



Resolution Foundation

*‘No snakes, but no ladders’:
Young people, employment, and
the low skills trap at the bottom
of the contemporary service
economy*

Dr. Steven Roberts

March 2012

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Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Young people and the high skills economy.....	4
An under/over qualified youth workforce?	5
In focus: Young people and the retail sector	7
Conclusions	9
References.....	11

Executive Summary

In recent years, research and policy activity has primarily been concerned with the numbers, experiences and trajectories of apprentices and university students, or with the lives of ‘spectacular’, more obviously economically marginalised groups of young people who are entrenched in issues of social exclusion and deprivation. Many young people with level two and level three qualifications, however, directly enter the labour market. This sizeable but unspectacular group remains overlooked by policymakers as well as researchers. These young people undertake new forms of employment in an increasingly polarized job market, rely on on-the-job training rather than higher education to enhance their human capital and compete more and more with graduates who cannot find jobs to match their own newly acquired high skill levels.

The net result is that this middling group ends up becoming trapped, with limited chances of progression, for example in the retail sector where 31 percent of employees are aged 16 to 24. The ongoing policy focus on level 2 qualifications does not serve these young people well. Policy-makers use qualification levels as a proxy for skills, but disregard the negative returns and by extension the lack of genuine progression as a result of obtaining such qualifications. Achieving a qualification – any qualification – it seems has become a proxy measure of successful outcomes over and above what people actually do in their jobs, what they are actually paid, what they can afford, or whether they have genuinely improved their capacity to be more productive. Greater employee engagement in company training and development programmes can better align business needs with individual needs for progression. At the policy level, skills policy needs to place greater emphasis on whether achieving a qualification enables employees to perform better and progress.

Introduction

Consistent with patterns across many other advanced industrialised nations, the UK economy has undergone substantial de-industrialisation over the past 30 years or so, transforming from a manufacturing, production-led economy to one which is led largely by the provision and consumption of services. This is evident in Table 1 which shows the decline of employment in the manufacturing sector over the last 20 years being offset by growth in the proportion of people employed in the public and financial services sectors.

Table 1: Employment by sector, 1992, 2000 and 2010

Sector	1992	2000	2010
A-B: Agriculture & fishing	2.2%	1.5%	1.6%
C E: Energy & water	1.9%	1.1%	1.1%
D: Manufacturing	21.3%	16.9%	10.7%
F: Construction	7.0%	7.1%	7.4%
G-H: Distribution hotels & restaurants	20.2%	19.6%	19.1%
I: Transport & communication	6.5%	6.8%	6.3%
J-K: Banking finance & insurance etc	12.5%	15.4%	16.9%
L-N: Public admin education & health	23.2%	25.3%	30.6%
O-Q: Other services	5.3%	6.2%	6.3%

Source: ONS (Labour Force Survey)

It has often been argued that this fundamental shift necessitates a highly skilled workforce to underpin economic competitiveness. Indeed, the previous UK government insisted that ‘we need to see every individual across the nation rising up the skills ladder’ (DIUS, 2007, p.4).

Accordingly, efforts at increasing participation in post-compulsory education through reforms in the 14-19 agenda were linked to commitments to attracting larger numbers of young people into higher education (HM Treasury 2004). At the same time, with large numbers already ‘beyond the reach’ of educational institutions, the workplace was also highlighted as an important site for individuals to learn new skills, reach their potential and ensure the UK economy was not simply ‘running in order to walk’ (see the cross-department paper *21st Century Skills* (DfES, DTI, HM Treasury and DWP2003 and Leitch 2006)). There has been and continues to be something of a consensus in this regard. New Labour’s ‘ambitious plans to improve the skills and fulfil the potential of all our young people and adults’ (HM Treasury 2004, 1) and the current coalition government’s aim ‘to achieve a world-class skills base... through making sure everyone has the opportunity to gain skills’ (DBIS 2010a, 5-6), both suggest that lifelong learning opportunities for all are the primary means of underpinning economic prosperity.

A significant problem, however, has been that rather than evolving into the predicted high skill economy, the structure of UK employment has become increasingly polarised as technology has replaced many mid-level tasks and technical and semi-skilled jobs (Goos and Manning 2007). Growth in jobs at the top end of the occupational ladder has been matched by growth in elementary roles nearer the bottom. This is because, while technology can replace human labour in both routine manual and cognitive tasks, at present it is unable to do so in non-routine tasks. The routine tasks in which technology can substitute for human labour such as manual craft jobs and book-keeping jobs that require precision were never the least-skilled jobs in the labour market. The non-routine tasks which are *complementary* to technology include skilled professional and managerial jobs, but also many of the most unskilled jobs such as shelf stacking and, moreover, most customer-facing, front line interactive service roles. Consequently, the

limited ability of technology to substitute for service-intensive tasks has led to strong growth in less-skilled service sector jobs (Felstead, Gallie and Green 2002).

