

Reducing the Skills Gap

GIVING YOUNG PEOPLE A CHANCE TO DEMONSTRATE
THEIR EMPLOYABILITY

PROFESSIONALISM

is having ~~confidence~~ confidence
in your skills and making sure doing
job at the best of your ability.

ENTHUSIASM

is to be happy and liking to go in
the work place.

COMMITMENT

Be DETERMINED and
showing effort and wanting to do your
job.

MOTIVATION

is being excited and focused
to get a job done.

Pauline Leonard and Rachel
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The Research Team

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Executive Summary

Youth Focus North East's 'Reducing the Skills Gap' (RTSG) is a training programme designed to improve employability skills for 16-25 year olds. The three-week programme is distinctive as it is co-created by employers, youth workers and young people, some of whom have had personal experience of unemployment. RTSG focuses on the acquisition of soft skills and personal development and is delivered by both youth workers and young people, some having attended the programme themselves and since been trained as young trainers of the programme.

RTSG incorporates sessions addressing the key skills that employers cite as lacking in some young people today. These include: communication, commitment, professionalism, time management, teamwork, motivation, enthusiasm and confidence. Each skill is explored through activity-based learning methods constructed to engage young people from diverse educational backgrounds and learner identities.

On successful completion of the programme, through partnership with City and Guilds, each young person is awarded a Mozilla 'badge'. The badges enable participants to create a digital platform showcasing their achievements for employers, providing evidence of their acquisition of skills across the key areas.

Research was conducted by members of the ESRC LLAKES Research Centre, University College London to evaluate the programme.

RTSG participants are from diverse backgrounds, but most have previous experience of temporary unskilled work. Course leaders recognise that the young people come to the programme with all sorts of motivations and skills levels but most have ambitions to find work they will enjoy as well as to provide job and economic security. Some young people need the information about the programme to be made highly accessible and then require ongoing support and encouragement to attend.

Motivation to attend is provided by the activity-based learning style. Sessions have been designed with the help of young people, with a key aim to engage young people, bring them out of their shells, enable them to recognize how much they have to offer, help them grow in confidence and work well together.

A key tenet of the programme is the belief that young people know the appropriate behaviours and attitudes for work but lack the language to express these key ideals and find examples of when they have demonstrated them in the past. Activities help them find the language to express their employability skills and prove their acquisition of these skills in a low risk environment. Many respond well to this approach.

Teaching methods and tutors are well liked as the programme is very different from school. Many course members had poor previous experiences of compulsory education, with associated learner identities of 'failure'. They are relieved to find that the programme is more relaxed, with approachable staff.

Programme members recognized that their employability skills had improved as a result. Although many needed substantial support with some of the tasks, this is always on hand. Young people's social skills also develop and many recognized how they had developed in confidence. Those with learning difficulties and mental health issues were often amazed at how they had changed.

The involvement of 'real' employers in aspects of the programme is highly regarded. The credentialization of skills through badges is also appreciated.

Work experience is regarded as an invaluable outcome of the programme. This varies considerably in function and content, but the experience changes lives, with some gaining employment as a result of their placement, others gaining employment very soon after, while others, although still unemployed, feel they are in a better position to strive for a longed-for vocation or now realise there are multiple other choices available to them.

In any learning experience, there are some aspects that trainees enjoy less than others. The wide diversity within the group sometimes poses a challenge to the 'one size fits all' model, where participants with very different learning needs and educational attainment levels all participate in the same tasks. For those with poor previous experiences of learning, those who struggled with literacy and numeracy, or those with learning difficulties, some of the activities were experienced as testing.

Some were less keen on the more performative, activity-based sessions. They require a degree of initiative, self-management and communication skills which, for a minority, is at odds with their current daily activities and can be demanding. Having to talk personally in front of the group was a concern for those with troubled personal histories they did not wish to disclose.

Although participants enjoyed the skills-based modules, some question how much things would change in practice. The very real pressures of the workplace, compared to the relative safety of the classroom, is well recognized. Work experience was therefore highly valued, especially when good support was provided for training and confidence building.

Many of the young people appreciated the idea behind the online badge system but technical difficulties often made the process of completing these challenging. Some were confused about how to use the technology in the future, how well this would work in practice, in an interview or application. Others were concerned as to whether linking to social media was the right platform.

The Report concludes with five key recommendations:

- Involving young people in course design works well: playing into their interests, stimulating them to become involved, and enhancing skills development and acquisition.
- The personal development provided by RTSG is applauded but there is also a real need to ensure young people are informed about the likelihood of finding work in particular regional sectors.
- Finding good quality work experience placement opportunities is an ongoing challenge for YFNE. More employers need to become involved to meet the needs of young people and participate in their role in regional skills development. There is real evidence of good practice, and this needs showcasing and using as a catalyst for greater employer involvement and new approaches.
- New thinking is required to open up entry routes into work for young people. Some young people are not ready to enter apprenticeships immediately on leaving formal education, requiring more support with initial skills development. Pre-apprenticeships schemes are needed across sectors to enable access training in skills needed for sustainable economic development.
- Sensitivity is needed to distinguish which individuals are ready to work towards badged qualifications, and whether they are applicable for their desired employment sector.

Introduction

This report presents findings from a research study of the experiences, perspectives and motivations of young people aged between 18 and 25 participating in the Reducing the Skills Gap programme delivered by Youth Focus North East. The research was conducted as part of the larger research project '*Getting in and getting on in the youth labour market: entry practices, under-employment and skill formation in regional economies*' which is being undertaken by the Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies (LLAKES) based at UCL Institute of Education, University College London.

The project is investigating the fact that several 'Youth Labour Markets' now exist in the UK, each providing very different opportunities for an expanding age group of 18-30 year olds. In addition, there are an increasing number of different ways of 'getting in' to work for young people, such as apprenticeships, voluntary work placements, enterprise schemes and so on, across the public, private and voluntary sectors. Different regions within the UK have instituted various strategies for local economic growth and regeneration which often include schemes to help young people access new skills and get into work. However, we know very little about the success of these schemes and how young people's experiences of getting into work and getting on within their careers varies across the different regions of the UK. The project takes a comparative approach by looking at five different regions across the UK to explore entry schemes, employment and early careers.

Since the late 1990s, the North East has taken a proactive approach to tackling economic performance and employment. The success of this is demonstrated by the fact that the region went from being the lowest growing region during the 1990s to one of only two regions (alongside London) to outperform national average between 1999 and 2009 (NELEP 2013). However, at the same time the region suffers from an absolute shortage of jobs because of too few private sector companies and jobs, and insufficient skill levels to support a modern diverse economy. In 2013, Lord Andrew Adonis completed a North East Independent Review of the regional economy, which concluded that the North East needed better quality jobs to increase productivity and provide a broader range of training and employment opportunities for the youth workforce. As a result, a range of initiatives have been developed designed to provide young people with the skills they need to enter the labour market.

Youth Focus: North East

Youth Focus: North East (YFNE) is a charitable organization established in 1989 which acts as a regional hub connecting young people with the organizations and professionals who support them. It supports a network of over 1500 organizations and individuals concerned with developing quality services which aim to improve the lives of young people. The success of YFNE's approach to the values of youth work has been recognized through winning multiple awards such as the NCVYS Young Partners Award (North 2009 and 2011); NCVYS Young Partners Art and Culture Award (2013) and NCVYS Young Partners Health and Well-being Award (2013).

