



Who are the persistently
NEET young people?
Literature overview
support document

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Literature overview

The purpose of this section is to review some of the main research and literature on NEET to help inform the current research project. The review is not intended to be comprehensive but rather provide a baseline of understanding for the current project.

As was noted in the report, the phenomenon of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET) is seen as a key indicator in policy, alongside unemployment rates. It is seen as a broader indicator of potential disengagement than merely unemployment on its own. The term 'NEET' itself has only been around since 1996. Previous to that, unemployment was a key indicator of disengagement or vulnerability (Eurofound 2012). However, that does not include young people who are not in the labour force (NILF), and in both cases (NILF and unemployed) not undertaking any formal study.

The term NEET came about in the UK because of changes to the unemployment benefit regime in 1988. More particularly, the changes left most young people under the age of 18 unable to obtain unemployment benefits and those under the age of 25 with limited benefits. This essentially meant that young people were not officially recognised as unemployed. However, many were still vulnerable and hence another definition was sought to categorise these young people. In time the term NEET came into being (Furlong 2006).

There is, however, considerable inconsistency in how NEET is defined, both within and between countries. Furlong (2006) points out that the concept is now defined in different ways, making it very difficult to compare the results across analyses. Elder (2015) illustrates this by providing excerpts of 10 interpretations of the NEET concept. Elder points out that, while none of the interpretations are wrong, per se, some are not complete. An example of this is the definition provided by the Sustainable Solutions Development Network (SDSN) in a 2014 report that refers to NEETs as including informal or precarious employment.

One important distinction in definitions for the purposes of our study, however, is the difference between static and cumulative definitions (Furlong 2006). Static definitions refer to those who are NEET at a given point in time, while cumulative definitions refer to those who are NEET at *any* point within a given timespan, or, more importantly for the current study, those who are NEET for a minimum period over a given timespan. So there is recognition here that there is a qualitative difference between those who are NEET for fleeting periods of time by comparison with those who are NEET for longer periods. This important issue will be returned to further on.

There is also considerable discussion about the merits of the term. Furlong (2006) succinctly summarises the strengths and weaknesses of the term NEET. In terms of strengths, the arguments centre on its future predictability of vulnerability and the differences between this group and those who were never NEET at a young age.

Firstly, the NEET group, despite its heterogeneous nature, is seen as a predictor of future vulnerability (see for example, United Kingdom Cabinet Office, Social Exclusion Unit 1999; Bynner & Parsons 2002; NZ Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment 2013; Samoilenko & Carter 2015 for studies predicting future vulnerability for long-term NEETs). The second argument put forward is the converse of the first; namely, that those who were never NEET early on (16–17) are less likely to be disadvantaged in the future.

The two arguments against the NEET construct focus on its not adequately being able to capture the target group (i.e. vulnerable young people). It is at the same time seen as being too broad and too narrow. The definition is seen as being too broad in the sense that many young people will become NEET at some stage, and often for quite legitimate reasons, such as volunteering, taking a gap year, travelling, caring etc. Because many young people are NEET for legitimate reasons and so are not vulnerable, policies may not be effectively targeted at those most at risk. Furthermore, Anlezark (2011b) points out, when discussing ‘at risk’ youth, that many of these are undertaking meaningful activities, and labelling them as being ‘at risk’ is not helpful as they may become stigmatised. Indeed, the term could be seen as derogatory to those it is applied to.

Seemingly contrary, the NEET definition is also seen as being too narrow: while there are those categorised as NEET who are not vulnerable, there are also vulnerable young people who are not categorised as NEET. An example of this is young people who move into insecure employment such as casual or other temporary work arrangements. Another example is young people who leave school and move into training programs that do not have good outcomes. So while there are vulnerable young people who are NEET, there are also vulnerable young people who are not NEET, as well as young people who are NEET who are not vulnerable.

