ABSTRACT: Early school leavers is a relevant priority for the UK as it has a higher rate of early school leaving (13.5%) than the EU average (12.7%). Early school leaving has a negative impact both on the individuals concerned and on society at large in terms of holding back economic performance and undermining democracy. In the UK the group of interest, however, is NEETs among 16-24 year olds rather than early school leavers. The number of NEETs has declined in recent years to the point of reaching pre-crisis levels, but the percentage of NEETs among 19-24 year olds is almost twice as high as among 16-18 year olds. Paradoxically, government policies primarily target the younger age group, with the extension of compulsory education and training to age 18 likely to be the most effective measure to further reduce the number of NEETs in this category. The little it has done influencing the older group has had negative effects: the decision to increase tuition fees to 9000 pounds has led to a dramatic decline in the numbers of 19-24 year olds enrolling in higher education. The UK appears to have developed its policies on NEETs largely independently of European policy initiatives.

KEYWORDS: ESL, NEET, Government policy, England

Introduction

This paper examines the state of affairs regarding early school leavers and people not in education, employment or training (NEET) in the United Kingdom. It
first compares the UK to other European countries in terms of levels and changes in early school leaving. Subsequently it reviews the trends in NEETs in the United Kingdom as this is the category that official policy focusses on. We then examine who the NEETS are and what the consequences of NEET status are for both the individuals concerned and for the wider society. The last section examines government policies on NEETS and the relation to European Commission initiatives on early school leavers. Our main conclusion is that more should be done to tackle non-participation among the 19-24 age group. While the percentage of NEETs among this age group is nearly twice as high as among the 16-18 year olds, government policy only targets the latter and has counterproductive effects on the former.

1. **State of play of early school leavers in the UK compared to other EU countries**

Early school leaving is commonly recognised as an important problem affecting both the opportunities of the young people concerned and the competitiveness and social cohesion of the wider society. For this reason the targets set for the EU 2020 Strategy was the reduction of the average European rate of early school leavers to less than 10% by 2020 as one of the education headline targets. The EC defined early school leavers (ESL) as ‘those young people who leave education and training with only lower secondary education or less [e.g. below GCSE grade C], and who are no longer in education and training’ (European Commission, 2013: 8). In statistical terms, European ESL rates are defined as the percentage of 18-24 years old with only lower secondary education or less and no longer in education or training. Eurostat, the statistics office for the European Commission, measures this by calculating the percentage of young people aged 18 to 24 fulfilling the following two conditions: i) the highest level of education or training attained is ISCED 0, 1, 2 or 3c short; ii) no education or training has been received in the four weeks.

In 2012 the ESL rate in the EU as a whole was 12,8%. The UK recorded a slightly higher rate (13,5%). This figure may well be higher for the UK since GCSEs (GCSEs are the main qualification undertaken by young people at 16 in the UK) grade A*-C have been assigned an ISCED code of 3c long. Thus young people who drop-out of education after completing only lower secondary education who gained the qualifications of GCSEs grade A*-C are not included in the UK figure on early school leavers, which complicates international comparisons.

There is considerable variation across Europe in ESL rates. Countries with moderately to very high ESL rates are Iceland, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Spain and
Turkey. Ireland, the Netherlands, Austria and a number of Scandinavian and post-communist countries have already achieved the 2020 target of 10% (see Table 1).

However, levels of attainment tell only half the story. Developments need to be examined to assess whether countries are making progress in reducing ESL rates. Figure 1 below shows both the level of ESL per country and its progress in reducing ESL between 2009-2012. While some countries in the EU on average are making good headway, some countries are stagnating. In others, ESL rates are even growing. The UK has succeeded in reducing the ESL rate by 5% annually between 2009 and 2012, but could do better as there are also countries with lower ESL rates than the UK that achieve higher levels of reduction (e.g. Denmark, the Netherlands and Ireland). Some countries with very high ESL rates are showing impressive improvement (e.g. Portugal and Spain) while others see the situation deteriorate (e.g. Romania).
There are also countries currently meeting the EU 2020 target but experiencing rising ESL rates, including quite a few post-communist countries. Among the group of countries showing good progress in reducing ESL rates, there are both countries with healthy economic growth figures (e.g. Bulgaria, Lithuania and Estonia) and countries having suffered badly from the economic crisis (e.g. Portugal, Spain and Greece) (see Balcerowicz, 2013: 29, for figures on economic performance). This suggests that developments in ESL rates are not just a reflection of specific social and economic conditions but depend in large measure on the existence of targeted policies against ESL.

