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'At the end of the course, where is their progression'? The paradox of progression for former so-called not in education, employment, and training youth

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Abstract

It is often presumed that when students complete a particular entry course at college, the acquisition of that qualification should grant access to the next, higher level of study. There is a dearth of academic research on the actual progression outcomes for so-called not in education, employment, and training (NEET) and disengaged youth, enrolled on an employability course. Purportedly, the employability qualifications should enable students to progress towards higher levels of study, but do they? Adopting a case study approach, research was conducted with seven tutors and 26 students enrolled on the 2013 and 2014 Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, an employability course delivered at The Site, a FE college in the East Region. The college's database was also accessed to review success and progression outcomes. Highlighting discrepancy and controversy, key findings revealed that most participants were unable to progress onto higher level courses at The Site. Instead, they were recorded as either NEET or destination unknown. This paper reveals key factors impeding progression and the reification of NEET identities on this course. It calls for political debate and a sharper inspection into the quality of re-engagement provisions for so-called NEET and disengaged youth.

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> "At the end of the course, where is their progression? Because at the end of the course, they cannot take a backward step … you know, we should be evidencing their progression as an upward step. But where is their progression"? (Interview with Nina, Faculty Head of Pre-Foundation Learning, July 2015).

It is often presumed that when students complete a particular entry course at college, the acquisition of the qualification should grant access to the next higher level of study within the setting. In principle, students completing pre-vocational study, such as the employability course could progress onto the level 1 vocational provision. Especially, given that the further education (FE) college is uniquely positioned to facilitate student progression from pre-vocational to vocational, apprenticeship and university education. However, Nina's account revealed complications: reportedly, most former, so-called not in education, employment, and training (NEET) youth who enrolled on the employability course, faced challenges obstructing progression. In actual reality, there are institutional markers of exclusion and educational inequality hampering progress, evidenced in the gatekeeping function of GCSEs (Author, 2017), warehousing (2018) and ghettoization (Author, 2021a) of students on this employability course. Likewise, Simmons et al. (2013) found that instead of gaining access to meaningful courses that could result in improved outcomes, former NEET youth were expected to repeat compulsory study and training on courses that offered little scope for meaningful progression. Hence, for marginalised youth, institutional factors can create conditions that can make relatively reasonable aspirational goals appear unrealistic or 'high'.

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds face significant barriers within the education system (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979). So-called NEET and disengaged youth are positioned within an education system that is underpinned by principles of meritocracy, the ideological belief that if individuals work hard in education and aspire, they will succeed and improve their social standing (irrespective of their personal background). However, key theorists such as Bourdieu (1979) recognise that political ideology overlooks the complex ways in which meritocracy masks the real structural inequality in the system. What's more, so-called NEETs and disengaged youth are usually conceptualised as 'folk-devils' (Cohen, 1972), part of a 'problem population' who give rise to moral panic (Murray, 1984). Stereotypical assumptions, often driven by political rhetoric and media images, so-called NEET young people have been negatively construed as dysfunctional, posing a threat to social order (Tomlinson, 2013) and an individual that requires remedy (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). Increasing concern that NEET youth poses short and long-term risk to the economy (Finlay et al., 2010) resulted in the categorising, tracking and pathologizing of young people on the periphery of work and education (Furlong et al., 2017). The UK's Office for National Statistics (2021) indicated that 11, 6% young people ages 16–24 are currently classified as NEET. Powell (2021) specifically identified that 49 000 people of 16–17-year-olds were NEET. However, there are hidden NEETs, not captured by official statistics (Jones et al., 2018). Tackling the 'NEET' problem is consistently construed as a high policy priority, creating political concern over negative long-term labour market prospects and compromised health outcomes (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011).

Consequently, a range of government policies, including the Raising of Participation Age (RPA) policy were launched to instil a sense of duty and increase youth participation in education, training,

and employment. RPA, established through the Education Skills Act 2008, extended compulsory education to 17 and 18-year-olds on the premise that participation in post-16 education and training enabled the acquisition of higher qualifications. In turn, contributing to a skilled, qualified workforce boosting the national economy. However, RPA is based on an overriding assumption blaming youth for their lack of qualifications, whilst overlooking complex and wide ranging structural and institutional factors underpinning an increasingly competitive education sector (Author, 2017). Nevertheless, RPA re-engagement provision such as the employability, Level 1 Achieving Skills Course has been framed as a critical opportunity for students to acquire qualifications. Purportedly, the employability qualifications should enable students to progress towards higher levels of study, but do they? Do they advance onto a level 1 vocational course in mainstream education? Access apprenticeship provision? What is their destination data?