Many studies look at NEET as a point in time phenomenon. However, this may not be helpful for the following reasons. For instance, people may only be in the NEET state for a short period time. Quintini, Martin and Martin (2007), for example, identified across OECD countries that point-in-time NEET rates can be quite high.¹ They argue that a brief spell of NEET is quite normal as part of the school-to-work transition period. They also argue that the same may not be able to be said for youth with extended periods of NEET and that there should be efforts to quantify this group (as they may be more vulnerable). They therefore calculated, using longitudinal data from the European Community Household Panel (ECHP), the ratio of young people over the period 1997–2001 who were ever NEET (i.e. at least once) over the period by comparison with those who were always NEET. On average over the countries they found the ever NEET to always NEET ratio to be 4.2, meaning that the always NEET were a fairly small component of those who were ever NEET.

There are several differing definitions of persistently NEET in the literature. There is no one accepted definition and to some extent this is an artefact of the datasets used by the researchers, as well as of the context of the country they are in. To some extent at least, a pragmatic and fit for purpose approach should be adopted.

The practical drawback in looking at long-term or persistently NEET is that it requires longitudinal data which may not always be readily available. For this particular study, however, we will be using the LSAY dataset.

Young people’s broader circumstances

The proportion of young people who are NEET needs to be considered within the broader environment they are in and indeed to some extent the size of the group is a product of the broader environment. There have over time been considerable changes to the circumstances surrounding young people in many countries. Of particular relevance is the state of the labour market and also changes in participation in education and training.

¹ The OECD average NEET rate for 15 to 29-year-olds in 2014 was 16.5% or about one in six. See <<http://www.oecd.org/employment/ministerial/employment-in-figures.htm>>.

Eurofound (2012) discusses the institutional and structural factors that can affect the NEET group in reference to varying rates of NEET among various European countries. These include the configuration of the education system (for instance, whether it has an apprenticeship system or not) and labour market factors such as employment protection legislation, minimum wages and active policies to support young people who are NEET to get into employment. Among other factors affecting the size and composition of the NEET group are general economic conditions and the absolute size of the youth cohort.

Many countries have faced worsening labour market conditions, particularly since the Global Financial Crises (GFC). These worsening conditions affect young people to a greater extent as they are essentially new entrants to the labour market (NCVER 2014). Indeed, the (point in time) NEET rate for the young people aged 16–29 grew substantially across OECD countries following the GFC (Carcillo et al. 2015). Much of the increase in NEET was due to an increase in the numbers unemployed, while the numbers who were inactive (not in the labour force) remained relatively stable on average. Overall, there was an increase of seven percentage points in the NEET rate following the GFC.

Australia did not fare as badly as many countries in terms of the impact of the GFC and increases in the NEET rate were not as great as many other countries. Contrary to most other countries in the OECD, however, much of the rise in NEETs in Australia was due to an increase in those who were not in the labour force (or inactive).

Looking at the employment situation for young people generally in Australia, while the unemployment rate has been relatively stable overall, it is still at about 12.7% for young people aged 15–24 (in August 2016). There has also been a trend towards part-time and casualised employment as opposed to full-time employment. This trend is even more noticeable for young people. For 15 to 24-year-olds in Australia, full-time employment to population rates declined from 36.7% to 26.2% between 1996 and 2015, while part-time employment to population rates increased from 22.9% to 30.3% over the same period (Atkinson & Stanwick 2016). Full-time employment to population rates dropped significantly for 15 to 24-year-olds following the GFC (from 34.7% in 2008 to 30.1% in 2009), while the unemployment rate rose (from 7.4% in 2008 to 11.3% in 2009) and part-time employment remained fairly steady.

It may also be more difficult for young people to find employment if there is a larger cohort of young people coming through. Eurofound (2012) found, using statistical modelling, that the prevalence of NEET among 15 to 29-year-olds increases with increases to the relative size of the youth cohort.