2. Trends in numbers of NEETs in England

It needs to be stressed that ESL is not an official category in British government policy. Instead, the focus in England is on NEETs (not in employment, education or training) aged 16-24. It is important to highlight this difference as ESL people, according to the official EU definition, do not only concern a slightly older age group (18-24), they can also differ from NEETs in terms employment status and level of education. For instance, someone aged 23 who is in work and has a degree of lower secondary or less is considered an ESL but not a NEET. Conversely, some-
one not in work, education or training but with a degree in upper secondary or higher is classified as a NEET but not an ESL. In short, NEET is not synonymous to ESL. This is important to bear in mind when reading the following statistics.

The government releases statistics on NEETs every quarter. The latest statistics relate to the third quarter of 2014. As Table 2 shows, the number of NEETs as a proportion of people in a certain age group has gone down for all age groups from September 2013 to September 2014. The most rapid decline has occurred amongst 17 year olds which is likely to have been caused at least in part by the extension of the period of compulsory education to 17 in 2013 (see further below). The 19-24 year olds experienced the second most rapid decline in NEETs numbers, as the NEET rate went down from 20 to 17.6% reflecting overall trends in the reduction of youth unemployment figures and the figures for all age groups since the 2008 economic crisis. It should be noted here that the England does not have targets for increasing the number of young people going into higher education and the policy of increasing tuition fees means that the reduction in these figures is unlikely to be caused by more students going to university.

Seen over the longer term, the proportion of NEETs among 16-18 year olds has fluctuated between 8 and 10% from the mid-1990s. From 2008, nevertheless there has been a decline, which, again, may be partly explained by the raising of the age of compulsory education (Department for Education, 2014: 3). Table 3 below shows trends in the proportion of NEETs among 19-24 year olds from the third quarter of 2009 to the third quarter of 2014. Although there are notable fluctuations, a clear curvilinear trend can be detected: the proportion of NEETs first rises to 22% in the third quarter of 2011 and then declines (with ups and downs) to 17.6% in the third quarter of 2014. Thus, the number of NEETs has gone down both among adolescents and young adults. Moreover, they have sunk below pre-crisis levels, given that the proportion of NEETS among 19-24 year

### Tab. 2. NEET rates for different age cohorts: England 2012–2014. Values in %

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>July to September 2012</th>
<th>July to September 2013</th>
<th>July to September 2014</th>
<th>% Point Change from July to September 2013 to July to September 2014</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age 16</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>-0.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age 17</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>-3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 18</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>-1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 16-18</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>-1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 19-24</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>-2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 16-24</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>-2.2</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

olds stood at 18% in the third quarter of 2008 (Department for Education, 2013). Thus, the economic crisis appears not to have produced a lost generation as was feared by many. On the other hand, people who were 19 and older in 2009 are 25+ in 2015, meaning that they no longer fall in the 16-24 NEETs category and have thus dropped out of sight for policy makers. It could well be that the crisis has had lasting effects on this generation.

Yet, the proportion of NEETs among the older age group is much higher than among the 16-18 year olds, leading one observer to note that it is the post-18 NEET group that continues to give greatest cause for concern (Maguire, 2013). Moreover, many of those who are fortunate to be in employment are actually holding on to short-term and temporary contracts, including zero-hours ones, providing them with little job security and income (Esposito and Tse, 2014). Adding to these problems are the rising cost of living, particularly for housing, and the regional disparities in employment and affordable housing, suggesting that the

<table>
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<th>B. NEET</th>
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<tr>
<td>QUARTERLY</td>
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<tr>
<td>LFS SERIES</td>
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<tr>
<td>16 YEAR OLDS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q3 2009</td>
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<td>Q4 2009</td>
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<td>Q2 2014</td>
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<td>Q3 2014</td>
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Note: Q1 relates to the months January-March, Q2 to April-June, Q3 to July-September and Q4 to October-December.

situation for many young people in work, education or training is little better than for NEETs.

3. Early school leavers and NEETs: who are they and what are the consequences?

3.1. Who are they?

Contrary to the stereotypical image of NEETs as shy and spineless persons, they tend to have the same aspirations as other young people, with many of them wanting to find a job rather than continue in education (LSN, 2009; Pring et al., 2009; Spielhofer, 2009). Unlike other young people, however, they disproportionately suffer from economic and social disadvantage, low levels of attainment, negative experiences in the education system, and from profound feelings of failure. Other recurrent problems among NEETs and ESLs include homelessness, gang membership, delinquency, drug culture and dependency, depression, teenage pregnancy, prostitution, child abuse, and any combination of these issues.