There is little empirical evidence specifically focused on the student progression experiences for so-called former NEET and disengaged youth. Firmly focussed on student outcomes, this paper explores the actual progression data recorded on the college's database and how this compares to the students' stated progression ideal. This paper starts with a focus on progression and the paradox of the RPA. Following this, background context provides conceptual details of the NEET term, progression discourse and the lack of educational opportunities for so-called NEET and disengaged youth. Thereafter, the research methodology is described, followed by the presentation of three key empirical findings: the construction of knowledge regarding success and progression outcomes; summary of course statistics revealing success and progression issues; and being held back. A combination of Foucault's theory of governmentality and Bourdieu's notion of capital serve as analytical frameworks for data analysis. The paper concludes with key arguments for consideration.

Background context

Conceptualisation of the NEET concept

Youth, as a category, tend to have a subordinate position and are marginalised in social policy and public discourse (Harlan, 2016). Because of this marginality, this paper recognises and has carefully considered how power over the inquiry was shared with the young people. The aim was to enhance the agency and voice of student participants, ensuring that I conducted research alongside them. Youth have the capacity to raise questions and identify problems relevant to their own lives. For this reason, the research design and presentation of data was specifically chosen to maximise participation and amplify student voices in any publication. Still, the marginal position of youth has been established evident in the use of policy terms such as 'NEET and disengaged youth'. Although I could not change the reality that the NEET term was embedded in a language of deficit, risk, and social problems on the part of young people, in the own research, I use the words 'so-called' NEET and disengaged youth to challenge labelling and avoid further marginalisation in this article.

The initialism 'NEET' is often used to refer to youth having difficulties with education and employment (Nudzor, 2010). Historically, there were a range of changing terminology which included 'Getting Nowhere' (Bynner, 2004); 'Status Zero' (Williamson, 1997); 'High Risk Category of Non-college Bound Youth' (Worthington and Juntunen, 1997); 'Wasted Youth', 'Disengaged', 'Disaffected', 'Disappeared Young People' (Holroyd and Amour, 2003; DfES, 2007); and 'At Risk' (Conrad, 2005). Over the years, the NEET term has been extended to include youth up to the age of 24 years (Simmons et al., 2014), but for the purpose of this study, I am reclaiming the NEET concept by re-focussing attention on the original 16–18 years age category examining student progression of so-called NEET youth on the employability course.

The NEET terminology inherently promotes a deficient understanding of young people, often entangled with classicist and stereotypical assumptions about intergenerational welfare dependency (Levitas, 2005). Evidently, political discourse and representations of so-called NEET youth is based on a prejudicial view that NEETs are a homogenous group with common personal characteristics associated with academic difficulties, teenage pregnancy, drug or alcohol use, mental health issues and criminal behaviour (Coles et al., 2010). However, academic literature recognise that NEET youth was a heterogeneous group consisting of individuals from a wider range of backgrounds including those considered to be 'floating so-called NEETs' (alternating between periods of being NEET and phases of participation in further education (FE) courses), or those who have phases of employment with no training, and individuals in transition or on a gap year before progressing onto further or higher education (Coles et al., 2010).

In this current study, there was a combination of research participants who displayed the characteristic social, academic, and behavioural issues as well as a substantial minority who had higher GCSE grades, D and above but had enrolled late or were home-schooled. A few reported experiences of social anxiety and therefore also enrolled on the employability course as a transitory step towards mainstream provision. Therefore, underscoring the point that NEET and disengaged youth is a heterogenous group. However, the dominant discourse of NEETs is based on negative stereotypes, which could influence the educational experiences and outcomes of students enrolled on employability courses within a competitive education setting.

Indeed, there are wide ranging risk factors, including individual characteristics, education, family, social factors, health, and addiction which significantly diminish positive outcomes for so-called NEET youth (Rahmani and Groot, 2023). The most critical indicators which has a profound impact were education and family-related determinants, evident in physical and mental health issues, acrimonious home circumstances, local authority involvement, poverty, and social inequalities (Rahmani and Groot, 2023). Notably, rationed, and widespread funding cuts from children and young people's mental health services has created a growing demand for specialist welfare support amongst adolescents experiencing emotional and mental health difficulties (Author, 2018). Because of this, several vulnerable young people, including so-called NEET youth were falling through the gaps left by lack of essential services. Quality of educational provision matters too, providing a type of academic success that yielded to better opportunities tailored to their individual academic and employment goals. However, empirical data found that students on this employability course often struggled to access and acquire higher GCSEs and were expected to engage in a restrictive provision (Author, 2017). In one sense, so-called NEET youth were kept in education and taken off the streets, but there is also great ambiguity as to whether improved academic and employment goals would in fact be accomplished on the course. Ergo, the disintegration of publicly funded organisations together with individual, familial, socio-political, and structural determinants cannot be overlooked, and affected the structure and scope of the NEET problem (Author, 2018).

