Manchester Metropolitan University

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Tackling the NEET crisis: providing better quality, better focused support to young people identified as 'at risk' of exclusion from secondary school

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Introduction

The number of young people in the UK not in education, employment, or training (NEET) has risen sharply since the pandemic. Latest statistics reveal that there are now over one million young people (1,012,00 in March 2026) reported to be NEET, representing roughly 13.5% of all 16 to 24-year-olds. This surge represents an 11-year high, reversing a decade-long decline and bringing rates back to levels not seen since the 2008 financial crisis.

This rise has triggered a renewed government focus on who the NEET populations are, why the numbers have risen so sharply and on what interventions and support practices work best to enable young people to attend school, thrive, and gain meaningful qualifications that hold future trajectory currency.

Key recommendations

Data taken from the MINE (https://www.mmu.ac.uk/about-us/faculties/health-and-education/research/projects/mine) research, a five-year national research project mapping NEET interventions in England, suggest that to reverse the escalating NEET crisis government policy should:

- ***Acknowledge the complexity of NEET risk***, recognising macro policy and school level factors, as well as individual ones that culminate to increase the likelihood of future NEET status. Young people want to engage in meaningful education, training and employment pathways and outcomes but face systematic barriers to doing so.
- ***Allow young people more say over their future education, employment and training pathways***. Our research indicates that young people want to learn and earn but often lack the knowledge and support needed about how to move through to their next step. Many of our young people had very little say over what they learned and where, leaving some in destinations not of their choosing and not in close alignment to their future career aims.
- ***Broaden the curriculum offer*** and alternative pathways for young people who continually struggle to reach grade 4 in GCSE maths and English. Offer more flexibility in the entry criteria for post-16 opportunities for those not holding these passport qualifications.

For many young people in our research the high-stakes GCSE exam period escalates stress and anxiety. Young people and the professionals working with them are very aware that they are a gateway qualification that can either widen or narrow their post-16 options, as one Head of Year explicates below.

One of the biggest single changes I think you could make would be to remove that level 4 GCSE requirement. Because then you're not disenfranchising one third of students by saying 'you have to fail'. Because if they leave school having failed already, why are they going to go on to have a career where they feel successful? Why are they going to go on to a college? Because they're not going to go to sixth forms, those children, they go to colleges, which we already see as a second-class sort of thing. They're not going to go on and be happy if they've already left their education at age sixteen on a sad note. (Head of Year; Interview, March 2023).

- ***Offer more accessible lower-level provision (at Level 2 and below)*** to enable greater flexibility and choice for young people's post-16 destinations and futures. Giving young people ample opportunities to catch-up at different points within their education, training and employment trajectory allows young people to gain a sense that they can achieve if they have experienced significant periods of time out of schooling, particularly so in Years 10 an 11 (during the Key Stage 4, GCSE years). NEET preventative initiatives may be better judged via a sustained participation lens rather than on a purely outcome based one. More quality provision should be made available at midway points throughout the academic year. An easier hop-on hop-off system is advocated that isn't so linear and outcome focused.
- ***Provide more equitable careers guidance support***, ensuring those most at risk of dropout receive quality advice at crucial and vulnerable education, employment and training transition points. Sustained quality care is needed with a trusted adult during periods of school mobility and across these transitions. Advice should take a strength-based and relational approach.

Many of the young people and their families in the MINE research report having lost trust in the education system. They feel unheard and uncared for. Quality, independent advice and support is required to help support young people move out of school and on to the next best step. Currently, careers guidance and support systems and packages operate very differently across different education settings. A more unified and equitable approach to careers guidance support is needed – particularly so for those identified as most 'at risk' of exclusion and becoming NEET.

I think a lot of students have come out of school for different reasons, but they tend to all say that they lose trust in adults in education. Because they're told time after time, 'I'll do that, we'll sort that, we'll make that, we'll sort it out', and they don't see that happening. So I think one of the challenges is getting them on-side. (14-16 support worker; Interview, June 2023).

- ***Better target resources*** to those who have been identified as most in need of support. This may take a variety of forms and needs to an incorporate a myriad of interventions scoped at school, post-16 education and training and Local Authority level. Better financial support is needed to enable young people to partake in provision that works best for their needs, this may take the form of support with travel, food or even removing the cost for Home Educated young people to enter GCSE exams.

How funding is used and operationalised within Local Authorities and schools varies. More equitable and better targeted support is thus required for key groups such as those with SEND, those who are being Home Educated and for young people who have experienced mental health and anxiety.

Speaking from his career leader role in a mainstream secondary school one Careers Lead explains 'We don't have a budget for it, and so people may say 'oh it's only a thousand pounds for this'. But we don't have a thousand pounds in the budget. My budget for careers is five hundred quid, like for a year. So, you can't do all that. It covers printing and basically that is it.'
(Careers Lead, Mainstream Secondary School; Interview, June 2023).

Case study examples

Practical examples of how adopting relational strength-based approaches to support young people 'at risk' of exclusion from school are indicated below. These case study's reveal how interventions can more proactively promote young peoples (re)engagement and enhance their opportunity to gain relevant qualifications that set them up for more meaningful post-16 destinations.