3.2. What lies behind early school leaving? Experiences and motivations

Drawing from 101 semi-structured interviews with young people we explored what underlay early school leaving and the different experiences of young people dropping out learning. The interviews are part of a wider mixed-method research study ESRC LLAKES CELS (2013-2015) which focuses on how opportunities in education and work affect young people’s civic values. The sample includes young people aged 19 to 26 years old (the majority around 22 years old) from different social class backgrounds, living in different regions of England. We also paid attention in obtaining a balance of gender and different ethnic minority groups.

The analysis illustrates the different motivations and the complexity of the journeys that led to leaving school early. Behind the truncated educational journeys of ESL there were a range of personal factors which intersect with other social conditions. Amongst the personal factors, lack of motivation and not knowing what to do were prominent causes of dropping out. Michael, now 22 years old, left school at 16. He then started a music technology course at college but gave up without gaining any qualification. Since then, he had a couple of jobs and he has been claiming unemployment benefits on and off. He is currently out of work as he was made redundant from the last job:
Researcher: «And did you have any particular hopes when you left school?»
Michael: [Sighs heavily] «At the time I wasn’t one of those who thought about the future much, just sort of, not bothered about the future so I didn’t really plan ahead for anything. […] It’s just me. I was disinterested which is why I didn’t really follow up a lot of stuff… But to be honest it’s getting the motivation to do it all which, I don’t know, I just don’t really have. […] I was thinking about joining the Forces or something but I just don’t have the temperament to take orders, you know, so that was kind of… I mean now, I wouldn’t mind like, just for the money really, an electrician or some at but I didn’t get any of the qualifications when I was younger so… I’d have to save up loads of money and go back and pay loads and get in college again or something. So that’s pretty much nothing really apart from that».

Another male participant spoke about not having a goal or an interest. This lack of ambition involved not having a clear direction but rather going ahead by ‘trying things on’: «No, I’ve never really in my life never really known what I’ve wanted to do… That’s why I keep bouncing from thing to thing because I’m not entirely set on like a sort of goal in life». Other personal circumstances, like family breakdown, living in care, getting involved with local crime and drugs addiction also marked the life trajectories of some of ESLs in our sample. Shana is now 21 years old she was expelled from school at 15, she doesn’t have any qualifications and she has never worked. She has been living in care since the age of 14 and she had issues with drug addiction, and alcohol: «I moved away (from home) when I was 14, into care. I think that’s when I got kicked out of school and I was just hanging around on the street. […]. The reasons why I’ve been really far back, I’ve dropped out from school and from employments and stuff is because I was getting in trouble with the police, I was addicted to drugs».

One of our youngest respondents was homeless at the time of the interview sleeping in the street of central London. He spoke about school exclusion and how having left education with no qualifications was one of the triggers of a series of events that led to him in the street. After trying college and being on and off several odd jobs, he became unemployed and he has been out of work for over a year. While claiming benefits he got involved with selling drugs, he got sanctioned several times and ultimately lost his housing support and became homeless: «Er… yeah, yeah. But like it was worse in school, I couldn’t control myself at all in school like, no matter what lesson I were in I couldn’t concentrate. […] Er yeah but like […] I got kicked out of my school like four week into Year 11 and then I went into a new ‘un. And like, I don’t know, I just lost all motivation if you know what I mean. So when I sat my exams, I just did a few questions and then I left it basically».

A 22 years old young mother left school when she got pregnant. In the interview she looked back at when she was a teenager dreaming about going to
university and study history. Becoming a mother has involved shifting priorities: «I guess it’s just about him (her son) really… just about him, you know, about making life for him, it’s not about me anymore, it’s about him, you know. You give up that right when you have kids, it becomes about them and not about what you want, it’s about what they need […]. So for now it’s all focused around him really».

These personal factors were strongly interlinked with a range of external social conditions. The social class of the family was particularly important as it affected the availability of different types of resources. Lower economic capital increased the concerns about the cost of education: «To me, earning money is more important than getting it down on paper, although I know I have to do that to go forward and earn more money» (Female, 22 years old).

In addition, parents from a lower socio-economic background tend to have lower cultural capital. This is to say that they may have low or no qualifications themselves; they have less knowledge of the education system and are less confident about interacting with the schools and colleges and to help their children with homework: «I’ve never come from a big educated family that pushed to go to university. I think you have to be pushed by your parents to go, whereas my mum’s got no qualifications, nothing like that, she’s just done what she can with us as best she can, bless her» (Male, 22 years old).