The implications for those in the bottom half of this polarised labour market has been the focus of previous policy attention, especially in relation to the potential impacts on young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) and those who are in jobs without training – that is without training up to the equivalent of Qualification Credit Framework (QCF) level 2. A significant amount of attention, certainly academic attention, has also been paid to the experiences of those in casual and precarious forms of employment. Such situations are, of course, very worthy subjects for policy intervention. However, this focus on those at the extreme end of the polarised labour market overlooks another substantial issue. Even where elementary, service and sales based jobs at the lower end offer permanent contracts of employment - which is more often the case than not – it remains in question whether or not these jobs can act as stepping stones to something better, whether they provide opportunities for personal and professional development, whether they can potentially provide a platform for social mobility and can also increase skill levels to aid positive economic growth. Despite featuring as a positive employment statistic, many people in such jobs face being caught in a low wage, low skills jobs trap with little or no attention paid to the implications of such a situation.

This paper is concerned with the implications of structural changes in the economy on the skills development of people on low to middle incomes, particularly moderately qualified, apparently ordinary and unproblematic young people. The paper re-asserts arguments made by those who have analysed the polarised nature of the UK economy, but moves beyond these issues to consider the potential challenges that UK skills policy needs to overcome. At the time of writing, unemployment has reached a 17 year high, with a disproportionate impact on the UK's youth; yet, getting people back into work represents only one part of a wider challenge. Equally problematic is the number of low level jobs characterised by low-pay, low skills requirements, limited chances for training and development and highly restricted opportunities for any meaningful progression.

Young people and the high skills economy

As well as bearing the disproportionate brunt of unemployment, young people's employment is highly and disproportionately concentrated in front line service sector roles, especially industry sector 'G-H: Distribution hotels & restaurants' (this is the ONS industry sector classification that contains both the retail and hospitality sectors – see Table 2).

Table 2: Youth Employment by Sector, 2010

Sector	18-24 year olds not in education
A-B: Agriculture & fishing	1.5
C,E: Energy & water	0.7
D: Manufacturing	8.7
F: Construction	8.6
G-H: Distribution, hotels & restaurants	33.3
I: Transport & communication	4.1
J-K: Banking, finance & insurance etc	14.4
L-N: Public admin, educ& health	20.3
O-Q: Other services	8.4

Source: ONS (Labour Force Survey)

These kinds of jobs are often considered to be stepping stones to something better, the starting point for young people's engagement with the labour market. This notion is given significant credibility by the fact that an increasing number of students now combine study and work. However, the incentives for employers to provide any form of skill formation are weak because in many circumstances 'the social and generic 'skills' that employers are looking for are uncertified... because the formal skill levels needed in many lower end jobs are so limited' (Keep and James 2010, 14). This is an important point to consider given that by 2020 it is estimated that there will be just 585,000 economically active adults with no qualifications in the UK, but that the economy will still have around 7.5 *million* jobs that require no entry qualifications (Lawton 2009).

A further point of concern in relation to polarisation is that an increasing pool of graduates is entering the labour market, in many cases seeking jobs for which they are over-qualified, and accepting lower wages than their qualifications would be expected to garner (Green and Zhu 2010). The influx of over-qualified workers into low-skilled jobs has therefore blunted wage growth at the bottom of the earnings distribution, despite the growth in demand for workers in these jobs (Goos and Manning 2007). Less-skilled jobs might serve as a bridge to future opportunities for graduates (OECD 2008), but the process could trap those with limited or moderate qualification profiles in the lowest-skilled positions (Lloyd et al. 2008). Understanding such outcomes should remain of interest to the policy debate on widening participation. Questions remain about the relative rate of returns for graduates who begin in these jobs versus those of with fewer qualifications.

An under/over qualified youth workforce?

The education and training policy agenda (mentioned above) that has encouraged young people to remain in full-time learning beyond compulsory schooling has ensured that the educational attainment of all groups in the population has risen. As a consequence, even though the formal skill levels for many jobs in the service sector are relatively limited, the qualifications profile of the workforce is not as low as we might first imagine. There are indeed a great number of very poorly qualified people in these sectors – for example in the retail sector, one in eight (13%) of the workforce has no qualifications, and retail employees are generally under-qualified compared with other industries. However, reviewing the highest level of qualification frequencies for all 18-24 year old non-students in the bottom half of the UK occupational ladder the following statistics make interesting reading (figures listed in descending order by occupational group (source LFS 2010)).