Inequalities and the curriculum

As mentioned previously, there is a growing body of academic evidence accentuating the distinct difference in curricula for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially NEET and disengaged youth. RPA youth are required to legally remain in education or training till 18 years old. However, by then, the English youth are polarised: around two-thirds have qualifications to enter university whilst the remaining third lacked the required GCSE grades (Ofqual, 2019). The Augar Report (2019) recognises that very few young people improve on their educational attainment after 16 years

old. The Labour Force Survey indicates that at any time, around 15% of 16- and 17-year-olds are NEET (ONS, June 2018). Around a fifth of England's young people leave education without the levels of literacy and numeracy that are needed to function in daily activities (Roberts, 2020).

What's more, in the European league tables of student outcomes per country, England is close to the top of two league tables: England has one of the highest percentages of youth leaving education with the required grades to enter university. Whilst in another league table, England has one of the highest percentage youths who leave education lacking basic skills (Roberts, 2020). Educational policy changes, such as the 1988 Education Reform contributed to this distinct divide, promoting competition between education providers and national testing of pupils at ages 7, 11, and 16-plus GCSE examinations. League tables were introduced, enabling comparisons regarding school performance, influencing parents' choices. Pupils were set according to their academic abilities. High performance schools attracted increasing demand from the most able students. Those considered to have good academic abilities are strongly encouraged to achieve the highest grades whilst others who were perceived as lacking academic skills were taught to achieve at least a basic pass in all subjects (Playford and Gayle, 2016).

Pupils with low academic grades know from ages 13/4 years old that they are expected to fail; so, by the time they reach 18 years old, the polarisation has increased (Ainley, 2016). Historically, young people were divided into two groups, a minority with grammar school qualifications destined for university education and high-status roles whilst the majority completed comprehensive schooling to work or attend technical college. However, over time, with widening participation policies, access to higher education has increased. Now, most of the youth have qualifications for entry to university, whilst a substantial minority lack appropriate qualifications, signalling failure, and prospects of low pay and pressurise to take virtually any job (Taylor, 2017). The more attractive employment is usually filled by young people who have higher academic grades and training qualifications. Arguably, the precariat is the most likely destination for young people who leave education with no qualifications or qualification which don't have any value in the labour market (Roberts, 2020).

Furthermore, there is a long-standing achievement gap in England that is closely associated with socio-economic status (Strand, 2014). Children start education with differing access to levels of resources (Gorard, 2000). Research indicates that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to achieve lower GCSE grades than their counterparts (Rasbash, 2010; Clifton and Cook, 2012). Although social policies aim to address this issue, an Ofsted report (2013) named the *Unseen children: Access and achievement 20 years on* highlighted that years later, there still remains a substantial minority of children from disadvantaged backgrounds who do not succeed at school or college. Vocational students face hidden, challenging barriers which lead to a pathway that gives the illusion of opportunity (Atkins, 2009). Such language of opportunity can be seen in RPA and official rhetoric on post-16 education. Yet as previously indicated, choice is limited, and access restricted to students with higher academic credentials. In its current state, low-level provision is judged to be unsuitable for promoting meritocracy and the enhanced goals alluded to in RPA and related political discourse.

The discourse of progression

Although there is widespread knowledge of horizontal stratification within higher education (Lucas, 2001), there has been a stark lack of empirical evidence and focus on the horizontal stratification in terms of student progression outcomes within compulsory education (Sullivan et al., 2018). Overlooking the constraining influences of wider, structural factors such as poverty, UK policy

rhetoric promotes neoliberalist notions of individual responsibility to encourage young people to be 'authors of their own story' and become ideal citizens (HM Government, 2011). There is a policy fixation on young people moving smoothly and linearly between education and work (McPherson, 2021). Giving rise to a dichotomy whereby youth are considered as 'on track' when they are getting a university degree or 'at risk' when there is a lack of qualifications and unemployment (Cuervo and Wyn, 2014). This two-fold conception of being 'on track' and 'at risk' youth endorsed the seamless transitions between education and employment, whilst pathologizing youth whose transitions are fragmented, precarious and less straightforward (Cuervo and Wyn, 2014).

A growing body of academic evidence challenge any taken-for-granted notion that all youth, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, would ordinarily benefit from engagement in the education sector. Bradley and Lenton (2003) found that students without GCSEs were likely to drop out early from courses. The key idea put forward was that in order for NEET youth and other marginalised learners to achieve improved outcomes, they would need access to 'significantly different forms of education and training' (Simmons et al., 2013:1). Gaining access to education provision takes on greater significance for NEET youth. They predominantly come from working class backgrounds and a substantial proportion has no or low school-leaving qualifications. Some consider FE study as a 'second chance' opportunity, whilst for others it is the 'last chance saloon' (Allen and Ainley, 2010). The courses for NEET youth often lacked quality and embodied little more than 'warehousing' (Maguire, 2013:65-66). The Wolf Review (2011) particularly recommended reform and better-quality post-16 education and training provision in vocational education. In the end, although participation in education has potential social and economic gains, these benefits seem diminished for marginalised youth.