Carvalho (2015) argues that the 15–19 year age group and 20–24 year age group should be treated differently in terms of labour market dynamics. This is since 15 to 19-year-olds are more likely to be in education and possibly part-time work, whereas the 20–24 year age group is more likely to be interested in establishing full-time employment opportunities. Carvalho (2015) points out that since the GFC the unemployment rate for 15 to 19-year-olds has increased (by people looking for part-time work) but the unemployed NEET rates have decreased (and indeed the NEET rate has decreased). This is suggestive of this age group continuing on or returning to full-time education or training. Conversely, the NEET rate for the 20–24 year age group increased due an increase in those unemployed (looking for full-time work), as well as comprising an inactive group not in full-time education and training. These differences also have implications for differential policy responses for the two age groups.

Anlezark (2011a) also suggested that the GFC would affect young people in Australia disproportionately in terms of fewer opportunities for full-time employment, apprenticeships and

traineeships, and increased unemployment. Rising educational participation, however, was seen to provide some protection for young people. In this paper, Anlezark analysed verbatim responses on a question about young people's decisions in light of the economic downturn from a pilot sample from three cohorts of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) in 2009. The responses indicated that young people were feeling the effects of the GFC in terms of finding it more difficult to find employment, as well as apprenticeships and traineeships, and feeling the threat of unemployment. Some young people turned to or continued in education and training (or changed their current course) because of the poorer labour market conditions for them.

There have also been changes to education policies in recent years in many countries, which are aimed at increasing educational participation. Increased opportunities for education in developed countries by definition mitigate the chances of 15 to 19-year-olds becoming NEET. In Australia there is now a requirement for young people to stay on at school, education, training, employment or a combination of these until 17 years of age and one would expect a consequential impact on the NEET rate for 15 to 17-year-olds.² This youth compact was introduced in 2010. There were also targets introduced, to be achieved by 2015, for the attainment of Year 12 or equivalent qualifications (COAG 2009). The evidence certainly is that young people are staying on in education and training longer than before. For example, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS; 2016) shows that while in 2005 56.4% of 15 to 24-year-olds were in education and training, by 2016 this had risen to 62.8%.

This also acts as a counterbalance to the more precarious labour market situation for young people. However, increased educational participation may for some just delay them becoming NEET. Indeed, the International Labour Organization (ILO; 2016) claims that this is what is happening. The (point in time) NEET rate increases with age, with 20 to 24-year-olds more likely to be NEET than the 15 to 19-year-olds, and the 25–29 year old age group even more so. While the 15 to 19-year-olds (in developed countries at least) have had opportunities to increase their education and skill levels, the lack of job opportunities has meant that many still find themselves without jobs post formal education. In some countries such as Australia there have also been increasing rates of participation in tertiary education and in particular higher education. This could delay the age people become NEET even further if jobs are difficult to obtain.

In the current study we compared two cohorts of LSAY; 15-year-olds who started in LSAY in 2003 (the Y03 cohort), and 15-year-olds who started in 2006 (the Y06 cohort). The cross cohort comparison is of interest in this study particularly given the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and its subsequent effects.

The heterogeneous nature of the group

As mentioned earlier, the NEET group, even the long-term or persistently NEET group is heterogeneous in nature. This is important to note as they should not be considered as one distinct group, but rather a group with different circumstances that will require different policy responses. This heterogeneity can be looked at in various ways. Definitionally, there are those who are unemployed and not studying and those who are not in the labour force and not studying. Within this there are those who are vulnerable and those who are less vulnerable.

2 Refer to the Compact with Young Australians, see <<https://www.education.gov.au/compact-young-australians>>.

Eurofound (2012) lists five distinct groups of NEET³ which are the:

- *Conventionally unemployed*: they see this as the largest group and is composed of both short-term and long-term unemployed.
- *Unavailable*: this captures a variety of circumstances including caring, raising young children and sickness and disability.
- *Disengaged*: young people not seeking education or employment opportunities but are seemingly able to do so. This includes disenfranchised young people as well as those pursuing risky or dangerous lifestyles.
- *Opportunity seekers*: young people who are seeking training or employment opportunities but ones they see befitting their skills and status
- *Voluntary NEETs*: this includes a variety of activities such as travelling, volunteering, pursuing art or music, and undertaking informal learning

While this grouping applies to NEET overall, it could probably apply to the persistently NEET group as well. It is of interest as it shows that some of these groupings are less at risk or vulnerable than others. For instance, the last two groupings – opportunity seekers and voluntary NEETs – are less likely to be in need of policy responses than the conventionally unemployed and the disengaged, as well as some of the unavailable group.