Personal Service Occupations: NVQ-level 3 (18.8%); NVQ level 2 or equivalent (17.3%); an O level, GCSE grade A-C or equivalent (14.6%); a First/Foundation degree (11.5%); an A level or equivalent (9.2%); or a trade apprenticeship (4.1%); or an OND,ONC,BTEC etc., national (3.3%). 2.4% have no qualifications.

Sales and Customer Service Occupations: most have an A level or equivalent (20.5%); an O level, GCSE grade A-C or equivalent (20.4%) ; a First/Foundation degree (11.3%); an NVQ level 2 or equivalent (6.2%); a CSE below grade 1/GCSE below grade C (5.7%); an NVQ-level 3 (5.0%), an AS level or equivalent (3.8%); or an OND,ONC,BTEC etc., national (3.2%). 4.4% have no qualifications.

Process, Plant and Machine Operatives: Most have an O level, GCSE grade A-C or equivalent (20.4%); other qualifications (14.5%); no qualifications (11.2%); a CSE below grade 1/GCSE below grade C (6.4%); an NVQ level 2 or equivalent (6.3%); an NVQ-level 3 (5.6%); a trade apprenticeship (5.2%); a HNC, HND, BTEC etc., higher (4.6%); or an A level or equivalent (4.4%).

Elementary occupations: Most have an O level, GCSE grade A-C or equivalent (22.2%); an A level or equivalent (12.7%); other qualifications (10.4%); no qualifications (9.9%); an NVQ level 2 or equivalent (8.5%); a First/Foundation degree (6.7%); a CSE below grade 1/GCSE below grade C (5.2%); an NVQ-level 3 (3.5%); or a trade apprenticeship (3.8%).

It is quite clear from these figures that many young people with a variety of qualifications at all levels - certainly above the qualifications threshold for entry level jobs - enter the labour market searching for full time and/or permanent engagement with the world of work. These figures in some ways undermine the focus on Level two qualifications within the government's workplace training strategy. Further still, while the government insists that 'training for adults at level two and above brings the greatest financial and wider benefits to individuals' (DBISa 2010 para 29), recent analyses of educational and economic outcomes associated with vocational qualifications correlate possession of NVQ level 2 with various diminished returns (Conlon and Patrignani 2010). In relation to earnings, for instance, at the aggregate level, the marginal returns associated with level 2 vocational qualifications are strong compared to those in possession of no formal qualifications - except in the case of NVQ Level 2 qualifications, which struggle to achieve any positive earnings return. Worse still, 'a NVQ at level 2 achieve[s] a 3% to 6% earnings penalty when combined with possession of 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C (compared to GCSEs only)' (Conlon and Patrignani 2010, iv). The focus on level two qualifications therefore requires a much more nuanced analysis. In its current format, policy-makers use qualification level as a proxy for skills, but disregard the negative returns and by extension the lack of genuine progression as a result of obtaining such

qualifications. Achieving a qualification – any qualification – it seems has become a proxy measure for successful outcomes over and above what people actually do in their jobs, what they are actually paid, what they can afford, or whether they have genuinely improved their capacity to be more productive.

In focus: Young people and the retail sector

The significance of the retail sector for young people is marked - 31% of retail employees are aged 16-24, despite this age group constituting just 12% of the UK population. As such, this section uses the retail sector as a case study to reveal some problems that face moderately qualified, fairly ordinary, young people in their efforts to obtain a reasonable standard of living and enhance their chances of personal and professional development.

Half of all retail jobs (around 1.45 million employees) are in sales and customer service roles. They are followed by managers and senior officials at 18% of the workforce (around 525,000 employees), whilst elementary occupations (shelf fillers and trolley collectors) account for 12% (around 352,000 employees). These three groups account for 80% of retail occupations. It is fair to suggest that this kind of structure forms part of the reason that some recent commentators have noted that 'the bulk of low-end jobs are dead ends, with only a very small proportion of workers able to progress more than a single rung up the occupational ladder' (Keep and James 2010, 16,). The sector is instead synonymous with 'churn', characterised by a series of horizontal movements between retailers as a means to try to overcome the perceived lack of career progression within organizations, to increase experience and pay, and to move up the career ladder. Indeed, a recent survey revealed that 53% of retail employees did not consider there was scope for career progression within their own organization, highlighting that while internal labour markets are not dead, as with other service sectors (e.g. restaurants/ cafes) they are now thinner and weaker than they once were.