Although education may provide meritocratic opportunities and may therefore facilitate improved academic and employment outcomes, these benefits are considerably diminished for NEET youth and those with low school-leaving qualifications in education settings. However, this does not mean that it is outside the realm of possibility for these youth to gain from further study. A select few individuals with low grades on similar employability courses may experience elements of meritocracy within the education system, but the explanatory factors are beyond the scope of this research. However, what research has shown is that for the majority of young people with low academic grades, current academic conditions limit the extent to which they could attain improved academic outcomes. Issues highlighted are concerns over the curriculum, work practices and structural influences which compound and further contribute to the negative outcomes for students enrolled on lower level courses (Author, 2018). Consequently, the literature review cautions that a proportion of students engaged in the research are likely to experience similar complexities within this FE college. There is thus uncertainty as to whether there are actual available and meaningful educational opportunities, particularly for youth considered to be the margins of education. This exploratory focus consequently influenced the methodological framework of this study.

Theoretical framework

This paper draws on Foucault's theory of neoliberal governmentality (1978), an approach to the study of power which recognised the conduct, or an activity meant to shape, guide or affect the conduct of people. Neoliberal governmentality, where the conduct of individuals or of groups is directed by the government (Foucault, 1978), emphasises higher levels of educational attainment and skills training. Through RPA, youth are therefore urged to develop their own human capital, investing in education and constantly learning new skills. Education becomes a marketable commodity, resulting in a situation where those with higher levels of skills and qualifications are

preferred in a competitive labour market and global economy. In so doing, neoliberal governmentality establishes a new form of homo economicus, 'the man of enterprise and production' (Foucault, 1978: 147), positioning the individual as the 'entrepreneur of himself', the source of (his) earnings' (ibid.: 226).

Furthermore, Foucault's theory on the 'conduct of conduct' (1991) has prominence because it underscores contributions of others, in this case, the course tutors, who were responsible for governance. Through their conduct, the tutors' work practices demonstrated processes of governmentality, regulating participants' trajectory and access to limited, albeit essential, mainstream provision and vocational training opportunities within The Site. They felt they knew best, irrespective of whether eligible students missed critical opportunities to re-take GCSEs or were entered on lower level qualifications which could result in a prolonged period of study, or others leaving college with lower qualifications (Author, 2018). The effect of the conduct of the tutors on progression outcomes will be detailed in the next sections of this paper.

Research methodology

Qualitative research was conducted with seven course tutors and 26 students from the 2013–14 and 2014–15 cohorts enrolled on the fictitiously named Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. The Site, a pseudonym for a large general FE college was situated in the East Region of England and provided a wide range of educational provisions, including vocational education, apprenticeships and university education. The employability course provision was offered in Q-block, a green, temporary prefabricated building on the outskirts of this college. A detailed report was submitted, and the Research Committee granted ethical approval. In accordance with the British Sociological Association ethical guidance, all research participants were asked for full consent prior to the classroom observations, interviews and focus group discussions. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and the college setting.

Adopting a case study approach, multiple methods of data collection were used, including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, focussed group discussions and document analysis. Using criterion sampling, it facilitated a specific focus on participants that have direct involvement with this employability course. The course team, consisting of seven tutors consented to participate in the research. The Level 1 student groups on the course were also visited to share project details and gain consent. The research design included classroom observations with one class per year and their tutor that volunteered. The tutor, Hope and her class of 15 students agreed to participate in the study during March 2014 till July 2014 and in Gina's class, her 14 students participated in the study from September 2014 till July 2015. Everyone gave informed consent. A total of 130 classroom observation hours were conducted over the two academic years. Students seemed more vocal and confident in a group with their friends, resulting in the choice to include focus groups as a data collection strategy.

Staff interviews were planned for the later stage of the study once the student interviews were completed. It was hoped that this time delay would build trust and enable staff to feel comfortable and able to provide a candid account of their practice and operational systems in the college. All seven staff interviews were conducted in their respective offices providing privacy. I adopted a 'manual thematic coding procedure', using the interview schedule and classroom observations highlighting descriptive and explanatory accounts to enhance details. The interviews and focus groups were transcribed in full and then each transcript was read alongside a framework of all major themes and sub-themes that were outlined within the interview keys and coded. Key themes emerged and were elaborated in the next section of this article. This study has limitations, including

the fact that at the time of the study, the researcher was an employee and therefore a colleague of the staff members that participated in the study. Likewise, these issues were possibly also experienced by the students participating in the study. Recognising these limitations, the entire research process was discussed and scrutinised by two peers. A further limitation of the study was that the research sample was restricted. Generalisability was not the intended goal of the study, but what I address is the issue of transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) as similar processes might be taking place in other further education colleges in different parts of the country.