Another way that the heterogeneity of the NEET group can be categorised is by an examination of the socio-demographic characteristics of young people who are more likely to be NEET, such as early school leavers, and people who have children at a young age.

In a pragmatic sense, in addition to an examination of characteristics, the heterogeneity can be expressed by what information surveys try to capture in terms of unemployment and also activities for the not in the labour force group such as the following:

- caring/home duties
- travelling
- volunteering
- illness
- informal study.

All of the above express heterogeneity of the NEET group in different ways, but for this study, of course, we are restricted to information contained within the LSAY survey (socio-demographic characteristics and types of activities as above). Nevertheless, the heterogeneity of the group is an important consideration for policy design.

Findings relating to the longer term NEET group

There have been several studies that have examined the longer-term outcomes of those who are persistently NEET (with the exact nature of longer term depending on the study). This section reviews some of the findings from these studies. Only two of these studies refer to the Australian context (Hillman 2005 and OECD 2016).

³ They do not provide any information as to how these groups were derived.

The Social Exclusion Unit (1999) report examined the quantum of 16-18 year olds who are NEET in England and why. In addition they formulated policy options to reduce the numbers of 16-18 year olds that were NEET. The report found that while 9% of 16-18 year olds were NEET at a given point in time, 6% were so for more than six months, and 3% for more than 12 months (with those figures excluding summer holidays where there is a break in the academic year). There were variations in these long term spells according to ethnic background. In addition, they found that educational underachievement and disaffection, and family disadvantage and poverty were two main sets of factors associated with non-participation between the ages of 16 and 18 (although not specifically for long term NEET).

In another study, Bynner and Parsons (2002), using a sub-sample of the 1970 British Birth Cohort Study of those who were surveyed at age 21, modelled NEET status to earlier educational achievement and circumstances. They further considered NEET and the building of adult identity capital. The definition they used for NEET was NEET for at least six months between the ages of 16 and 18. In this study they found that poor educational achievement was the major factor in becoming NEET (as per their definition); however, there were also some other significant factors such as living in the inner city for males and lack of parental interest in education for females. NEET was also found to lead to poorer labour market outcomes and in addition, for females, the majority of whom were young mothers, being NEET could have damaging psychological effects.

Furlong (2006), in discussing the merits of the term NEET, used data from the Scottish School Leavers Survey to examine the extent of NEET using varying definitions, including the more restricted definition of six months or more continuously NEET in a 16 month period from July 2002 to October 2003. They found that while 36% of both males and females in the sample were NEET at least once in the 16 months, 8% of males and 6% of females were NEET using the more restricted definition. Looking at selected characteristics of NEETs they found that those who had never been NEET had more positive educational experiences and more advantaged family backgrounds than those who were NEET at the time of the survey or continuously NEET for six months or more. However, there were minimal differences in these characteristics between the latter two groups.

Carcillo et al. (2015) used monthly panel data to examine whether NEET is a transitory state or longer lasting. More particularly, they examined three cohorts of 16-year-old youths from selected European countries over a 48-month period (starting in 2005, 2006, and 2007), using the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EUSILC). They found about one in four had a NEET period of some description across their 48-month observation period. They further found that of young people who do have a NEET spell, for about one in four the period is longer than a year within that 48-month period. The incidence varies by country. Their analysis identified seven pathways for young people: students, school to employment, early employed, school to unemployment, school to inactivity, early unemployed and early inactives. The last four are considered 'problematic' in terms of NEET. Their analysis also found a strong association between pathway choice and parental level of education, including a strong relationship between parental education and NEET status.