One of a number of YFNE's programmes aiming to enhance the lives of young people, 'Reducing the Skills Gap' (RTSG) is a training programme designed to improve employability skills for 16-25 year olds. The programme aims to meet the needs of both employers and young people, following research into youth unemployment which was carried out in 2012 by the North East Youth Network (NEYN), a

youth forum. The three-week programme was then co-created by employers, youth workers and young people, some of whom had personal experience of unemployment. It focuses on both the acquisition of soft skills and personal development and is delivered by both youth workers and young people, some having attended the programme themselves and since been trained as young trainers of the programme. It incorporates sessions addressing the key skills which employers cited as lacking in some young people today. These include: communication, commitment, professionalism, time management, teamwork, motivation, enthusiasm and confidence. Each skill is explored through activity-based learning methods constructed to engage young people from diverse educational backgrounds and learner identities. The teaching and learning style is deliberately different to school-based experiences, as one participant summarises: ‘they try and like have a better understanding of what you want and where you want to go and not force you into something you don’t want to do’. The participants’ log their progress via self-assessment skills questionnaires and a reflective diary. On successful completion of these, through partnership with City and Guilds each young person is awarded a Mozilla ‘badge’ corresponding to modules of the programme. The badges enable participants to create a digital platform showcasing their achievements for employers, providing evidence of their acquisition of skills across the key areas.

During the programme, each young person also attends a pre- and post-training ‘real life’ interview with an employer. The aim is that the programme culminates with a placement within a workplace setting. However, employer engagement, particularly with regard to work placements, is one of the key challenges faced by YFNE.

Methodology

The research employs qualitative methods to build in-depth case studies of youth labour markets in five contrasting regions of the UK. In each region, a different ‘entry route’ was selected: volunteering, internships, enterprise schemes, apprenticeships and employability programmes and interviews conducted with young people and other key stakeholders. Ethnographies were also conducted of each scheme in order to gain a real ‘hands on’ sense of the experiences of young people. In the North East, interviews were also conducted with policy makers across the city as well as staff at YFNE. Ethnographies were conducted within two RTSG programmes in Hartlepool and Gateshead and several young people were interviewed twice during and after their programmes. Ethical approval for the research was gained through the Institute of Education, University of London and all names in the report are pseudonyms.

Motivations: Why participate in RTSG?

The participants of the RTSG programmes tend to be from diverse backgrounds. While they are predominantly attended by local young people, ‘born and bred’ in the North East, they also include migrants, both internal from elsewhere within the UK and international, mainly from the European Union. Educational backgrounds may range from no or few Level 2 (GCSE) qualifications to undergraduates. Many of those with lower levels of educational qualifications have already completed other employability courses elsewhere, as one of the programme leaders explains:

All at different places. It’s trying to get them to be like ‘it’s a little bit different, you’ll be doing different things in it’, because they’re just ‘I’m so sick, I’m so sick of going and doing the same thing, and someone saying this and I know all that stuff anyway, and I’ve gone through it again and I’m not getting

any results at the end of it and I'm just getting put on these different courses and they're not getting me anywhere.'

Others have some experience of work, usually temporary and low paid, often interspersed with spells of unpaid work and unemployment. Some have experienced family problems, learning difficulties, mental health issues, drug and alcohol abuse and/or criminal records. For some, attending the programme is an attempt to make a new start:

Honestly, if you knew me how I used to be, like most people would say I was going to end up in jail and stuff. Yeah, and like never be decent. But I got myself on the straight and narrow, started training, stopped drinking, stopped smoking, sort of left the group of people that I was hanging about with. And that's one of the reasons that I moved cities and stuff because I was going down the wrong road. So I did it for me. And it's like the best thing I've ever done. (Freddy)

Against this background, motivations to take the RTSG are varied. A key aspiration, however, is simply 'to find a job' (James); 'I want to find a job, I want to work' (Ion). In this regard, their hopes and ambitions were also highly variable, from those who wanted to get into retail:

I'd like to work in a place with like for example Primark or shop, Morrison, Tesco, Asda, H & M, just stuff like that, McDonalds. Yeah retail. (Ion)

to one day running their own business: *'Well I hope I get me...like own my own garage and stuff, I would enjoy that (Peter),*

or hoping to get into vocations such as animal care, the creative industries, IT or social care and probation. As a stepping stone to this, many, like Steph, were particularly attracted by the programme's promise of work experience, often with high hopes of the outcome of this:

I guess it just sounded really good and they said work experience at the end, and I thought 'oh it could help us with my animal care. I think it will be useful like, especially with the work experience, it might make people recognize us.

Erm...I'll get the work experience, I'll enjoy it, and then they'll turn round and go 'do you know what, we're actually looking for someone to have an apprenticeship with us', that would be...you know. Perfect scenario. (Jake)

Connected to this, those who were still uncertain as to the career path they wanted to pursue saw the opportunity to do some work experience as a chance to identify a vocation they would enjoy:

I'm just branching out trying new things because I don't know what I want to do. I'll just keep going down that road, even if it takes me years. It's took me years to get here, do you know what I mean, and I've still not found anything. But I'm just going to keep going, like I won't stop, do you know what I mean? I don't want to be jobless going into my 30s and stuff. I want to find something that's going to...just something I can stick at and stay at long term (Freddy)

For some participants, the social benefits offered by meeting were also very important: 'it sounded good and I couldn't wait to meet them all and start it'. (Steph)

For those who had previous experience of doing similar programmes, motivations were at first more ambivalent and less focused: more to do with the 'why not?' than the 'why?':

I thought I'd give it a go, see what happened. Someone mentioned it and I thought 'why not?', I've got some spare time so why not do it? gain some skills and learn some new things (Freddy)

Yeah, initially I think I just said well...I was like 'why not?', it's like it could actually work out that really like I learn something and it's beneficial. And also it was quite good, like obviously we're meant to be doing work experience...(Holly)

Others were initially rather more coerced into the programme by Job Centre Plus, fearing loss of financial benefits if they did not participate:

Basically, my adviser was busy so I got put with another placement adviser and she was just like 'I'm taking you because I want you to actually like get a job and stuff' and then she just said 'OK, I've heard about this course, we're going to read you your benefits contract and you have to go to this course'. (James)

Course leaders recognise that young people may come to the RTSG with all sorts of motivations, skills levels and backgrounds. Some young people need not only the information about the programme to be made highly accessible but then will require ongoing support and encouragement to attend. As such YFNE are active in recruitment:

Like I went to the Jobcentre one day and I came downstairs and there was like Nicole was there. And she just said 'can I have 5 minutes with you' and then just told us to come on the course. I'm on Universal Credit. (Peter)

Benefits of the RTSG for young people

All the young people we interviewed were extremely positive about the RTSG programme run by YFNE, as well as the organization itself. From the time they come in through the door, the staff are friendly and welcoming. As Peter succinctly summarises, 'I've enjoyed it all really'. Jake and Andrea agree:

All of it, it's been a really good time.