Key research findings

Three emerging three key themes emerged: construction of knowledge regarding success and progression outcomes; summary of course statistics revealing success and progression issues; being held back.

Construction of knowledge regarding success and progression outcomes

Gaining understanding of what constitutes as success and progression for students enrolled on the Level 1 Achieving Skills course was complicated. Firstly, I discovered that there were technical difficulties with the recording and reporting of student data. The Site used numerous and overlapping categories to record learner destination codes. Categories such as 'NEET', 'economically inactive' and 'unknown' have specific definitions but were subjected to ambiguity, human error, bias and the manipulation of data. The tutors spoke of the organisational pressure to deliver a 'successful' course, which in turn has possibly heightened concerns over quality assurance processes; possibly influencing how data was recorded and reported. Negative student outcomes had substantial financial ramifications. For these reasons it was important to adopt a cautious use of local and national benchmark data on this course.

Conceptualising success was necessary to fully report on the students' prospects once the course has been completed. The obvious marker of success is evidenced in the acquisition of the qualification they set out to achieve. Progression, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which students were able to move between different stages of learner routes that enable student transitions (Fergusson and Unwin, 1996). However, previous sections of this paper highlighted that progression opportunities were limited for most students on the course. Consequently, the concept of 'progression' is used in its broadest sense, to refer to transitions away from this employability course and any other pre-vocational courses, towards student progression onto the level 1 mainstream vocational course, apprenticeship or employment.

Recent conceptualisations of student transitions have identified the substantial influence of cultural and social constraints on progression in terms of space and location (Avis and Atkins, 2017). Hence, in contrast to neoliberal rhetoric, the wider context plays an equally significant role: broader socio-economic factors, the actual location and place of study, and the course provision are some key influences which can potentially restrict young people's prospects - especially on the local level. These new conceptualisations of transition include notions of time (Colley, 2010), place (Webb, 2014; Mayhew and Keep, 2014), family, physical and mental health issues, and socio-economic circumstances (Rahmani and Groot, 2023) intersect and facilitate young people's transitions in particular ways.

Presentation and critical summary of course statistics

Cohort X (2013–2014)

A close examination of the course database indicated that for Cohort X in 2013–2014, the success data showed that of the 53 students enrolled at the main campus, 62% of students achieved both learning outcomes – passing the portfolio-based work and both Functional Skills English and Maths exam; 38% of the students did not complete the course. On a class-level, for the research participants in Hope's class, 11 out of 14 students (79%) of the students attained the Level 1 pre-vocational qualification. A comparative appraisal of the national benchmark data indicated that the course's overall 62% success rate was lower than the 91% national average. Likewise, the courses' 79% achievement rates was lower than the 95% national average. The retention percentage rate indicated that 79% of students who started, subsequently completed the course. Overall, the course results appeared less impressive when compared with the 96% national benchmark average. Judged against the national benchmark data, students on the 2013–2014 cohort were enrolled on a study programme that did not meet national benchmark standards.

Cohort Y (2014–2015)

The course data for 2014–2015 showed that in this particular year, 45 students enrolled on the course at the main campus. The success rate suggested that 80% of the students who enrolled on the course, completed, and achieved the qualification. Though the success rate was higher than the previous year's result, comparatively it was still lower than the previous year's 91% national average data. More specifically, for participants in Gina's class, the success rate was lower, with six out of twelve (50%) compared to the previous year's 79% of students in Hope's class who completed the course. For the course overall, the achievement data indicated an 86% achievement rate, higher than the previous academic year's 79% pass rate. However, it was still lower than the last year's 95% national average. In terms of retention, the data indicated a 93% retention rate, closer to the previous year's 96% average. The increased percentage rate was partly due to a direct result of a 4-week taster course implemented by the course team to vet prospective students before enrolment onto the actual course. Hence, without staff intervention to tighten recruitment, perhaps the course results might have been like that of the previous cohort's or worse.

Specific focus on progression outcomes

The database highlighted that although 53 students were enrolled on the course in 2013–2014, only 50 students appeared in the progression data. Based on the reported success data alone (without the national benchmarking), the employability course presented as a relatively 'successful' course – in that most of the students attained the qualification. However, in adopting a sharpened focus examining the students' progression outcomes, a contrasting image emerged. The course statistics shows that 32 students attained what is considered a positive outcome, but although three students found employment, the data showed that 16 out of 29 students (55%) were in fact enrolled on slightly modified version of the same course, delivered by the same course team. Meaning, 55% of the students were going nowhere and offered a place to stay on, effectively 'recycled' within the course because they could not advance on to mainstream provision.

