful, and even to the last day, when we went to collect our results, it was almost like a case of ‘What are you doing now, then?’, and I told them I was working in the [hairdressing] salon. I don’t think that they were very keen on that, to be honest. They just thought ‘Oh really, you’ve got your A evels and that’s what you’re gonna do?’ “.*
- *When I was in college, the teacher [name], that’s a teacher for the sport department, he asked me what I’m planning on doing ‘cause I’m 18 now and I was saying ‘Personal trainerfor body building and all that..’, and he says ‘Well, I always see you in the gym anyway, so you might as well go for it’, so, yeah... “ (Bim, 18).*
- *“I didn’t want to do anything if I’m honest and then I sat down and I spoke to that woman that I said I had to speak to in school [Connexions adviser?], and she was like “What do you like doing?” - And I’ve always liked doing hair, makeup, I’ve always been this, like, loads-of-makeup-girl, big hair - so I was, like, ‘I’ll go to college and do hair and beauty ‘cause I know I can, I’ll stick at that and do it ‘cause I like doing it’. (Shelley, 18)*
- *“I did go to the careers service, and I listened to the talks that came in from the relevant people at the criminology department, but I was so focused on getting my First, I just didn’t look past it. ... and before I knew it, it was September andthere wasn’t an abundance of vacancies and I wasn’t really sure where to look” (Shamira, Law graduate, now academic education manager at a professional institute).*

Formal guidance provided at schools and colleges

Timing of careers information: *“You’ve got all these questions in your mind and then you’ve got externals coming in and talking about what they could possibly offer you, and I think it’s just too late, because I think I needed it throughout the two years”*
(Chira, 22, female)

Gaps in information: *“I wish I’d known about apprenticeships before, because I loved education so much in secondary school, and I love working so much and it seems like the perfect combination of both, whereas I had no idea that I could even do that from secondary school onwards”* (Leanne, 19, female)

Superficial coverage of options: *“We didn’t have careers advice, as in the traditional sort of what you think of; an interview- ‘I’d like to do this...’, ‘Well you could do this, you can’t do that, or you’d need to be able to do this’ - or Your science isn’t great enough for you to be a doctor - but maybe you could look at this’. We didn’t have anything like that! Work experience: we did one week (‘cause it’s normally two weeks; we did one week in school and then different people came in to speak, but I honestly don’t remember anything about that. Maybe some CV talk or, yeah... no, I don’t really remember that”.* (Barbara, 25)

Graduates' access to information and guidance

Most had had access high quality guidance while at university, whether or not they had used it.

Most were aware of the importance of getting work experience to add to their CV - and unpaid work experience before, during (especially Sandwich degree students) and immediately after graduation often led to subsequent paid work experience.

Those with voluntary and unpaid work experience before, during or immediately after graduation most likely to access paid work experience and career-related employment.

Those with clear vocational aspirations from the outset were particularly likely to have done this.

Support and guidance provided by JobCentres

“They don’t really help you. Like, they don’t help you apply for jobs or anything ... it’s you basically, you’re on your own, and they just check ... they see what you applied for, and after they’ve checked ... then you sign it. Then you just go.” (Amir, male, 21)

“ it’s got all of the job sites {names several] aggregated, and because some of them list certain jobs in duplicate because through different agencies, it ends up [with] the same job gets listed 14 times and I’ve heard that people have been told to apply to the same job 14 times!”. (Charlotte (with a degree in Historical and Philosophical Studies, plus an MA in European Studies, now freelance proof-reader)

“My work coach understands that I’ve got [depression].... ‘cause I can talk to her about it as well, kind of takes the pressure off me a bit every time I see her.. so it’s like you build that relationship with your work coach” (Natalie, female, 18)

JobCentres have few graduate jobs

“When I was unemployed, I signed on for about 6 months, but I [lost my benefit]. [I was told that]I should apply for a routine, low paid] job,” – and the following week she said “Did you apply for that job?”, and I said, “No, I didn’t apply, because I was waiting for [multinational technology company] to get back to me”, and she said “Well I told you to apply for it, so you breached your contract”. (Tarun, degree in sports sciences, working as Finance Analyst in foods processing company).

They kept saying to me things like, “Just because you’ve got a degree it doesn’t mean that you have to just look for teaching jobs, you know:” [...]And I thought “I’ve got two degrees... if I go back people [will be] questioning... why am I a teaching assistant? Is it because of a problem with my practice....that I can’t get a teaching job? Then I had to go on workshops so, I just joined an agency [instead]” (Shereen, with a degree in youth and community studies and a PGCE, now working as a social worker).