Yeah I like so much, it's good. Everything is the best, I like everything is the best. No, I like everything I done like

Quality of Delivery

A key reason was the quality of the programme leaders and tutors, and the teaching and learning methods used:

I really enjoyed it. I like the tutors and stuff. (Peter)

Just like Nicole and Gemma have always like been really friendly and helpful, and always like if you have a question or if you're stuck you can always ask them and they're always there to help you. (Steph)

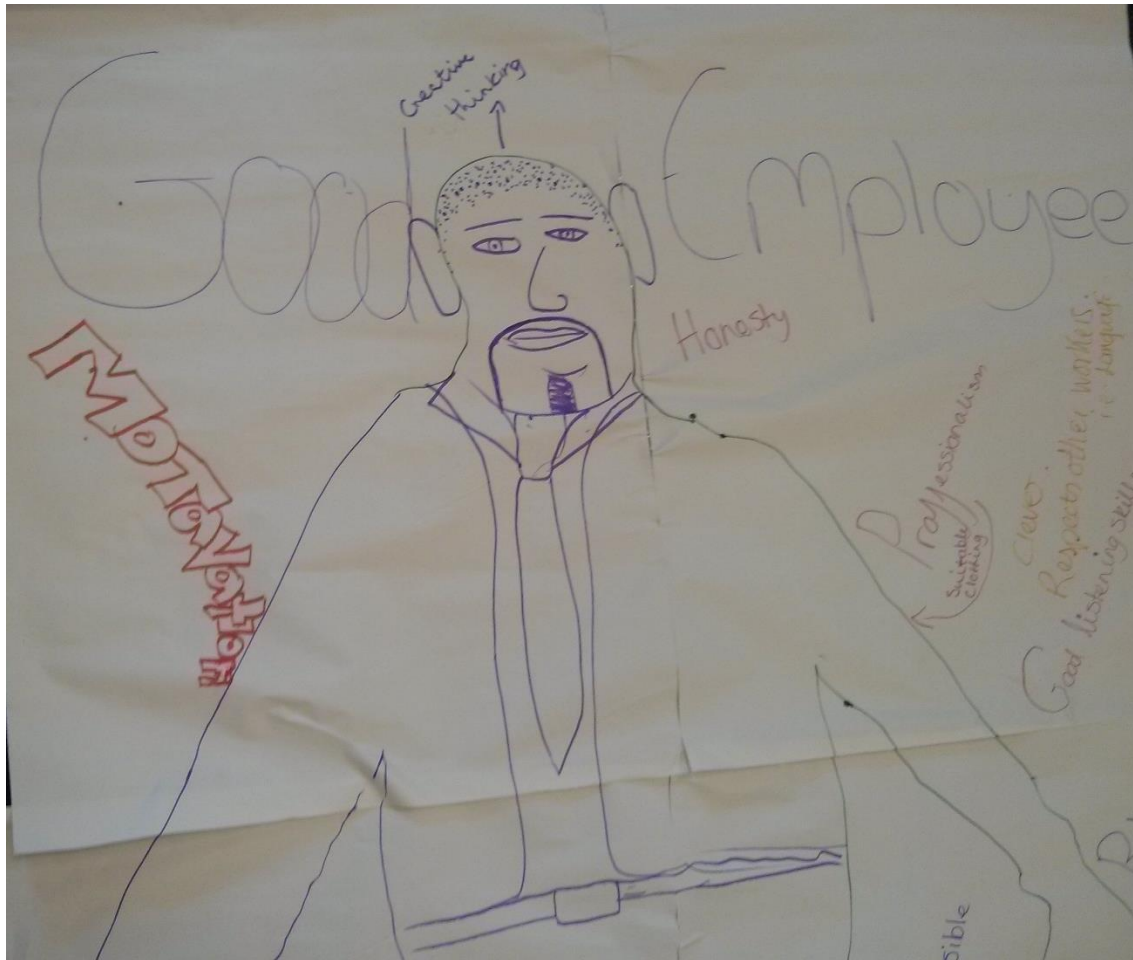
The staff were actually nice, they were helping us out a lot every day, yeah. (Elliott)

Yeah, it's alright, decent people on it. Like I said it's not like school, they just treat you how you should be treated really. Some of the work obviously has been hard to understand but they're there to help you, like they do explain it in a way that you can understand. And then a lot of team work so you're not like left by yourself all the time, so yeah, it's good. (Freddy)

They've been really good, it's been good to watch. Like they're not doing it like so obvious, they don't go like 'this person's struggling' but they've done it subtly and it's been really good I think to see then that person kind of come more out of their shell and stuff. Holly

Activity-based learning

Particularly enjoyed were the activity, group- based sessions. These are designed with the help of young people with the aim of engaging course participants, bring them out of their shells, recognize how much they each have to offer, help them grow in confidence and work well together. One of the key tenets of the programme is the belief that young people know the appropriate behaviours and attitudes for work.



The main difficulties, as the trainers see them, are that young people lack the language to express these key ideals, and struggle to find examples of when they have demonstrated skills in the past – particularly if they have not previously been in paid employment. Thus the activities aim to help them find the language to express their understanding of employability skills and to prove their acquisition of these in a low risk, low stakes environment. Many respond well to this approach, as Steph describes:

I've enjoyed it, yeah, I like it. Doing all the group activities, again I've been doing things. and the story board that I did the other day, I liked that. I don't know, it's just something fun, like just drawing. I'm a bit of a drawer myself, not an expert but I do like little doodles. We did a lot of presenting in the first

week, so I liked that. Cos it was basically about me, and like I had lots of stuff to talk about, like my flat, my family, my dog, and I do photography in my spare time as well so I had like quite a lot to talk about. And I was like 'I'm going to show everyone what I do...yeah'. I was a bit nervous because we'd just met them. I was just kind of like 'hmm' but I was still excited to do it.

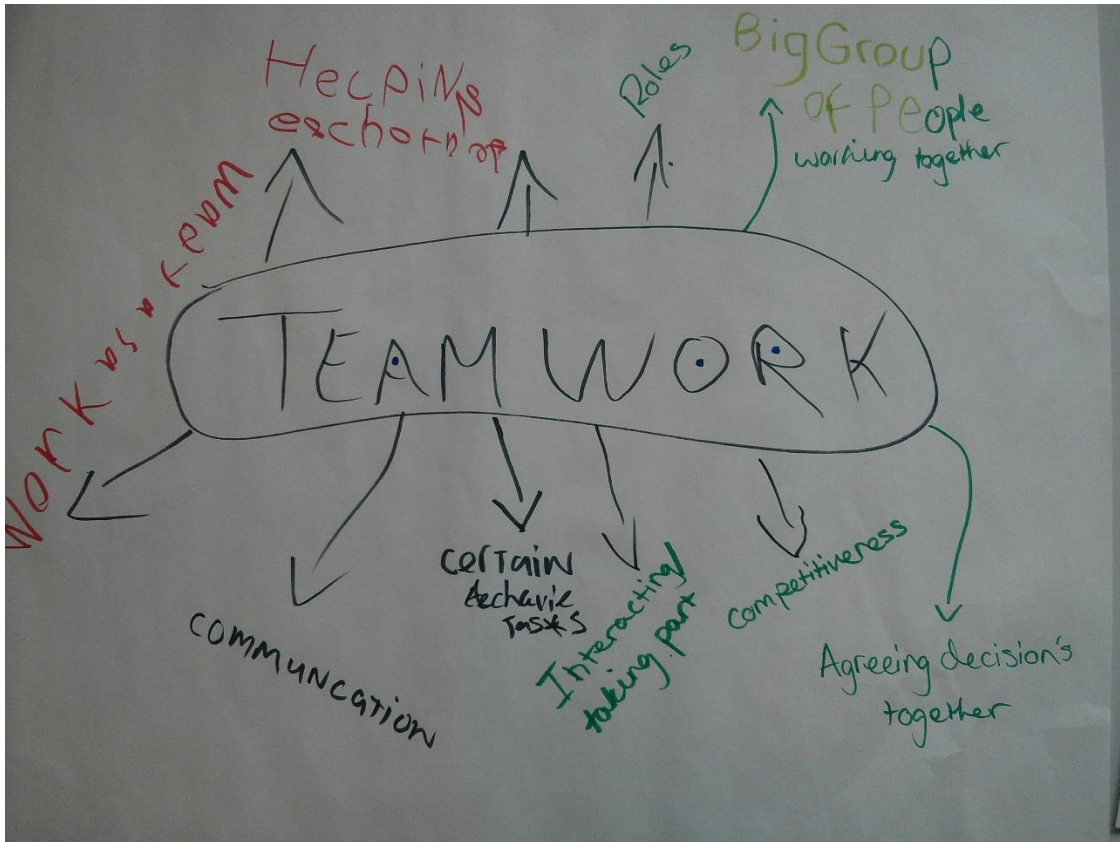
A clear favourite amongst programme members is the 'teamwork' session:



It's fun. Like I've done similar sort of things and it is just 'right, right', you know. There was an activity where we had to...for teamwork, there was three, one holding the bucket, one blindfolded throwing a ball, and the other directing them, which you don't usually get with teamwork, it's just 'you've got to work with a team, here's an activity' and then you've got to write stuff on paper as a team. Whereas obviously this one it was like, you know, actually work with a team... (Jake)

Enjoyed the most was teamwork, because I always like working as a team and we had a fun time making a biscuit car. We had to work in a team, we had different roles assigned and we had to try and come up with an idea. So we marketed off a biscuit car. (James)

I would say the team work because I think everyone...obviously at the start everyone wouldn't get involved because they didn't know each other, so I found that difficult because I'm alright with that, like I'm alright with meeting new people and I'll do things in front of people that I don't know, but obviously you can't expect everyone to be like that. But obviously you're just trying to get everyone together to work as a team and get everyone comfortable doing it, I think I've enjoyed that the most because now after like 2 or 3 weeks everyone's proper comfortable and like they do everything, like everyone gets involved.



Working in a team you get to see other people's ideas and how they do things and maybe you can sort of adapt to that and share your ideas and maybe bring them both together, do you know what I mean? So I like that sort of idea. (Freddy)

Others agreed that there may have been an initial reluctance to do a task and become involved, perhaps thinking they had done it all before and already possessed certain skills. However, many shifted to the realization that the session had a real purpose and there was more to learn:

I think it's made me kind of re-think the different skills that maybe I have achieved from jobs and maybe how I should be more putting them across, which was quite good. Where before I think I was just kind of maybe just giving answers, kind of like 'oh like well I've got team work, I've worked with people and stuff'. But now I think it's more a kind of shift to 'I believe this is what team makes good teamwork, and like this is an example of where I've shown this'. So I think like it's helped me a bit more, now I feel like there's more structure in my head when I think of it – if that makes sense? (Holly)

Different from compulsory education

A clear reason the teaching methods and tutors were so well liked is that the programme is run along very different lines from school and college. Many course members had poor previous experiences of compulsory education, with associated learner identities of 'failure', so were relieved to find that the programme was more relaxed, with approachable staff:



I suppose it's a bit different, like it's more relaxed. Because like at college they'd say 'do this, do that', and they're just like laid back here. So yeah. . I prefer this to college, yeah (Steph)

So that's kind of what I like, it's like they've got the training and all that to teach but they're not quite separated, which for something like this it's the way you want to be. (Jake)

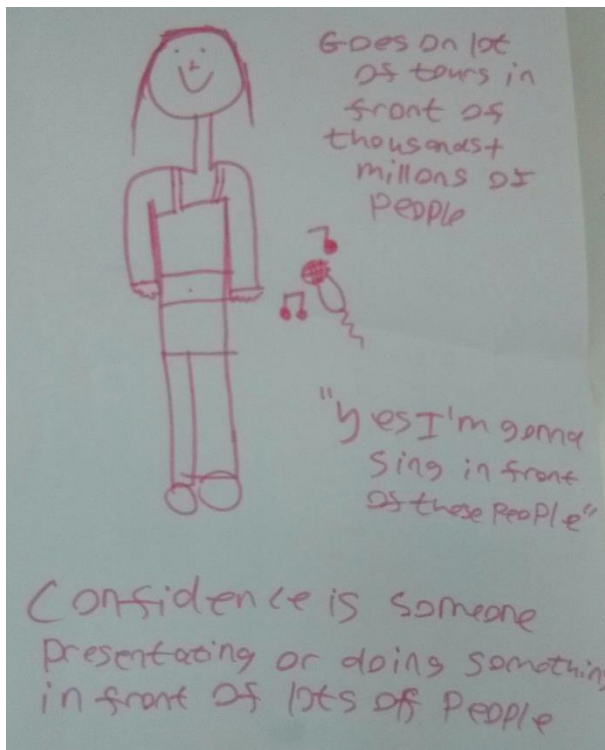
I like the tutors and stuff. Because you can speak to them. Because people at college I didn't really speak to them much because I didn't like them much. They had like a bad attitude and that. Peter

I think it's just like they have a bit more leniency with you and they try and like have a better understanding of what you want and where you want to go and not force you into something you don't want to do. And like they don't treat you like a kid or anything, like they treat everyone the same ...obviously it is a classroom environment but it's not as pressured, like you don't feel pressured like you're sitting in a classroom full of people, do you know what I mean? Because if I'm in like a classroom environment where it's like school I'd probably just walk out, do you know what I mean? I just get annoyed, frustrated. (Freddy)

Physical factors were also appreciated as an important part of this:

The fact that it doesn't start at 9 o'clock in the morning is pretty good. And the fact that the room's smaller but you know you could move the tables to one side of the room when you start and it's the same space you'd need for everything. And it's more than one room, you could push the table to the side in here and throw stuff around in here. (Jake)

Not only were the teaching and learning methods more enjoyable, but programme members recognized that their employability skills had improved as a result. Although many needed substantial support with some of the tasks, this was always on hand and gradually confidence improved:



At first I was struggling, I was like 'I don't know what to write'. And then they helped us and I was like 'oh yeah'. Ooh I've learned quite a lot. Like communication and the workplace, there's some things I didn't even think of that you could use. It was like showing positive ways to communicate, like active listening, like nodding your head so you know what someone's saying. Since they'd said that I've been nodding my head a lot. I'm like 'yeah, yeah' like a nodding dog (Steph)

A lot of it's been like recap for me but there are a few things which have like taught me a few new things, and now I also have some examples I can use in interviews. Just some basic stuff, like about confidence, motivation. If I ever go to an interview I'll be much better prepared to like show off these skills. I definitely feel job ready. (James)

I think it's given me a better understanding of how to be in a workplace and how to come across to an employer. (Freddy)

Involvement of Employers

The involvement of 'real' employers in aspects of the programme was highly regarded. A manager from a local bank gave trainees a pre-course interview, which was then followed up with another interview at the end of the programme to establish improvement in interpersonal and interview skills. While most found these nerve-wracking they also recognized how useful these were.

Like he said I did well, I came in like eye contact and I shook his hand and he asked if I always do it, I says 'yeah always'. Because he said I was stuttering a little bit, so he was like 'don't stutter so much', I'm like 'I'm sorry'. I'm nervous, like s...s..., I can't get my words out. (Steph)

Qualifications through Badges

The credentialization of skills through badges was also appreciated. This enables the programme members to demonstrate the accomplishment of important skills cited by employers as critical to effective work performance:

They've been really helpful yeah, I like doing the badges. It's something different- you can like put a link on to your CV, and they say sometimes employers, like you can bring in like your tablet or whatever and you can show your badges. (Steph)

Social benefits

They're all nice, I like them. (Andrea)

Not only was it clear that the young people's employability skills had developed but also their social skills. Over the course of the programme, during which the young people attend from 10.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m with an hour for lunch, a clear group camaraderie develops, in spite of the diversity of the young people and some initial stereotyping.

