

Time to revisit the Youth Training Scheme?

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Youth unemployment has been a significant social and economic problem in the United Kingdom for more than forty years now and, whilst it is now lower than after the financial crisis of 2007-8, the number of young people outside education and work remains higher in Britain than in most comparable economies. Yet in the years after World War Two, the UK's unemployment rate was less than 1 per cent and lower among young people than older workers. The great majority of school-leavers went straight into full-time employment after leaving education at the earliest opportunity (at age fifteen until 1972 and sixteen thereafter) and, although some 'churned' from job to job, this was masked by the ready availability of work and overall youth unemployment remained relatively low. The labour market was, of course, stratified according to 'race' and gender as well as social class but most school-leavers were still able to find work consistent with their expectations.

Young people were, however, disproportionately affected as unemployment began to grow during the 1960s and accelerated following the OPEC oil crisis of 1973. By 1980, over 20 per cent of 16 to 18-year-olds were 'on the dole' - a figure almost three times higher than the general unemployment rate. Falling profits, automation and the reorganisation of work meant that the number of new jobs was shrinking, especially in manufacturing industry. By the early 1980s, the number of apprentices had halved since its mid-1960s peak, when more than a quarter of male school-leavers obtained an apprenticeship. Meanwhile, employers also began recruiting alternative forms of labour, particularly adult women who were often seen as more flexible, reliable and easier to manage. Yet dominant discourses increasingly blamed youth unemployment on the supposed failings of both young people and the education system, which was accused of failing to equip the nation's youth with the skills, abilities and dispositions deemed necessary for the world of

work. Subsequently, there have been various attempts to engage or re-engage unemployed youth in education and work, although training initiatives based on the assumption that young people lack the wherewithal to find and retain work have been the main strategy.

Initially, the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), a state-funded quango established in 1973, was responsible for running training schemes for young people outside education and work. The first of these, the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP), began in 1978 as a six-month scheme for young people with 'low qualifications', although it was preceded by smaller initiatives like the Job Creation Scheme and the Work Experience Programme, both of which tried to induce employers to offer jobs to the unemployed. Initially, around 80 per cent of those who completed YOP found paid work or went on to further education or training but the ongoing collapse of the youth labour market meant that roughly half of all sixteen-year-old school leavers were on the Programme by 1981-82. By the end of its life, the overall proportion of YOP trainees finding work was under 25 per cent and less than 10 per cent in the most deprived locales.

Mrs Thatcher's incoming Conservative government inherited the Manpower Services Commission in 1979 and many commentators anticipated its abolition. The MSC was, at root, a corporate body formed in the dying days of consensus politics, and notions of manpower planning and government-sponsored training did not sit well with a new regime committed to market forces and 'rolling back the state'. The MSC was nevertheless able to find a place in the new scheme of things. Thatcher and her followers were strongly opposed to trade unions and their control over the apprenticeship system, and MSC initiatives provided a way of undermining such 'restrictive practices'. Expediency also played a role though: spiralling unemployment and the urban riots of 1980-81

undoubtedly also prompted a change in government attitude. A major expansion of YOP was announced in summer 1981 and the year ended with the MSC calling for a radical overhaul of vocational education and training. There was a need, it was argued, to produce more multi-skilled workers able to move across occupational boundaries in ways which the traditional apprenticeship system prevented. Such a programme would, government claimed, also help break down long-standing divisions between mental and manual labour and constitute nothing less than a 'training revolution' for the UK. Such claims were ambitious to say the least but the notion of building a bridge between education and work appealed to many people. For government, any way of reducing, or at least disguising, youth unemployment was attractive - both to reduce headline unemployment figures and help keep public order. For employers, a new programme of state-funded youth training would provide another income stream to help subsidise recruitment. Meanwhile, many young people and their parents welcomed another alternative to the dole, at least initially.

YTS was launched in 1983 backed by £1 billion of public money, which was an extraordinary sum at the time, although the Scheme also represented a significant landmark in other ways. On one hand, it marked a recognition that the traditional youth labour market was in terminal decline and that there was a need for an alternative mechanism through which to regulate the behaviour of young people. But the social and cultural impact of the Youth Training Scheme should not be underestimated either. Certain employers used school-leavers as cheap labour and there were accusations that some young people received little if any coherent training whilst on the Scheme. Consequently, those who were able to stay in full-time education usually did so. Others chose to remain unemployed rather than take a YTS, although various benefit sanctions made this option increasingly difficult to sustain. Eventually, one way or another, the Youth Training Scheme became something of a rite of passage for large sections of working-class youth.