Employment Agencies: ‘The New Normal’

“I’m starting to think that’s the only way in which to get [through to] employers, as last time it was so simple, I just got employment so quickly. Now I’m thinking that’s the only way to get employment for now ...” (Aqeel, male, 18)

“I never came across a job where you just get it on-the-spot like that” (James, male, 20)

“And click, that’s all I do ...” (Danielle, female, 21)



Who benefits from agencies?

“I’ve updated my CV, so I’ve got experience on there now. Before I had the agency [work], I was stressing that I wanted a job...” (Bless, 18).

“I have Wednesdays always free, I have the whole weekend, Friday I’m free, so it’s basically, Friday I finish [classes] at 10 in the morning, so if I get a job from Friday in the afternoon then plus the weekends or Wednesday” (Maarif, 18).

“I don’t think I would ever have found the Energy sector job on my own, because I wouldn’t have been looking for it because I wouldn’t have known what to look for, so I got lucky that I stumbled into a role that fitted my skill set”. (Paula, Maths and Psychology, found her first job as an energy analyst through a graduate recruitment agency).

“Especially with the economic downturn in 2008, and [the subsequent expansion of a major manufacturer who], started taking on thousands of engineers, employers like [the company where she currently works] couldn’t employ permanent members of staff fast enough, so they started employing contractors instead, so a good proportion of people who work at [named company] are contractors”.(Grace, Mechanical Engineering graduate, currently employed a test engineer by large automotive company).

And who doesn't benefit?

- *“Agencies don't help you if you're under 18. They say ‘Well, we've got no work that you're able to do’”* (Katherine, 18, monitoring and controls auditor in energy company, permanent post, accessed following completion of customer service apprenticeship, Coventry).
- *“The jobs that come up ... were either too far [away] or I needed to be available for more hours of the day”* (Aafa, 18, on gap year prior to starting university, Birmingham)
- *“Most of them [agencies] have the same jobs on there, that's what I've noticed. Like, the same job will come five or six [times]”* (Chloe, 17)
- *“They're more bothered about the money [they generate] and paying the employee less”* (James, 20, temporary employment, Leicester).
- *“Agencies do not offer a secure contract, so you can do three months' work and then they'll get rid of you and then pay the same price for somebody else for three months”* (21, permanent employment, Leicester).

Agencies and other intermediary organisations working with young people

- Variable, ranging from excellent to inadequate, depending on role of advisers.
- Graduates had found specialist agencies most useful, sometimes including career-relevant advice and guidance.
- General agencies used by graduates as students and between courses for paid work, but temp jobs sometimes led to career-related employment.
- Specialist agencies used by public sector professionals exiting secure but stressful jobs in teaching and NHS.

Unexpected findings: access to self-employment and social media use

- Incidence of self-employed and graduates aspiring to become self-employed.
- Increased use of social media the most important explanation.
- Different use of push/pull variables, depending on sector of employment and subject studied, from freelancing because unable to find job to voluntary choice of self-employment

‘Self employment among graduates - anew flexibility?’ by C. Tzanakou and K. Purcell (forthcoming)

Importance of networks

Family connections: *“My parents helped me to find the contacts and things. They helped, whether that was sort of saying ‘Oh, try and ring this person’ or ‘Here’s an email address’, even as much as that. I can do the rest from there. But I think some young people even struggled to have that little push: “ Here’s someone you can talk to..” (Raji, male, 20)*

School-Employer Links: *“[EmployerName] came to a careers event on a Thursday night....and then an email was sent round the entire college saying there’s a work experience opportunity, for two weeks, apply within. I just texted my mum [about it]. She worked in banking so she knew about [EmployerName] . She went ‘Take it!’.... ... and I’ve ended up here. “(Edward, male, 18)*

Concluding comments

- Shortfall in opportunities for sustainable entry level jobs for both school-leavers and new graduates.
- The start of working life too often begins with inconsistent and patchy careers advice. *Means* to apply for jobs covered, but too little labour market information.
- Large variations in access to employment opportunities and to 'useful' work experience
 - WHAT you know is important; but WHO you know is often crucial.
- Entry to work increasingly influenced by intermediaries like employment agencies, and the experience of insecure, short-term and low paid work dominates (- zero hour contracts are 'normal').
- The employment intermediary industries reinforce social and educational inequalities.

Thank you for your attention.

Contact us:



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Find out more about the project via
www.warwick.ac.uk/paths2work

where you can download the report *Present Tense, Future Imperfect: young people's pathways into work* and See a [video](#) with extracts from interviews with young people and other delegates who attended the Stakeholders' workshop held at the end of the project.