It's weird, because obviously, it's a group of people that I wouldn't usually spend any time with whatsoever and we've all got along. It took a while for everybody to start talking, the first two days obviously, there was a little bit of chatting but then, I think it's the fact that the room was a little bit smaller as well, so everybody is that little bit closer. But everybody seems to be getting on. (Jake)

We have good banter sometimes, and we're all like...obviously just sarcastically we'll like tease each other and take the Mick out of each other. We know we're just joking. Yeah, it's fun. (Steph)

While at first some were daunted by the fact that groups are so educationally and socially diverse, the value of this, learning from others with very different experiences and realizing that stereotypes need to be challenged was recognized as a key benefit:

I think the oldest is 25. I think there's three under 20 and then everybody's 20-25. A couple are 22. But like some of them are going 'oh when I went to uni' and everyone else was like 'I never went to uni'. But if you didn't mix them everybody would have the same sort of experience – pointless. Yeah. If everyone's like 'oh I've just left school', well we already know what that's like, it would be no use. I've learnt that it's just as hard no matter what (Jake)

Definitely mixed, not just from like different backgrounds but also different like levels of skill on the course. It's definitely been good because we've like been able to help each other in parts that we're not so good at. Well when I first started the course I was like wondering to myself 'why am I on this course, everyone else just doesn't seem as good as me' but then as it went on some people are like better at some stuff than I am, you know and would help me out and stuff. Yeah, because I think it's quite easy to sort of stereotype people isn't it and think 'oh that's that type of person, and that's that type of person', and then as you say you learn 'actually he's got lots of skills' or 'she's got lots of skills'. (James)

But, you know, there's times when I've had really good ideas doing things but then someone's said something and I'm like 'do you know what, why didn't I think of that, that's good'. So it's just adapting. Again I just like learning new things in different ways and stuff. (Freddy)

It's just not the sort of person I would spend any attention to, it would be like 'right, no he's probably a bit...I don't know, just leave him to his own'. But he's not, he's....oh I don't know, I don't know how he can be so different to what he looks. So don't stereotype either way, don't positively stereotype or negatively... (Jake)

Growth in confidence and self-respect

I'm like being more confident, more improved (Andrea)

Because of the programme, both in terms of what they had learnt as well as their social interactions, many recognized they had developed in confidence. For many this came from recognition from others in the group that they had much to offer:

Obviously, some have got really different backgrounds. One did his degree in computers of some sort, and obviously he enjoyed that...But I sort of have obviously not the same level of understanding as him but a higher level than some of the other people so I sit and talk, so it changes the conversations that everybody has which obviously keeps you interested. And it's one of those things that obviously while you do need confidence, it boosts it up when people are going 'you're so smart' and I'm like....because Freddy turned round and said 'how come you don't have a job?' (Jake)

There's a few lads in there that they wouldn't say nothing at the start for a few days, they just sat there and they just didn't say a word. For the people that haven't been confident I think I have helped them. It's just getting people out of their shell isn't it, getting people out of their comfort zone. I mean there is certain things that I don't feel comfortable doing but I'll do it, because it's just stepping out of your comfort zone isn't it? But obviously getting people that are not confident at all to build their confidence, I think that's a massive key because that's what employers want, they need confident people. (Freddy)

Others with learning difficulties and mental health issues were amazed at how they changed throughout the programme. Many who, as Freddy described, would 'just sit in the corner and say nothing' are gradually transformed, as Elliott acknowledges about himself:

Before I come here my confidence was really low, and then I've come here and changed: I've gained confidence!

The Work Experience:

Our interviews revealed that the work experience was regarded as an invaluable outcome of the programme. This varies considerable in function and content, from working in a shop or office to having the chance to work in the creative industries through a successful partnership with Generator – a music development agency based in Newcastle. However, it was clear that the experience changes lives, with some gaining employment as a result of their placement, others gaining employment very soon after, while others, although still unemployed, feel they are in a better position to strive for a longed-for vocation or now realise there are other choices available to them.

I don't know where to start! Basically I was in the studios most of the time but I was doing a lot of touring different studios around Newcastle, meeting new people. Yeah, and basically just working on my own project. Yeah, cos like obviously Nicole knows I'm like bang into music, and I was originally supposed to



do blogging wasn't I? But then the opportunity came up to be able to do the actual music, so I was like 'I'll jump on that'. Yeah, yeah, spot on. Yeah it was good, it was a good experience.(Freddy)

A key component of the success of the work experience for Freddy was the new sense of respect he received. That the trainers showed real interest in his abilities and spent time attending to his skill development was highly valued, as he explains:

I just think the respect you get, because obviously I've done courses in the past and they just treat you like shit. Like they don't put any time and effort into you, do you know what I mean? Whereas this one, like I turned up and there were so many different people that are not sort of my sort of people, if you know, and I thought 'shit, I'm in the wrong place here' I felt out of place. But as time went on, like after about two weeks, like I felt like all of them were just spot on, do you know what I mean? And especially my music producer, the time and effort he put into me and the support he gave me was just unbelievable. Like I just...more than I ever thought I would get, do you know what I mean? So I really liked that.

Jake also undertook work experience at Generator, gaining new skills in IT:

Mine was with computer software. But I did blogging as well, and I had absolutely no experience with any of it before that. So I just kind of got thrown in. I learnt four different languages, used three of them to produce a not very good game, but still a game. (Jake)

A big step forward was achieved by Elliott, one of the quieter members of the programme. Such was the success of his week that he attended our focus group interview and talked freely about his week, making good eye contact and smiling happily:

I was working at the pub for a week. reducing stuff like food, stacking shelves, taking out of date stuff off and people asking us where stuff are. That was my first day so just gradually come through it, I just told them where it is. Yeah I really enjoyed it, yeah. Yeah, yeah because I really enjoyed it, it was fun. I think there's a lot of clothes shops and stuff like that. So then it's the thing of like if you've...you can still use the skills (Elliott)

It was clear that the young people on the programme, despite the diversity of their educational, social and health backgrounds, all gained substantial benefits from the RTSG programme and the work experience elements. However, at the same time, some found aspects of the programme challenging.