This tendency towards high staff turnover is one of the reasons that investment in training might be perceived to be a risk; after all, labour turnover can substantially reduce the return on such investment for the employer. Figures that suggest that less than 1 in 5 employees have received training within the previous 13 weeks (Skillsmart Retail 2010) seem to attest to this.

However, retailers are identified by recent and present governments as having excellent training programmes (Direct Gov website). Indeed, Norman Pickavance, the HR director for *WM Morrison Supermarkets*, glowingly commented in 2010 that '[b]y next year, 100,000 of our people will have achieved the QCF (formerly NVQ) level 2 in retail skills... This commitment to training is one of the key factors in our success as a business'.

Such training programmes might offer the ways out of a low level jobs trap. However, recent qualitative research conducted with young retail employees in the South East of England suggests that is far from the case (Roberts 2011). In addition to the usual criticism applied to such models of training, such as that 'NVQs are usually used as mechanisms for validating what employees already know' (Fuller and Unwin, 2004, 141) and offer little scope for knowledge development, this research explains how the quality, content and subsequent value attached to the qualification by the candidates is often very negatively perceived. These quotes are very revealing of the dominant attitude among those who already held a clutch of level two and level three qualifications upon leaving education:

This woman would come in once a week and review us serving a customer or something and then 'wahey' we got a certificate ... [Employers] are not sitting there saying 'I hope someone with an NVQ in retail comes along because we could really do with someone like that'.

You have to show someone [the assessor] that you know how to stack a shelf, or, you know, move some stock, or be nice to a customer. Do you really need a certificate for that? It doesn't make any sense!

I think anyone that does know [what the qualification is] is gonna think I'm quite an incapable person to find myself in a position where that is gonna help me out.

They wasn't actually giving us any training... It was a total waste of time. It's like, if the government really wants everyone to have qualifications by their name, yeah sure it'll work, but it's not gonna achieve anything.

The perceived lack of actual training involved is clear here and the understanding that one is not taught and does not learn anything new or that would make one more productive at work was a consistent response. This raises questions about the purpose of the qualification. Officially a measure of competence, recollections about the way in which the qualification was assessed were not congruent with what respondents identified as training. Moreover, at times answers to questions in the training books were 'given' to respondents, which further undermined an exercise that was perceived to be valueless. The last comment also insightfully reflects the understanding that, in addition to being a waste of time and money (for employers) and effort (for individuals), more credentials do not necessarily lead to increased productivity, or even increased skill levels. Retail employers are well recognised for providing training but the difference that such qualifications can make for both employers' bottom line and individuals' prospects are facts that need to be established. Meaningful progression following the achievement of these qualifications is far from inevitable, and perhaps even unlikely.

A second cause for concern for such young people is that increasing numbers of graduates are entering these types of industries at higher levels. In fact, 29 per cent of all recent graduates working in management roles are working in retail. Consequently, the 'trolley boy to manager' career path becomes an aspiration ever more difficult to achieve as incoming graduates cause downward occupational pressure, limiting the potential development trajectory of those starting at entry level positions on the sales floor. Again, the qualitative work discussed above provided good examples that reflect an awareness of this situation:

It's hard [promotion]. You get manager designates, which are these weird people that are like half-managers, they have just been hired or brought in as managers, from another business or straight out of university

Progression for these young people also becomes more challenging when considering the role of student-employees. The flexibility that such employees offer often corresponds with employers' desires for short hours, part-time contracts, and is in direct conflict with the motivations of those who want full time work and who want to progress. Of further importance, recent research indicates that retailers are yet to take maximum advantage of the skills that student-employees bring to work (Huddleston 2011). If this is the case then, young people without a degree face even greater difficulties in achieving promotion or progression in any real sense as their upward trajectory is cut off by increasing opportunities for graduates. Instead, such young people are likely to be left 'without a narrative of occupational development' (Standing 2011) as jobs that once were realistic aspirations become out of reach, re-packaged as occupations requiring a degree, despite there being no real substantive re-formulation of the job role.

Conclusions

These ordinary, low income young people have remained off the policy radar by virtue of being neither a problem nor following the government's preferred 'royal route' through education and training. The consequence is that they are likely to remain trapped in the lower realms of the labour market, unable to become upwardly mobile and, in the absence of parental support at least, likely to continue to struggle with the increasing costs of daily living.