The Youth Opportunities Programme was never intended to be more than a temporary measure to assuage youth unemployment but YTS would, it was claimed, be central to 'upskilling the nation' and effectively help Britain train its way out of recession. Different forms of provision would be provided for different client groups but high quality, it was argued, would be central to its success. Most YTS placements nevertheless continued to be in the same shops, offices and small businesses that had provided work placements for YOP. Trainees were also supposed to receive at least twenty weeks off-the-job training (13 weeks in year one and seven

weeks in year two after the Scheme was extended to two years) but workplace learning away from a trainee's workstation would, in many cases, qualify as such. In some cases, training was almost non-existent. Either way, YTS trainees were also exempt from most statutory employment rights and training allowances were consistently held down below the rate of inflation, although the proposal by the then Secretary of State for Employment, Norman Tebbit, to cut them from £25 to £15 a week was never implemented.

Perhaps understandably, YTS under-recruited in its first two years and roughly half of all trainees left the Scheme early; many young people were keen to get a 'real job', even if it meant going into 'dead-end work'. YTS was nevertheless extended to two years in 1986 and a combination of more and more benefit sanctions and the continued collapse of the youth labour market meant that eventually over 500,000 young people were enrolled on the Scheme. Recruitment started to fall towards the end of the 1980s though. Partly, this was due to something of a pickup in the economy but the MSC also became progressively sidelined after Mrs Thatcher's third general election victory in 1987. Initially, there were significant funding cuts but the Commission was eventually abolished and replaced by a network of 'employer-led' Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) at the end of the decade. YTS was then repackaged simply as Youth Training and placed under the control of the TECs, and eventually absorbed into the Modern Apprentice framework in the early 1990s.

The Manpower Services Commission was very much an organ of the state but operational delivery of YTS was sub-contracted to managing agents, many of which were commercial enterprises, and it is from this point that we can trace the extensive privatisation and marketisation of post-compulsory education and training we see in England today. Some managing agents simply ran YTS programmes for young people who undertook work placements with them - and often such organisations kept trainees on as employees at the end of their Scheme. There was, however, also the growth of small businesses set up wholly or mainly for the purpose of placing young people in local labour markets, typically in low-skill segments of the service sector. This, on one hand, encouraged certain businesses to take on trainees who may otherwise have remained unemployed but the 'payment by results' system through which managing agents were funded also encouraged the reproduction of long-established labour market inequalities. Meanwhile, some employers simply classified their apprentices and other recruits as YTS trainees in order to access public money. The

more unscrupulous ones saw them as an almost inexhaustible pool of free labour and certain businesses used YTS trainees to displace existing workers. We should nevertheless be careful not to fall into lazy stereotypes about YTS. Many reputable employers were also involved with the Scheme and took their responsibilities seriously, often sending trainees to college on day release, where they gained qualifications of significant labour-market value. Some companies had a good record in offering young people permanent employment at the end of their Scheme, and certain YTS programmes - typically those run by 'blue chip' employers - were highly sought after.

Roberts and Parsell (1992) argue that there was a hierarchy of youth training which consisted of 'sponsored', 'contest' and 'warehousing' schemes, each of which were characterised by certain defining features. Sponsored schemes were, according to them, able to attract significant numbers of well-qualified applicants and, once recruited, progression to permanent employment was usually the norm for those able to gain a place on such a programme. Training was usually good quality and often led to nationally-recognised qualifications. YTS programmes run by large public and private-sector employers most commonly met such criteria, although some smaller businesses recognised locally as 'good employers' also did so. Contest schemes were, Roberts and Parsell argue, generally less sought after than sponsored schemes and usually run by firms which recruited more trainees than they expected to retain. Effectively, YTS was used as a longitudinal assessment process and a significant proportion of young people were discarded at the end of their time on the Scheme - often to be replaced with another tranche of trainees. Warehousing schemes were effectively bottom of the pile and typically offered trainees virtually no chance of paid employment upon completion. Often operating in areas of mass unemployment, warehousing schemes generally recruited the least-qualified school-leavers and usually failed to equip trainees with any recognisable skills or qualifications.

There is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a significant literature on YTS, even though much of it deals with the political economy of the Scheme. There is less on young people's experiences of the Scheme, although Dan Finn (1987) and Patrick Ainley (1988) both wrote important books on the subject when YTS was at its peak, at least in terms of the number of trainees who were on the Scheme. There is, however, a paucity of research on the *historical* experiences of former YTS trainees. This means we know very little about how those who took part in YTS view their experiences in retrospect, or the

extent to which their time on the Scheme has shaped current orientations to education and work. This, in my opinion, represents a significant gap in knowledge, especially given the sheer number of people - especially those from working-class backgrounds - who were involved with YTS. It is time we had a programme of research which addresses this.

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