Challenges of the RTSG for young people

In any learning experience, there are some aspects that trainees enjoy less than others. The wide diversity within the group sometimes posed a challenge to the 'one size fits all' model, where participants with very different learning needs and educational attainment all participated in the same task. For those with poor experiences of previous learning contexts, those who struggled with literacy and numeracy or those with learning difficulties, some of the activities posed familiar challenges:

The only thing that scares me is Maths and English, because I just can't do it, I don't understand it. I've had help with Maths and English and trying to help my sort of concentration and my ability to learn like others do, but it hasn't worked. I've tried a number of things but it just doesn't work, so I don't think there's anything or any support I could get that would help me, do you know what I mean? I don't know. It's just all the writing and stuff. I do have my own way of wording things, I don't struggle to put things into words but it's just my general understanding of questions and stuff like that. Reading and writing, I I'm just slow, just like proper basic, do you know what I mean? I mean I know a lot of big words but I don't know what they mean! Freddy

At the opposite end of the learning spectrum, a discerning attitude was demonstrated by the participants with higher levels of educational attainment, who felt 'older' due to their stage and style of learning:

If I'm being honest, in the first few days that we'd done it I felt like it's like 'oh I'm not sure about this'. Because I felt like maybe I am the oldest one here. I felt like in some of the situations I was frustrated because I feel I have so many life experiences that I need for work. It's like I feel like there's almost like an age gap –it's kind of frustrating I find because I'm kind of like 'oh I actually do want to listen and I want to be here because I want to get on...' (Holly)

Activity-based learning

Some were less keen on what was involved in some of the more performative, activity-based sessions. Having to talk personally in front of the rest of the group was a concern for some, especially if they had troubled personal histories which they did not wish to disclose:

What we did yesterday, talking about personal stuff and that, because I don't like talking about my past and that. Because like I'm not going to lie, it wasn't easy, but I'm not one of these people that...like I don't look for sympathy and I don't like talking about the past and bringing it up, I just think it's in the past isn't it, just leave it where it is. I sort of get frustrated and stressed, so I don't really think about 'oh what benefits can I get out of it' because I just get annoyed with it and I sort of get angry like bringing up the past and stuff. That's why I was getting a bit frustrated yesterday. But obviously I did it, like I can

write it down on paper I don't mind that, it's just talking about it. I don't like going into detail and stuff so I won't, you know, they can't make me if I don't. (Freddy)

Oh I just hate like, do you know when people are like 'oh right so now we're going to stand and like introduce yourselves' or like do you know those kind of things, group activities, I'm not the biggest fan of. Or like 'right you just need to like...' to do like an activity and stuff sometimes they'll be like 'oh I don't really feel comfortable' because sometimes I can be like shy and stuff. I wouldn't say I really like to stand up and talk in front of people, I found then also the pressure of like, I felt like when they're filming and stuff it's like 'oh that's making me feel like even more uncomfortable about the situation' (Holly)

However, while some sessions were disliked, participants often recognized that these still had value and were worth doing:

I don't think it is an overall reflection on them, I think it was probably just maybe I just personally find that really hard because it's like I don't know how to word stuff. Once we've done it, like I go 'oh I can see why they did that' and I'm like 'it's not that bad' kind of thing and it does make you think. (Holly)

Another challenge is that for some of the young people undertaking the course have not encountered this learning style in the past. The activity-based learning requires a degree of initiative, self-management and communication skills. For a minority this is at odds with their current daily activities and thus can be demanding, and can even feel threatening. However, the trainers are always on hand to reassure and support, permitting people to drop out of activities if it pushes them too far out of their comfort zone and reincorporating them into the next task.

New skills?

Although most participants enjoyed doing the various skills-based modules on the programme, some questioned just how much things would actually change in practice. As noted above, some know what they need to do and say within job interviews and in the workplace, but have difficulties performing in this context. The very real pressures of the workplace, compared to the relative safety of the classroom, was well recognized:

It's different learning it to actually doing it, and actually being in that environment, especially if it's a fast paced job or a high pressured job then it's a lot of pressure. So you can learn about dealing with pressure but when you're actually under it it's completely different. (Freddy)

A particular anxiety which remained was performing well at interview, for while Freddy, already 'quite a confident person', 'wouldn't say I was "better prepared" because I think when I do interviews and stuff I am quite good in that sort of situation', others such as Steph felt her confidence levels were 'just about the same' and still felt:

I always go in there nervous and ...I know I shouldn't but I keep thinking 'what if that person in there is better than me?'

Jake agrees: *I can do it when it's not important, I can be like 'yeah I'm great I know I am' but when it comes to it I'm like 'oh, no'.*

Holly had specific advice on this aspect of the programme:

I think my mindset of the programme was that I just wanted to kind of get more kind of focus on interviews. I know we did a section on how to do an interview, but rather than the structure of the

interview I would have preferred to learn more about the type of questions you'll get in an interview and how to answer them or maybe perfect it. More like we were talking about with [the employer] doing the interview earlier on, I think he mentioned the Star method. And I just think that would have been quite good to tie in with the module on confidence.

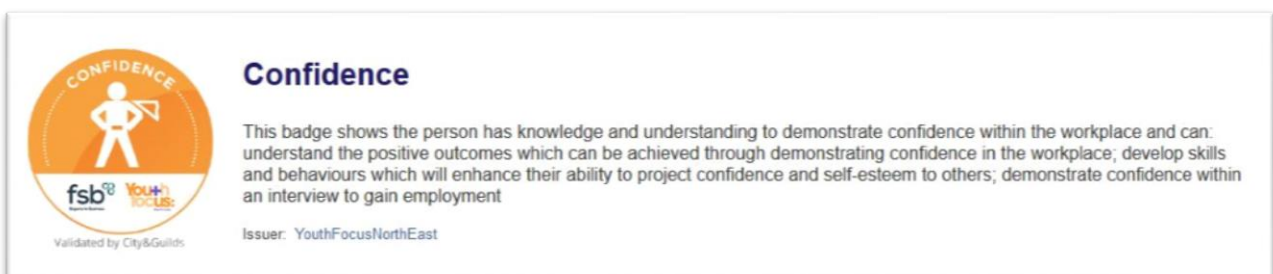
Technology and Badges

Though many of the young people appreciated the idea behind the online badge system – to have evidence of their learning they could share - technical difficulties often made the process of completing these less than smooth. Lack of sufficient wi-fi signal, glitches in the programming and confusion at when they needed to hit the 'save' button sometimes led to the loss of work. This engendered great frustration amongst some of the young people, and for the trainers likewise.

The lack of appropriate technology in some programme delivery sites resulted in some rather 'ad hoc' solutions needing to be developed. These did not always enable participants to perform tasks to their best abilities. For example, the lack of working tablets when filming presentations in Hartlepool meant that the young people were left trying to read from notes scribbled on large pieces of paper held up by trainers. This led to hesitation in delivery and an inability to look straight at the camera: features which may not impress potential employees.

Technical issues aside, validating the acquisition of skills through the badges also caused confusion about how to use the technology in the future, particularly how well this would work in practice, in an interview or application. Others were concerned as to whether linking to social media was the right platform. Jake explains:

Apparently, you can email it, but I don't know how it would work if you were to email. Can you email a link if they don't have the password to access? so I don't know how the system works: apparently, you can tag them in like social media and stuff, but obviously I haven't tried that yet because I don't think I would tag badges to my Facebook



Some of the young people, such as Steph, mentioned that they did not have access to a computer at home and so needed to come into YFNE to complete all their tasks:

I don't have access to computers at home so I have to do everything now

A further issue for the trainers is the opportunities for distraction that the presence of the tablets offers the young people – though with the prevalence of smart phones, this is an issue needing careful management in any classroom.

Physical Features

Some participants commented that physical issues detracted from the quality of the learning experience. It was recognized that many of these are outside of YFNE's control, but the location of the classroom, the noise of traffic on the busy road outside and the temperature were all identified as impacting negatively on effective learning:

I think one of the worst things was actually out of their control because, you've heard the buses haven't you when they go past and you can't hear anything. (Steph)

I think if it was done when it was slightly cooler it would be a lot easier because when it's hot you want the windows open and when the windows are open the buses are really loud. (Jake)

The corridor, getting in from the door's a long way as well as the lift. (Jake)

While some challenges were experienced on the RTSG programme, the bigger challenges identified by participants were not to do with the programme itself, but concerned their employability for the future. Many perceived that personal, social, political and regional barriers may work to prevent them from entering the labour market, especially in a career of choice.