Ranzani and Rosati (2013) examined the NEET issue in the context of Mexico. Using data from the Mexican Labour Force surveys they investigated the determinants and risks associated with the NEET status. They found persistence in NEET to be high, particularly for the neither in the labour force nor in education group. In contrast, transitions for the unemployed NEETs were found to be relatively quick. An analysis of the characteristics also found two groups in terms of speed of transition. For example, women from a poor background and with low education were more likely to have a slow transition from NEET. There was also heterogeneity by other characteristics, such as level of

education and whether they were parents or not. Their other important finding was that having been in the NEET status one year before increases the probability of remaining NEET by about 50%. It also decreases the probability of finding employment in the following year, and also the probability of being employed.

There are two New Zealand studies that have examined the longer-term outcomes of those who are persistently NEET. Both of these studies employed the Longitudinal Survey of Families, Incomes and Employment, and in addition Samoilenko and Carter (2015) linked these data to administrative data from the Inland Revenue Department, Ministry of Social Development, and Ministry of Education.

The New Zealand Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (2013) in their study examined patterns and durations of NEET spells during the period 2002 to 2010. They found in common with other studies that short-term NEET spells were common in the teens or early 20s; however, about 25–30% also experienced a longer-term spell of NEET of six months or more. Characteristics associated with a long-term NEET spell include early school leaving, low school qualifications, being a teenage parent, coming from Maori or Pacific background and coming from a lower socioeconomic background.

They also found that teenagers who had a long-term NEET spell were more likely than others to have further NEET spells, were less likely to study and less likely to be employed at 20 and 21 years. However, they also found that they became more likely to be engaged in education and work in the following three to four years. Those who had their first long term spell of NEET at 15–17 were slower to get back into activity than those who had their first spell at 18 or 19.

Samoilenko and Carter (2015) in their New Zealand study examined longer-term outcomes (up to four years) of those who had an initial long term spell of NEET (i.e. five months or longer). The outcomes examined were in terms of benefit receipt, education, employment and further inactivity. They found that young people with a long-term NEET spell had relatively poorer outcomes after two years compared with youth who did not have a long-term spell. They were less likely to be employed, more likely to receive a benefit and more likely to be inactive. However, there was no difference in the rate of study. After four years the differences in outcomes tended to converge with some variations (they were more likely to hold lower-level qualifications and/or receive a benefit than their non-long-term NEET counterparts). The four-year outcomes varied with the age of the first long-term NEET spell – those whose first long-term spell was between the ages of 15 and 17 had the worst outcomes, while for those who were aged 20–24 when they had their spell the four-year outcomes were similar to their 20 to 24-year-old non-long-term NEET counterparts.

Crawford et al. (2011) examined the characteristics and the shorter and longer-term outcomes of young people in different education and labour market states (including NEET) between ages 16–17 and 18–19. They used three British longitudinal surveys for their analysis. Among their findings in relation to NEET was that about half of those who were NEET at ages 16–17 were still NEET one year later. They also found differences in transition likelihoods according to various characteristics such as socioeconomic advantage (the more advantaged were less likely to be NEET) and prior achievement (those who are NEET at age 18–19 have lower levels of prior achievement). They also found that those who became NEET when they left school had a very high risk of being unemployed five years later and at a greater risk than others of being unemployed and earning lower wages up to 10 years later. Overall, those who are NEET at ages 16–17 or 18–19 have worse outcomes than any other transition state, particularly those who become NEET at the 18–19 year age group. The authors do point out however that being NEET early on does not necessarily cause these poorer outcomes and that there are other characteristics that may increase the risk of being NEET later on.

In an Australian study, Hillman (2005) used the 1995 cohort of the LSAY surveys to examine young people not in full-time education or the labour force for at least one month over the period 1997–2003. This grouping differs from the NEET group, in that it includes those studying part-time (but not working) and excludes the unemployed. She found that a large proportion of 16 to 22-year-olds fell into the group under investigation at some stage; but that for the majority it was for a short period (about one month). However, some (2%) of this group stayed in this state for longer periods of time (more than 12 months). The characteristics of people who stayed in the group for longer periods included not obtaining a Year 12 certificate, not having high achievement in secondary school, having a disability, or being female.