The retail NVQ level 2, at least in part, seems to follow what Felstead et al (2009, 5) describe as a government 'fixation with initiatives to increase the supply of qualifications [with] no emphasis on helping employers re-configure the way they organise work, but instead concentrate solely on the individual and the certification progress'. The inception of the sector skills council Skillsmart Retail has facilitated employer engagement in the design of these qualifications, but the effectiveness of this engagement remains questionable and the 'more is better' assumption appears to remain deeply flawed. Rather than accrediting pre-existing knowledge and supplementing industry training budgets, policy makers must consider ways of enabling and encouraging employers to create the sort of workplace learning environments that will provide opportunities for development. That is to say that attention needs to be paid to the outcomes of achieving such qualifications. This applies to organisational outcomes, but even more so to measurable outcomes for individuals. Genuine development opportunities would stem from obtaining qualifications that involve learning new skills which in turn can increase an individuals' potential productivity, increase their chances of progression, promotion and advancement up the pay scale.

Despite major employers such as B&Q, Tesco and WM Morrisons celebrating increasing numbers of NVQ attainments, both the funding provided and the format for the NVQ (QCF) level 2 in retail requires a radical re-think. It should be made clear that, whilst the author is very much in favour of delivering quality training opportunities for young people, the current system does little for the individual beyond providing them with something often perceived as a 'badge of dishonour' – a credential which is perceived to hold no value for prospective employers or employees, whilst also being symptomatic of having no other 'worthy' qualifications.

There seems to be little doubt that supply side initiatives alone are not the answer to the issues laid out above. There is now fairly universal recognition that demand side initiatives are an imperative. However, the recent and current climate is very much one where regulation has been viewed suspiciously or negatively and governments have instead leaned more towards ensuring and extending employer flexibility. It seems, therefore, that rather than concentrating on full employment or educational credentials per se, it is of the utmost importance that a policy strategy is developed to improve skills and that this should be done with the aim of *working with firms* in combination with pressure and encouragement through regulation.

Of course, this is not easy; after all, as noted by Crouch and colleagues at least 10 years ago, there are no inherent tendencies for firms' market driven search for improved skills to include a strategy for skill maximization for a society as a whole. One solution could be co-operative expert forums, which include a range of actors and stakeholders from industry and government.

Echoing recent calls by the IPPR, another solution could be to rebalance employee voice and power in the workplace. A move towards greater workplace democracy with increased consultation and participation would ensure that employees and their ideas are valued in the decision making process. This would be a positive step as there is a relationship between well being and control and influence over work. It is also

likely that such approaches would have a positive impact on reversing increasing pay differentials between the shop floor and boardroom and put issues of training and career ladders firmly at the centre of organisational strategy. Furthermore, in the context of a weak union base, particularly in the service sector and among young people, it is important that government work with firms in two particular ways: first, more must be done to make employees aware of their rights in relation to the EU directive on information and consultation regulations; and second, identifying mandatory and transparent strategies for organisations to report mechanisms for employee voice will be essential.

Lip service approaches or even nominal formal procedures will not enable workers to have meaningful input into decisions in any realm, least of all skill development. An appropriate formal system will allow employees to articulate their interests and ensure that they are heard – workers, after all, want the chance to develop and progress. A working environment where this is the norm encourages employees to feel valued and understand their role in relation to the business' wider strategic goals. This in turn promotes greater commitment, dedication and support for the business, innovation and enhanced productivity (Marchington and Wilkinson 2005). Furthermore, several workplace case studies show that the presence of an effective system for employee voice promotes employee demand for training and development which increases employability and earning potential. Crucially, it also contributes to a jointly focussed approach to the achievement of business objectives through supporting training for business needs and helps to reduce tensions between employer and employee objectives (Rainbird et al 2003).

By failing to recognise and deal with issues of employee engagement in training and development, employers may continue to benefit in the sense that they can be sure that their staff are of a nationally recognised standard, with costs for some employee training continuing to be government subsidised (DBIS 2010a,b). Individuals, however, will continue to fall foul of the government obsession with counting qualifications, without careful consideration of outcomes. Skills policy needs to place greater emphasis on whether achieving a qualification enables an employee to better perform their job and helps them to progress to the job on the next rung of the ladder.

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- developing practical and effective policy proposals; and
- engaging with policy makers and stakeholders to influence decision-making and bring about change.

For more information on this Briefing Note contact:

Vidhya Alakeson

Research and Strategy Director

vidhya.alakeson@resolutionfoundation.org

020 3372 2953