The progression data for the 2014-2015 cohort revealed similar findings. The course statistics showed that there were more students recorded in the progression data than in the course's success

rates: 45 students were recorded in the success rate data, but six extra students were recorded in the progression data from the same cohort. In working within these limitations, the course data was based on the 51 students recorded on the database. Specifically focussed on the 27 students engaged in further study, eight students experienced progression on Level 1 vocational courses, such as bricklaying, electrical installation, painting and decoration, hospitality, construction skills, and public services. However, 19 out of 27 students (70%) had to repeat a modified version of the same course and were unable to progress onto vocational education or apprenticeship training within The Site.

On a class-level, in Cohort Y, out of the 12 students who participated in the research study, nine students gained the qualification, two of whom experienced progression onto Level 1 vocational courses. For these two students, enrolment onto the Level 1 vocational course placed them on a direct pathway towards their trade and was therefore considered progression by these two male students. In their circumstances, they were able to cross the metaphorical divide between pre-vocational and vocational learning. For them, engagement in education thus proved beneficial. However, for their counterparts who participated in the study, their educational outcomes were negative. Table 1 (below) illustrated that 75% of the participants in Gina's class were recorded as either NEET or destination unknown at the end of the programme. This, despite the attainment of the qualification and success rates of the course.

In speaking with the participants, they reportedly considered re-engagement provision as part of a bigger goal to make up for 'lost ground'. The illustration in Table 1 outlined participants' details, columns revealing their relatively realistic aspirations versus actual progression outcomes. The majority of the students in Gina's class found that the completion of the Level 1 employability qualification by no means guaranteed access to mainstream vocational education or apprenticeship training at The Site.

The data challenged taken-for-granted assumptions that 'good' success rates lead to reasonably 'good' progression outcomes for students on this employability at The Site. The Level 1 qualification did not guarantee straightforward transition that would result in higher levels of progression. Hence calling into question the extent to which the qualification held any academic relevance within this particular college. Contrary to popular belief, participants at The Site held realistic aspirational goals: the majority wanting to continue further education on vocational courses or apprenticeship training, but within The Site such prospects were diminished for several students.

Being 'held back'

A close review of course data indicated that most students were 'held back' and placed on a modified version of the course, despite their attainment of the employability qualification. The lack of available Level 1 courses within The Site was cited as one of the reasons why students could not progress within the setting. Aggy, one of the tutors stated:

> "So, what we've found, last academic year, they slashed most Level 1 courses … So these kids had nowhere to go … now they've upped the standards so you've got to have 4 GCSEs to get on a Level 1 BTech. So, most of these kids aren't going to have that so where do they go? The only choice is XXX*** (name of course) … there's no choice, why aren't these kids given choice? (Interview with Tutor: Aggy - Field notes: June 2015).

The lack of level 1 provision within The Site played a significant role in limiting scope for student progression for students on the course. Entry level courses such as the Level 1 Achieving Skills

Table 1. Actual progression outcomes versus progression ideals.

Cohort Y	September 2014–Jul 2015				
Learners	Gender	Ethnicity	Achievement of qualification	Actual progression	Aspiration/Progression ideals
Jada	F	White	Completed qualification	Unknown	Level 1 child care
Zette	F	Black	Completed qualification	Unknown	Level 2 health and social care (social work later)
Laurie	F	Black	Completed no qualification	Unknown	Level 1 public services (prison officer later)
Kyle	M	White	Completed qualification	Level 1 construction skills	Achieved goal
David	M	White	Completed qualification	Level 1 hospitality industry	Achieved goal
Lee	M	White	Completed qualification	Unknown	Unknown
Jada	F	White	Withdrawn	Unknown	Unknown
Ella	F	White	Completed qualification	Unknown	Level 2 travel and tourism
Lindy	F	White	Withdrawn	Unknown	Apprentice animal welfare
Amy	F	White	Completed qualification	NEET	Unknown
Leah	F	White	Completed qualification	Repeating level 1 achieving skills course	Level 1 travel and tourism
Adam	M	White	Completed qualification	NEET	Learn proper English and then off to work

employability course is a pre-vocational course and usually provides an introduction into education for those looking to enter formal education (Author, 2021a). This employability course is a pre-vocational course, situated on the periphery outside the formal rung of mainstream vocational qualifications within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). Reportedly, once participants on the employability course achieve the pre-vocational qualification, in theory, they could access mainstream Level 1 qualifications, the first formal rung on the numbered system of qualifications that lead to access to vocational courses in college (Author, 2021b). However, the course data and Aggy's narrative flagged discrepancy and underscored the reality that student progression for former NEET and disengaged youth is incredibly challenging in a neoliberalist, competitive educational landscape.