Diverse Starting Points

A final challenge for the groups of young people are the diverse starting points from which they come to the programme. Not only are they different 'distances' from the labour market, but also have extremely different experience and capability with literacy, numeracy and public speaking. From Dave, who hasn't picked up a pen to write anything since school, to Holly, a recent graduate used to writing long essays, trainers have no small tasks in involving everyone in the tasks. The activity based learning largely mitigates this difference, but the introduction of the badges system, which requires participants to record their learning mostly through written text, proved to be a significant challenge for some. Despite the variety of competency, the young people themselves clearly valued the diversity of their cohort and it would seem counter-productive to set a minimum bar for a programme based on the idea that young people have the skills, but need to develop the ability to articulate them. A more individual approach, offering choice whether to work towards the badges, rather than the badges being the fundamental goal of the programme could be a more sensitive tactic.

Young People's Suggestions for Improvement

Although many of the young people would, in most aspects, agree with Ion's claim that 'it's good, they don't have to change nothing, it's all good!', some did have some suggestions for improvements that could be considered for the future development of the RTSG programme. Highlighted is the advantages offered through involvement of employers. Having the opportunity to talk to employers about what they are looking for in an employee, as Steph explains, was regarded as invaluable:

To ask them [employers] questions, like 'what makes an employee.... like what do I need to do in an interview to make you say 'yes, I want her!''?

Also very important to most were the work experience elements of the programme. Some would value the opportunity to do more, perhaps including several different occupational contexts to enable the young people find out what kind of work they enjoy for future decision making. Jake explains:

I know they're trying to do to something that you'll enjoy – but obviously I know it would be a bit hard and they'd have to make the course a bit longer I think, but give you know like maybe a couple of different ones like a trade or a list of five things that they put everybody into so that there's a chance that you might actually find one that you really, really enjoy, something that you never thought of before.

He continued with some specific recommendations about how this could be organized:

Maybe do it so that you do the course and then maybe 3 weeks of random ones, maybe like a week on 3 different ones, while you're waiting for your work experience block. And then they've got that 3 weeks there where you're still doing something, so you're not just sitting there waiting for them to call. You've got that 3 weeks there where you're doing something with work experience that you might actually end up telling them, 'do you know what, at the end I'll do this work experience that you've set up and see if I enjoy that more, but if not I'm going to go back to that because it was a really good one'.

In terms of the day to day organization of the programme itself, some felt that preparation could be improved before some of the modules. Ensuring that the technology was working was an important issue, as technological failures disrupted the ability of participants to complete modules fully or well. Another recommendation was to advise participants what was to be covered the next day and to bring in relevant materials such as CVs already produced. James felt that:

It could have been a bit better prepared at some points. Like the tablets, we had some issues with those on the first day. Yesterday we were told to come in and do life skills and if we'd been told to bring in our CVs it would have been helpful. So like the preparation was good but maybe a bit more kind of stuff.

A related concern was with the technology of the badges, and how well this would work when it came to showing these to employers. James, an IT graduate explains:

I think the badges website's like really good, but it needs improvement a lot. It needs a better way to show it off to the employer and how it uploads information. Because we had issues with where stuff got deleted, videos just don't upload. The website's really good, it's just being able to like show it to employers, maybe something where you can take the badges and show your profile on social media websites like LinkedIn. LinkedIn's a big one for this kind of stuff, so you've got like a link from LinkedIn to your profile so employers can just click and just like look through all the badges.

Peter agrees:

You can upload the badges individually but you have to do it for each badge at the moment. It's just like the website needs like a rework so employers can look at your profile on the Open Badge Academy website and if you just put a link to that from LinkedIn it would just like link it.

Jake suggests that converting the website into an App might be a good step forward:

You can have an app and a web page and if you're using it on a computer you'd want an app because apps are designed to be smaller, so it would be easy enough to convert the website into an app if they so desired to do so. Obviously it would probably mean a little bit more programming, but they've already got it on Windows which means Android would be fine with it, so it's just a case of turning a little bit of the base code, which anyone with an IT degree could probably do! If they were to do it I think it would be easier because obviously you can just hit the app and it would be like Facebook, you'd be logged in with all your details anyway and so you'd just press it and go 'there you go'.

Employability Challenges

Despite having enjoyed and benefited from the RTSG, many were still concerned about their employability in the future. The reasons for this were varied, ranging from a broader understanding of the economic landscape of the North East to anxieties over personal biographies. Jake was all too aware that although he feels his skills have improved as a result of RTSG:

That doesn't mean I'm any more likely to get a job than I was previously, or any less likely, because if no-one's hiring I can't get a job with anybody.

Freddy demonstrates an appreciation of the 'Catch 22' situation many young people, find themselves within even those with higher level qualifications. While work experience is needed to enter their chosen vocation, at the same time employers are reluctant to offer opportunities to do this:

It's hard isn't it, if you haven't got the qualifications and you struggle to learn then it is going to be hard. But I know people that's been university, got degrees and stuff like that and even they can't get a job with what they've been doing for the past 3 years or so. So again, like employers want qualifications and skills and experience, but then when someone has got that they don't get employed anyway, so how do you win? So I think a lot of people, especially young people, find it hard just finding that one thing that's...like someone's going to give them a chance with. A lot of people say, well employers say, say if you go for a job, like they want you to have experience and qualifications within that line of work, but if they don't give you the experience how are you meant to get it?

James, trying to get into IT, agrees:

Well I have noticed it quite a lot, these jobs they like require you to have like 2 years or so experience, like especially IT jobs they require you to have a certain amount of years of experience, it's just like how am I supposed to get in there, there's nothing I can do for 2 years' experience. It's difficult. IT's a growing sector but then you can't really get in because you need experience.

Holly recognized that, as well as having relevant work experience, young people's youth may render them less competitive in the over-supplied job market:

And I think it is so competitive, like you need to have so many years doing this with so much experience, but then to try and get that experience is extremely hard. And then it's like going up against people, like a lot of people are being made redundant now and not only do they have the actual work experience, they have life experience, where I still have loads of areas that I still probably need to learn in life. But if you had on paper if you had someone who was like 24, no experience in that field, and then you had someone who is middle age or older, you're like 'well actually they're probably going to maybe stay'

Some realized that the economic context was also tied up with political issues, although standpoints varied widely within the group. Jake was concerned that the 'Brexit' referendum, which was impending while we were conducting the research may dwindle opportunities still further, while Peter expressed the view that migrants were taking all the jobs:

Obviously with the referendum coming up everybody's probably too scared to hire anybody at the minute anyway. Fingers crossed we'll stay.

Because like probably all people from different countries are coming here and maybe getting all the jobs and that.

Although aware that the region may offer fewer opportunities for young people, most are still committed to remaining in the region and demonstrate a lack of mobility:

I'm definitely staying, I don't want to move any more, I'm sick of it. Yes it always feels like home. Newcastle is where my grandmother's family was (James)

Preferably yes, or close enough that it's not miles I'd have to travel because my girlfriend also lives not very far from here. So I don't mind travelling, if it's maybe 45 minutes away from here that would be alright, or if it's 45 minutes in the other direction as well – not like 6 buses, a plane and a ferry, you know (Jake)

Some of those with previous work experience had found the pressures of the real world environment stressful and had been unable to cope. This may be compounded by mental health issues, meaning that they were looking for a work environment which was more sympathetic to their needs:

In a workplace environment my brain starts to feel uncomfortable. If I'm not sure what I'm doing I feel I'm getting looked down on and judged and portrayed of as though 'he's not capable of doing it' - so I don't feel like I'm capable of doing it. And obviously my learning curve because of my learning difficulties, sometimes it takes me a lot longer to grasp things, unless it hands-on, like I'm better with hands-on stuff. But if it's too much hands-on stuff, like when I was doing bricklaying, I found that a bit too much, like too much pressure, I can't deal with pressure too much. (Freddy)

These young people now had a clearer idea of what kind of work they wanted to do. They realized that it was often possible to get 'just any old job' but, having done 'virtually anything to get some money' (Holly), they now preferred to strive for work they would enjoy and feel committed to, and saw the RTSG as a step in this direction. Freddy explains:

I don't find it hard to find work but it's finding something that I want to do.