Interview accounts suggest that the lack of availability of these resources impacted on young people’s attitudes toward education with preferences for an early start of a working life: «I was just worried about going to uni […] and there being no job at the end of it. So I didn’t want to waste all my time and money basically doing all that to just be in the same position that I would be when I left school but with a degree that’s probably not going to be much use to me» (Male, 22 years old); «I just I think […] working and getting a wage and doing it from the side» (Female, 22 years old).

Our analysis suggests a sense of ambivalence between some of these young people’s preferences for work and the general recognition that qualifications were ultimately needed. Early school leavers who end up NEET often develop feelings of failure and sense that society views them as people lacking willpower. Our respondents negotiated this sense of failure with their belief in self-reliance and an underlying optimism for their future.

3.3. Consequences for the individual

Leaving school prematurely is first of all a tragedy for the individuals concerned. Reviewing the literature on the effects of ESL, Dale (2010: 32) arrives at the following list of consequences:
– young people that leave school early are more likely to be unemployed than those that complete their education;
– they are more likely to be in blue collar jobs with less employment security and more part-time work;
– pregnancy, crime, violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and suicide have been found to be significantly higher among early school leavers. Most of these issues are also found to be causes of early school leaving;
– early school leavers are more likely than other citizens to draw on welfare and other social programs throughout their lives;
– early school leavers have a shorter life expectancy;
– ESL is associated with a much lower propensity to become involved in life-long learning.

To this list we may add low self-esteem (Prause and Dooley, 1997). Early school leavers often develop feelings of failure and sense that society views them as people lacking willpower.

3.4. Consequences for society

ESL also carries very high costs for national economies. Due to their low levels of skills many early school leavers cannot find a job. Their high unemployment rate has been calculated to cost the UK £ 13,442,164,622 in non-earned income and welfare expenditures in 2008, which is just less than 1% of GDP (Eurofound, 2012). But the damage is not just economic. The social fall-out includes higher levels of crime, higher inequality, reduced intergenerational mobility and poorer levels of public health (Levin, 1972: 10), which in turn have been identified as threats to social cohesion (Green and Janmaat, 2011). Early school leavers also tend to be politically disengaged. Taking social background and other influences into account, Hoskins and Janmaat (2014), for instance, found that young people in England with Level 1 and 2 qualifications (i.e. those with qualifications from lower secondary) had a significantly lower chance of voting in the 2010 elections than youngsters with higher qualifications (see Figure 2). This unequal electoral participation makes democratic politics less responsive to the needs and interests of the disengaged, which may ultimately undermine the public legitimacy of democracy.

4. UK government policies countering ESL and NEETS

The publication of the Bridging the Gap report by the Social Exclusion Unit in 1999 put the plight of NEETs firmly on the political agenda (Maguire and
Thompson, 2007). Reviewing a rapidly expanding body of literature on NEETS, the report highlighted the special obstacles that vulnerable young people faced. It called for a number of measures aimed at keeping young people in education, training or work (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999: 9-11). The proposed measures included:

– making sure that young people have clear goals to aim for by the age of 19;
– introducing a variety of pathways in education and training, which address the needs of all young people;
– providing financial support to encourage all groups of young people to participate in education and training;
– the creation of a multi-skills support service for young people targeting those who are most at risk of underachievement and disaffection.

In response, the Labour government launched the Connexions Service, which offers advice and guidance to 13-19 year olds by means of Personal Advisors to help them get their lives on track. It also instituted the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) in 2004. The EMA offered young people from low income families financial support and incentives to boost retention, participation and achievement rates in upper secondary education (Maguire and Rennison, 2005). Research looking into the effectiveness of the EMA found that since its introduction participation in Year 12 full time education (16-17 year olds) had gone up by 5.9% while the number of NEETs had diminished by 2,4% (Ashworth et al., 2002). Thus a small but noticeable positive effect of EMA was found. Other measures to

**FIG. 2.** Probability of having voted in the UK 2010 general election by level and type of qualification

Source: Logistic regression analysis performed on the Citizenship education longitudinal dataset 2002-2011. The young people were aged 20 at the time of the election.
incentivise NEETs to re-enter education or take up paid employment included the introduction of a variety of vocational and professional Diplomas available at different levels of qualification and the introduction of a national minimum wage for 16 and 17 year olds (Maguire and Thompson, 2007).

However, the decision in November 2007 to raise the education leaving age to 17 from September 2013 and to 18 from September 2015 was likely to be the most effective in terms of enhancing future participation in upper secondary education and training. So as not to undermine apprenticeships and other job-specific training, compulsory education was understood in a wide sense, including learning in schools and colleges, at a work-based learning provider, or as part of a job, and comprising both full- and part-time arrangements (Spielhofer et al., 2007). The issue of enforcement attracted a lot of debate: how to respond to 16-18 year olds who resist continuing in education and training? The government decided in the end not to impose criminal sanctions on them but to enforce compliance with the new law by means of fines and compulsory community service.