Another report in the Australian context (OECD 2016) undertook an analysis of long-term NEETs in two parts. In the first part they undertook an international comparison of 15 to 29-year-old NEETs over a 48-month period (from January 2009 to December 2012) using the HILDA and EUSILC datasets.⁴ They found that about a half of Australian young people had a period of NEET which was higher than for European countries overall. In addition, 8% had multiple short spells (lower than for European countries) and 16% were NEET for more than 12 months in total over the observation period of 48 months. Long-term NEET was found to be more frequent for those with lower educational attainment (Year 10 or lower), women (particularly young women who were parents), Indigenous youth (Indigenous youth more likely particularly in remote and very remote areas), and lower parental educational attainment. These factors had already been identified in their cross-sectional analysis.

In the second part of their analysis they followed 16-year-olds in HILDA over a 96-month period until the age of 24.⁵ They found that 71% of this sample was NEET at some time over the 96-month period, while 67% were NEET for at most six months in total. However, 20% of this sample was NEET for a total period of over 12 months across the 96 month period.

A note on implications for policy design

The intention of this section is just to make a couple of observations on implications for policy design without going into any detail on actual policy interventions and their efficacy (as this is out of the scope of this paper).

Firstly, it is clear that this group is heterogeneous in nature, both in terms of underlying characteristics and also activities. And while this more contained group of persistently NEET are more likely to be at risk than the larger point-in-time NEET group, there will still be some who are not as vulnerable or as at risk. This is even though previous research indicates that the persistently NEET group overall has poorer long-term outcomes.

The groups who are more likely to become persistently NEET are associated with certain socio-demographic characteristics. Additionally, the NEET group is by definition split into those who are unemployed and those who are inactive (defined as those who are not in the labour force). As unemployment is a factor of economic cycles they should be treated differently from the inactive group of NEET (Carcillo et al. 2015). Furthermore, becoming NEET at an early age (before the age of 20) has been seen to be more problematic. What this means in terms of policy is that it needs to be nuanced; that is, there is not a one size fits all policy.

4 The Household, Income and Labour Dynamic in Australia survey and the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions survey.

5 The survey participants turned 16 between 2001 and 2005 and consequently 24 between 2008 and 2012.

There are a variety of different policy response types that could be relevant, depending on the circumstances, but include employment services, education and training at various levels, depending on need, and a variety of other supports such as social support (e.g. counselling), outreach services, and financial support.

To illustrate the point of considering the heterogeneous nature of the group, Elder (2015) suggests a process for analysing and building a policy response to the NEET issue. This process firstly involves analysing data on NEET in terms of its composition, gender breakdown and age bands. Elder then suggests different policy responses/mixes depending on whether unemployed NEET is greater than the inactive NEET, or whether the inactive are greater in proportion. And within these two categories are variations in policy response, depending on sex and age range.

The report by the OECD (2016) examined the NEET issue among young people in Australia. This report contains suggestions for policy options that pertain specifically to the Australian context. The policy options include addressing school attendance and early leaving, increasing the completion rates of vocational education and training (including apprenticeships) programs, tightening up on benefit receipt, provision of social services for at-risk youth (for example the Youth Connections and Youth Employment Services programs), provision of further training, including foundation training and improving literacy and numeracy, and more systematic evaluation of social and employment programs.

Summary

What can we summarise from the literature? Firstly, previous research indicates that the focus on the longer-term or persistently NEET group is warranted and that they are more likely to contain those who are vulnerable. On balance, their outcomes are not as good as those who do not experience long-term NEET spells; even more so for that group of long-term NEETs who are still in their teens.

Secondly, the research indicates that there are certain socio-demographic characteristics associated with the longer-term NEETs (although these characteristics are also associated with young people who experience any NEET). These include low school achievement/early school leaving, coming from a lower socioeconomic background, teenage parenting, being female, low parental level of education, being Indigenous and having a disability.

The research also indicates that the group of young people who are NEET, including the long-term NEET, is a heterogeneous group in terms of activities and characteristics. And furthermore, the broader country circumstance has an impact on the nature of this group.

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