The MINE project has worked closely with both of these initiatives to promote the strength-based flexible and relational way of working with young people and both examples show how these guiding principles can be scaled up to simultaneously afford good quality provision over a larger scale basis.

Example 1: Manchester United Foundation
https://www.mufoundation.org/en/about-us

Manchester United Foundation uses the four-stage 'REDS' framework to mentoring when working with young people at risk of school exclusion and drop out: *Relate, Empower, Develop and Sustain*.
This approach embraces the centrality of young people having access to sustained relationships with trusted adults in safe spaces.

The Relate phase underpins the mentoring, focused on building supportive relationships and rapport during one-to-one mentoring sessions.

In the Empower phrase, mentees guide the mentoring conversation. Mentors listen to the young person's needs and interests to help them shape their own goals. This involves seeking to harness young people's aspirations as strengths to enable autonomy rather than stifling it.

In the Develop phase, mentors help young people to monitor their progress and celebrate success. A relational approach and caring environment aims to create a space where young people feel free to take risks, make mistakes and learn from them.

Sustain is the phase where mentors continue their support for their mentors, with this continuity and consistency important in enabling them to achieve their goals.

Example 2: Indie Education UK
https://indieeducation.org/about

Indie Education is a registered independent school providing high-quality, inclusive education for young people aged 14-19 who have not thrived in mainstream settings. They offer an educational model that is flexible and personalised that combines academic rigour with embedded wellbeing support.

Learners here can work towards GCSEs, BTECs and A-Levels, as well as have the opportunity to do Functional Skills qualifications across a broad range of subject areas. Post-16 and Post-18 pathways are individually managed and supported with clear viable routes enacted and continually supported via trusted adults.

The young person below was aged 17 when interviewed, he gained no GCSEs in school, had been in special educational needs school all of his life and had been 'kicked out' of several places before starting here with Indie Education in October 2025 when the school first opened. He started the school with no GCSEs but was doing his maths and English as well as a BTEC landscaping qualification at Indie Education, with plans to stay on and do his A-Levels in the same setting.

This was important to Karter as he trusted the adults he was working with in the setting, appreciated their focus on him as an individual and was motivated by future education and training pathway open to him – he saw a clear relevant route that would help him maybe one day work with his dad doing gardening.

I was getting kicked out a lot, so I only managed to pass functional skills level one. But now I'm doing GCSE. So next year I might come back for A-levels too (...)I mean it, yeah, it's, I think it's the best place for me. For me I think it's the best place. Obviously, the staff have got a lot of experience with kids like us, so we ain't got to act a certain way around them, because they've been around it ten-plus years. So, I can just be myself.
(Young Person Interview Jan 2026).

Conclusion

All support work that is done with young people must start from the proposition that **every young person has something valuable to add to society**. There needs to be greater recognition that youth disengagement is not about individual failure, but rather that systematic barriers are at play that prevent young people thriving in our current education, employment and training landscape.

The quality, timing and place of the provision and support on offer matters. Strength-based, relational approaches that are sustained across and beyond transition points are advocated. Young people need to feel secure and safe where they engage and crucially need to be able to travel there. Pathways should be affordable, flexible, learner-led and support young people to move onto their next step, whatever that might be and whenever that is needed.

National curriculum reform is required to remove the high-stakes nature and intensity of GCSEs – particularly so for maths and English, since allowing young people to continually to be set up to fail will only increase disengagement not act to improve it. Enrichment activities, life and employability skills need to be better embedded sooner. A greater focus on equality of opportunity for accessing quality work experience and decent paid work for young people is welcomed.

Becoming NEET does not start at age 16. Risk needs to be identified and measured early. Professionals working in the field often know who these young people are, they see the signs, but these signals need to be acted upon in good time and with bespoke quality provision that eases the young person's ability to (re)engage.

Schools are operating as front line services and can only do so much. They must be viewed as part of a wider ecosystem of support that includes youth work, health care provision, further education and higher education sectors. Independent and quality information and careers advice needs to be made more equitable across the country. Support needs to be better coordinated, and key NEET preventative leads need to be more easily identifiable.

School to work pathways need to be clear, achievable, flexible and hold meaning for the young person embarking upon them. The power of the paraprofessional and relational ways of working with young people should be better recognised. **Young people want to feel valued and hold a sense of belonging;** long-term, sustained relational approaches that continue across and beyond key transition points go some way to offer this.

Professor Lisa Russell and Dr Katherine Davey

Professor Lisa Russell is a Professor of Education and Employment at The Manchester Metropolitan University. She represents a global leading figure in the areas of NEET young people and ethnography.

She is Principal Investigator for the MINE project (Mapping Interventions for young people 'at risk' of becoming NEET in England). Funded by The Leverhulme Trust this longitudinal research offers the first comprehensive national picture of early intervention provision and how it is experienced by the young people, their families and the professionals working with them. This work informs this brief and fed into the Milburn Review interim report that was launched to investigate the causes of record unemployment amongst 16–24-year-olds in the UK.

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