Holly agrees:

Just like being in a job where like for once like I do and like I refer to like as 'my life job'. I feel like something in myself has just shifted and I want a job where I could see myself not feeling like I've just got stuck working in this place. But being in something I can really enjoy and where you're helping people and you just go 'oh do you know what, today is a really good day' rather than just like 'oh, I have to go tomorrow' to a job where I'm doing loads of work but I'm just like 'what am I doing with my life?'

Some revealed that they were content to stay on Universal Credit, preferring the freedom to do what they want rather than strive for more money to obtain unneeded material goods:

Yeah, what's the big deal? Like yeah I'm on Jobseekers, a lot of people see that as a bump? fair enough, but at the end of the day my bills get paid for, I'm quite comfortable, do you know what I mean, I can still train, I still get my food, I don't see earning an extra 400/500 quid what difference is that going to make, maybe I can get myself a car again but, do you know what I mean, if I really wanted it I'd get it, do you know what I mean, I'm just not bothered. Like people don't seem to grasp that I don't care about money, do you know what I mean? What is it really, do you know what I mean, it's nothing, it's only paper isn't

it? Obviously you can live a nice life and have nice things, but I don't know it's just how you want to live isn't it, choose your own path. (Freddy)

A few were concerned that their personal circumstances, such as a criminal record, would act as a barrier to employment:

I think it's a bit harder for me because of my conviction, I know that I want to go back into Care but I can't work with care people any more. Maybe people might think 'oh she's a thief!' You don't want a thief to work with you, do you know what I mean? So it's more hard (Steph)

The collective challenges these young people have faced to enter the labour market into jobs they want to do means they are well placed to make policy recommendations to government. These are summarized in the next section.

Young People's Recommendations for Government Policy

The young people responded well when asked how they would recommend the Government improve young people's employability. Their recommendations included:

- More involvement by employers in communicating with and advising young people and providing more opportunities for work experience.

Just sort of like talk to employers within the line of work that people want to get into and sort of persuade them to get them to give young people a chance, even if it's like a week or two trial, just so that they can...maybe they find out if they do enjoy it and find out if they want to stick at it. And just get some general knowledge, because you can have a general knowledge about something but it's different to actually doing it. I mean I've got a lot of knowledge about music and football but it doesn't mean I can be David Beckham, do you know what I mean? So you have to be given a chance to like learn things, so experience is a massive key I think. Like that's what they need to get over to employers, to give people a chance, give them experience. So I think that's the main thing. Just giving people a chance, that's basically what it comes down to isn't it? (Freddy)

- Improved careers advice and work-related skills training at school

Reflecting back when I was younger, work experience stuff was never in my head. Whereas I think if it was more talked about at school and explained then maybe I would be maybe able to make that decision when I was younger. (Holly)

And fake interviews in schools that you're learning it as something that you need to know. (Jake)

- Improved funding for qualifications

Help to get the qualifications they need. Because if you need certain levels to do a course, say if you're going to do a cooking course or catering, you're going to need to get your like food hygiene. So maybe they can fund for you to get your food hygiene certificate, because they're not going to be able to pay for it, especially if you're on Jobseekers do you know what I mean? If it's like 50/60 quid I can't afford to

take that out of my money for example. So maybe give more funding for people to get the qualifications and skills that they need and then get given experience. I think that's a massive...(Freddy)

- More apprenticeships

I think they should put out more apprenticeships, like give a budget to companies to accept students on young people, anyone, on a short term basis, so give out money for trials so they've got the money to train them and then it doesn't cost the company anything. (Jake)

- More sensitive interview processes

A lot of people are saying because of the interview processes, people hate the interview processes, and it all comes down to confidence and stuff like that. And people aren't getting the chance. They might not do too bad in the interview but actually in practice they're really good, they're actually really good but they're missing out on showing that because of how the interview process is. And it's so frustrating. But loads of people have said 'I just want to go in and do a taster, do a taster so then I can do the thing and show it' (Nicole)

- Improvements in Job Centre advice about benefits and volunteering opportunities

I find like my experience so far with the Job Centre ...I think it's pretty rubbish to be honest. Like it's really bad service, if you ask the question about, say, Universal Credit, they go 'you'll have to phone up'. Surely you're meant to be an example to me, and if you're not doing a good job how is that meant to be driving me? I'm not saying like they need to baby spoon feed you but they just don't have any advisers, it's literally 'oh well go off and do your job search'. And you're just like 'well, I give me some information, how to job search, if I knew how, I wouldn't be here! I just feel like it's frustrating I feel like they could have suggested more like I've done, like the People's Kitchen I volunteer at and like I really enjoy that and I think I've got loads of experience from that. And I think the government, if anything, like I feel like they need to sort that out because I'm like 'right OK I'll just go and try and help myself'. (Holly)

Conclusions and Recommendations

Active Learning Works

Young people respond well to the active, participatory learning methods designed by YFNE for the RTSG programme. The range of activity-based tasks, which involve the young people getting up, moving around and interacting with others, problem-solving in teams and having fun while learning were well-liked and perceived as beneficial in terms of new skills development. The fact that young people had been involved in the original design of tasks and activities meant that, in the main, these were appropriate for programme participants, playing into their interests, stimulating them to become involved, and thereby enhancing skills development and acquisition.

Labour Market Information

The young people we spoke to were very aware of the competitiveness of the local labour market and recognised that no matter how many skills they accumulated, if there were no available jobs they were not going to be able to find work. Thus, while we applaud the personal development aspect of RTSG that

seeks to support young people into realising their aspirations, there is also a real need to ensure they are informed about the likelihood of finding work in particular sectors. For those too, who were more willing to work anywhere, knowledge of growth sectors and support for making strategic choices in further training or focused job searching would potentially improve the outcomes for young people in terms of increasing the probability of earning a wage.

Work Experience

Finding good quality work experience placement opportunities is an ongoing challenge for YFNE. More employers need to become involved to meet the needs of young people and participate in their role in regional skills development. There is evidence of good practice, and this needs showcasing and using as a catalyst for greater involvement and new approaches.

Training schemes

The young people on the RTSG demonstrate that new thinking is required to open up entry routes into work for young people. Some young people are not ready to enter apprenticeships immediately on leaving formal education, requiring more support with initial skills development. Pre-apprenticeships schemes are needed across the sectors to enable more young people to access training in the skills needed for sustainable economic development.

Optional Badge Participation

It is recognised that not everyone attending RTSG is at the same point in their journey, and that some may struggle to attain the badges to document their learning. Overemphasis on the badges could be detrimental to the open ethos of the programme and act as a barrier to those furthest from the labour market, who, arguably, need the most support and encouragement. Sensitivity is needed to distinguish whether individuals are ready to work towards these qualifications, and whether they will be applicable for their desired employment sector.