Moreover, the research discovered that when education provision is scarce in a competitive milieu, academic credentials were used to restrict access to limited and desirable educational courses. Evidence of this outcome was expressed during Aggy's interview, when she recognised the compelling ways in which raised academic standards and the demand for 4 GCSEs were construed as the gateway for progression onto a Level 1 BTech (vocational) course. Educational policies such as the White Paper, Importance of Teaching (DfE, 2010) played an influential role in introducing the requirement for higher GCSEs to raise academic standards and qualification levels amongst post-16 youth. The problem lies in the fact, that for most participants, they fell short of this academic ideal

and experienced significant challenges within the education system. In a previous publication, I reported on the case of Zette, one of the participants who found that access to the next level course required the entry requirement that was set at four GCSEs (grades A*–E), including maths and English. Thus, previous achievements other than GCSEs appeared to be overlooked (Author, 2017). This strong emphasis on higher GCSE grades was similarly revealed in the entry requirements for apprenticeship provision, reflected in the four to five A*–C GCSE with at least a D grade in maths and English. Thus, most of the participants who had below D-GCSEs or no school leaving qualifications found that the demand for academic competence on industry-related courses severely constrained the extent to which students could access vocational and apprenticeship training on mainstream provision. Most students on this employability course were therefore confined to pre-foundation/pre-vocational learning (Author, 2017).

Additionally, the data uncovered the problematic way in which the course tutors used the Basic Key Skills Builder (BKSB) assessments and Functional Skills qualifications to enforce the government's employability agenda regarding social skills development (Author, 2021a). The employability mandate emphasises a focus on social skills, interpersonal skills, and self-presentation (HEFCE, 2013). It was during a joint interview with tutors, Aggy and Kirsten, that they exposed the common practice amongst the course team to evaluate and pass judgement on their students' personal attributes and overall social skills. Often, a deciding factor facilitating student progression. Aggy elaborated on this practice when she stated:

> "Yeah, some students have got some qualifications but they're very low grade, so like E's and D's, F's in English and Maths especially. I get quite a few kids come through that have been home-schooled. So, they haven't been to school … but that also has implications because their social skills are non-existent".

Kirsten's account offered compelling evidence of how the course tutors' work practices contributed to student progression difficulties, especially when students were perceived as supposedly lacking social skills. As a matter of fact, she explained:

> "And that's the problem, even doing Functional Skills Level 1 with them, that they might be academically Level 1, but you can't keep them for the social reasons. So sometimes with our course you have to go back down to Entry 2 because you need them for that longer time until Functional Skills Level 1, for them to socially develop….Do work experience with them, get them out on social events, things like that (Joint interview with Kirsten and Aggy, June 2015)

In the different interviews, the course tutors confirmed that they believed that the assessment of social skills was necessary; it was mandated by the employability agenda. However, there appeared to be some disparity in practice across departments within The Site because BTEC Level 1 students, also studying an industry-related qualification, were able to progress onto the Level 2 course once they have attained the qualification, regardless of whether the course tutor judged them to lack the required social skills. Perhaps underscoring the possibility that once students are positioned within mainstream education, the student trajectory is more straightforward than their counterparts, out on the margins of education and seeking access to courses on the formal rung of qualifications.

Discourses such as 'you put them at a lower level' and 'you've got time to build them up' seemed reflective of the tutors' use of power and control which they exercised on the course. In one way, such a discourse can portray the students on the course as passive objects, unaware or less bothered about their trajectory. However, the students interview data suggested that instead of being passive, several participants were vocal and voiced dissent regarding the gatekeeping function of GCSEs

(Author, 2017) and the warehousing, low-quality course provision (Author, 2018) obstructing their academic goals. Liam, one of several students spoke plainly and in front of tutor, claiming that '*the course hasn't helped me to move on'* (Interview with Liam, Field notes, May 2014). Liam gained the qualification; he was not offered a place on a vocational course within The Site. Most students wanted to move on from the employability course, despite the tutors' belief that a prolonged stay on the course might be beneficial (Author, 2021b). The actual course statistics indicates that even though they have completed the course and attained the employability qualification, that a substantial proportion of students were unable to progress within The Site. The way the tutors' interpreted and implemented the employability agenda, it contributed to processes of marginalisation and restriction from key provision facilitating progression within this competitive college (Author, 2021b).