Keen to reduce levels of public spending, the Coalition government, which assumed office in May 2010, scrapped the EMA in England and replaced it with a £180 bursary scheme focused on students from less wealthy households. Unlike the EMA, which was paid directly to individuals, the bursary would be paid to schools and colleges. This policy change was criticised heavily for depriving disadvantaged young people of the necessary financial means to continue their education (e.g. The Guardian, 17 November 2014). The new government also sought to reinvigorate vocational education and training by giving employers more space to shape and take ownership of the skills agenda. However, this move also met with a sceptical response as doubts were expressed as to the commitment of employers to invest in apprenticeships and other forms of skills formation. According to Sloman (2014: 7), for instance, private sector initiatives to invest in skills development are «third-order decisions taken at the micro level and for business reasons», not social ones.

Reviewing these policies, one cannot fail to notice that they all concern 16-18 year olds. This is quite remarkable as the earlier section on trends in NEETs revealed that the proportion of NEETs in the older age group of 19-24 is much higher than in the younger group. In fact, one of the few measures that directly targeted the older age group has been widely criticised for actually pushing down the numbers of young people taking part in education. This was the Coalition government’s decision to raise the tuition fee to a maximum of 9000 pounds for students seeking to enter higher education in the 2012-13 academic year. Figures from the Independent Commission on Fees (2014: 16, 17) show that the number of English students enrolling in higher education has gone down by 3% from 2010 to 2014. The older age group was disproportionately affected, however, recording a decline of 8% over the same period. In contrast, recovering from their
depressed level in 2012, the number of 18 year olds has risen by 1.9% from 2010 to 2014. The figures further revealed that the social gap in application and entry rates has narrowed slightly for the whole of the HE sector but remains very large for the most selective universities.

Interestingly, UK government policy on NEETs appears to have been developed largely parallel to and often in isolation from EU policies on early school leavers. Thus, the UK was the only country that did not adopt a national target in response to the ESL objective of the Europe 2020 Strategy. According to one study, key stakeholders in the UK (from education authorities, teachers, parents, and secondary school students, as well as practitioners working with early school leavers through NGOs and projects targeted at at-risk youth) practically all denied that the EU benchmark on early school leavers had influenced national policies on ESL (GHK, 2011). Hoskins et al. (2014) deplore the isolationist stance of British policy makers as they see a lot of benefits in adopting EU policies on ESL, including (1) the exchange of good practice with other European countries (2) the acquisition of additional European funding to support national initiatives and programmes that tackle the consequences of ESL (3) the pooling of expert resources and funding of research towards understanding and preventing ESL, and (4) ensuring that early school leavers are a policy priority. Regarding the second benefit, they note that the Department for work and pensions itself acknowledged the value of the 2007-2013 European Social Fund programme for «supporting localised, targeted provision in a way that complements existing provision, helping young people to meet the requirement to participate in education or training until their 18th birthday» (Department for work and pensions, 2014: 20). In relation to the last-named advantage, they note that in countries where national targets have been set had, such as Finland, France, Greece, the Netherlands and Spain, the Europe 2020 objective raised the policy profile of ESL.

**Conclusion**

Early school leavers is a relevant priority for the UK as the UK has a higher rate of early school leaving than the EU average and is above the EU 2020 benchmark of 10%. Early school leaving has a negative impact both on the individuals concerned and on society at large in terms of holding back economic performance and undermining democracy.

In the UK the group of interest is NEETs rather than early school leavers. The number of NEETs has declined in recent years to the point of reaching pre-crisis levels, but the percentage of NEETs among 19-24 year olds is almost twice as high as among 16-18 year olds. Paradoxically, government policies primarily target the younger age group, with the extension of compulsory education and training to age
likely to be the most effective measure to further reduce the number of NEETs in this category. The little it has done influencing the older group has had negative effects: the decision to increase tuition fees to 9000 pounds has led to a dramatic decline in the numbers of 19-24 year olds enrolling in higher education. In view of the other problems that this group faces, such as insecure and low paid employment and high and rising costs of housing, there is every reason for an expansion of policies easing the pressures on young adults, NEETs and non-NEETs alike.

The UK appears to have developed its policies on NEETs largely independently of European policy initiatives. This might not have led to the best outcomes as there is evidence that the UK could benefit from EU level collaboration through the sharing of good practice on reducing early school leavers and through using European structural funds and European programmes to complement national funding streams.

References