Critical discussion

Nuances of governmentality underpin the employability agenda on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, whereby different systems and mechanisms stringently regulated participants' access to meaningful education that contributed to positive academic or employment outcomes. Drawing on the theoretical lens of Foucault's theory of governmentality (1978), the empirical data revealed tension and contradiction. Shown in the way governance practices and current academic conditions within The Site, mostly impeded the extent to which several participants with minimal or no school leaving qualifications, skills and knowledge were able to improve on previous academic failure. Most participants have demonstrated individual efforts participating in the employability curriculum and completing the course. However, they have encountered gatekeeping practices (Author, 2017) that resulted in most students' diminished access to higher levels of knowledge and qualifications within The Site.

In the context of the study, the data illustrated how educational credentials were often used as a key explanation why educational opportunities were closed off to those with no or low GCSEs. At The Site, GCSEs have become capital, the much-required academic tariff to gain access to higher levels of study or training (Author, 2017). Bourdieu's theory (1986) on capital recognises the social relation of power that stratifies, differentiates and establishes some degree of social closure. Based on the findings, arguably, GCSEs embodied 'social relation of power' evident in the various challenges most participants faced when they sought opportunity to re-take and improve on their GCSE grades. Highlighting embodied policies and gatekeeping practices, the data exposed how The Site and the tutors used GCSE capital to construct an intellectual divide, segregating those with low GCSEs from those deemed more academic and credible to gain access to valued provision within the setting. By implication, closing off a range of educational opportunities and access was therefore denied to those with no or low GCSEs. In turn, placing higher levels of vocational courses, apprenticeship training, and the opportunity to re-take GCSEs were out of reach for most students on the course (Author, 2017).

Ideally, The Site could ideally offer student participants a through-way from pre-vocational studies to university education or apprenticeship training if they so wanted. However, in actual reality, this opportunity was not granted for many participants.

Foucault's theory on the conduct of conduct (1991) recognised the role of others in regulating the conduct of others. In applying this theory held, it demonstrated varying ways how the tutors on the course exercised extensive power through GCSE gatekeeping practices (Author, 2017), and an evaluation of students' personal attributes and social skills (Author, 2018). The situation is compounded by the fact that the course tutors' subjective evaluation of students' personal attributes,

made it difficult to draw up a definitive list of desired attributes which would guarantee positive student progression outcomes. Because this is currently lacking, the educational landscape was precarious.

The complexities inherent within the education system should not be underestimated: structural inequalities deeply permeated the real chances of progression for so-called former NEET and disengaged youth, seeking educational opportunities within the education system. Participants therefore faced hidden barriers which prohibited their progression within The Site. Therefore, contributing to ambiguous and mostly negative outcomes for most participants on the course is shown in the destination data for both cohorts.

Hence, most participants have come to experience a distinct difference between rhetoric and reality; access to essential and desirable provision was limited and heavily regulated within The Site. Admittedly, although this employability re-engagement provision did not facilitate higher outcomes for most students, it did what it was meant to do. In essence, a substantial majority of former NEETs and disengaged youth were offered the chance to stay on and re-engage in a modified, repeated version of the course for another year. They were in a structured and formal academic environment, kept busy and off the streets for part of the day (Author, 2018). Broader structural influences along with various social, economic, and cultural factors do indeed structured individual agency (Beck, 1992).

Conclusion

This paper examined the extent to which so-called NEET and disengaged youth were able to advance onto higher levels of vocational education and training once they have completed the employability course. Most students pinned their hopes on the qualification, expecting it to pave the way to mainstream vocational courses (other than the substantial minority that sought employment). Contrary to stereotypical assumptions, many participants had relatively realistic aspirational goals, but most participants faced severe academic conditions and multiple structural factors which placed them in direct competition with better-qualified students for access to essential education provision at The Site. Distinctly different to RPA discourse, the paper showed that the current college system makes it difficult for these participants and similar students with poor grades to accrue the necessary GCSE capital and achieve the type of academic success the students valued – one that could yield better opportunities tailored to their individual academic and employment goals (Author, 2017).

Viewed as a threat to social order, so-called former NEET and disengaged youth enrolled on the employability course at The Site that was restrictive and not only required longer periods of study, but also expected them to do so in a situation in which academic conditions were precarious. Consequently, there was great ambiguity as to whether these goals would in fact be accomplished in the current climate (Author, 2018). Bourdieu's theory (1974) and criticism of the meritocracy discourse, exposes how structural inequalities were embedded within the ways in which numerous social and institutional arenas work together to influence the real chances available to marginalised students. Only two students were able to achieve these goals; the rest of the students who could not progress did not repeat the modified course and severed ties with the course and The Site. They encountered stringent controls and a combination of institutional policies and educational practices made relatively realistic aspirational goals unobtainable for most participants within The Site. Evidently, NEET identities were reproduced within the Site.

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