Developing career capabilities in 'NEET' young people: Experiences of participants in the Prince's Trust team programme

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Abstract

This qualitative study focuses on the impact of a supportive 12-week programme intended to empower young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) to pursue life-career goals of their own choosing. The programme is viewed through the conceptual lens of the Capability Approach of Amartya Sen, an approach to social justice that stresses the power to make and implement lifestyle choices. Fourteen young people who attended the Prince's Trust team programme were interviewed. Their accounts of their experience of the programme were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Participants found the programme to be a positive confidence-building experience, and it enabled them to deploy their existing resources in pursuit of a personally meaningful goal.

Introduction: NEET young people, social justice and career development

In recent years, unemployed youth have sometimes been characterised as 'not in employment, education or training' (NEET) in both policy and research discourse. This label seeks to capture a broader population than the term 'unemployed', as it is not restricted to those who are economically active, seeking work on the labour market, or in receipt of welfare benefits for reason of unemployment. The NEET category can be understood in a wider context of social change that has extensively restructured the relationship between young people, work and education (Ainley & Allen, 2010; Simmons, Thompson, Tabrizi & Nartey, 2014). Career pathways are more individualised and less predictable (Roberts, 1997) and potentially placing more responsibility on young people to find their own way.

NEET status is often transitory, and the young people who pass through it are highly diverse (Eurofound, 2016). Indeed, the label defines young people by what they are not; it conveys no information about their important characteristics (Yates & Payne, 2006). They are heterogeneous and may face issues that are more salient than unemployment. Spielhofer et al (2010) point to important barriers to participation in education and training including lack of finance, transport provision and knowledge of opportunities. Whilst a sub-group may benefit from a period away from work or learning, NEET status is associated with socio-economic disadvantage (Duckworth & Schoon, 2012; Russell, 2016, Thompson, 2011). NEET young people remain a concern for governments, and a target for active labour market policy interventions (Hutchinson, Beck & Hooley, 2015), although lack of clarity about the nature of the NEET group may hamper the effective targeting of public policy (Maguire, 2015). It remains a deeply problematic category (Furlong, 2006), and yet one that provides a useful reference point for analysis (Eurofound, 2016; Simmons, Thompson, Tabrizi & Nartey, 2014).

Three contemporary factors have intensified perennial concerns about NEET young people. Firstly, the banking crisis in 2008 and the subsequent global economic downturn resulted in elevated levels of youth unemployment across Europe (European Commission, 2016) providing a powerful reminder that youth labour markets are vulnerable to the economic cycle (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011; Scarpetta, Sonnet & Manfredi, 2010). Secondly, young people are particularly affected by the casualisation of work, and the growth of insecure employment (Avis, 2014; Eichhorst & Rinne, 2014; IPPR, 2014). This can lead to work patterns that Shildrick, Macdonald, Webster and Garthwaite (2012) have labelled a 'low-pay, no pay cycle'. Some scholars use the term 'churn' to describe moving in and out of NEET status (e.g. Simmons & Thompson, 2011). Thirdly, there is an emerging evidence base suggesting that NEET status can be associated with long-term detriments, a phenomenon referred to as 'scarring'. There is persuasive evidence that youth unemployment can lead to enduring labour market disadvantage: this is 'economic scarring' (e.g. Brandt & Hank, 2014). Some emerging evidence suggests detrimental impacts on mental health and health behaviour that can endure to mid-adulthood: this is 'health scarring' (Strandh, Winefield, Nilsson & Hammarström, 2014). For these reasons, any approach that may ameliorate the harmful impact of NEET status is potentially of great interest.

This research explores the effectiveness of a short personal development programme for NEET young people, through the experiences and perceptions of the participants. A more extensive project with a related focus was presented by Simmons and Thompson (2011). They conducted an ethnographic study of the experiences of participants and professionals involved in the 'E2E' programme in England. This programme was aimed at 16-18 year-old NEET young people and aimed to move them towards work-related learning. Often delivered in a further education college context, the programme incorporated elements of personal development, core skills, and vocational skills development, but with a flexible curriculum

and no required qualification outcomes. This enabled the enthusiastic staff to make the provision flexible to individual and group needs. Participants appreciated its distinctiveness from their school experiences. Difficulties in sourcing work experience and converting it to employment remained. Simmons and Thompson noted the relatively low status of E2E. They located the provision in a wider context of the UK's specific history of provision for youth in transition to adulthood. They argue that inequality is an outcome of such provision: work-related qualifications for the disadvantaged offer negligible economic benefits and the drawbacks of a neoliberal globalised economy are felt mainly by the less advantaged.

The study reported in this paper is more modest in scope, but can be seen in the context of a wider trend towards highlighting the importance of social justice in career development practice. Irving and Malik's (2005) landmark publication represented an important step in the international resurgence of interest in this dimension of practice. A special edition of the International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance made a further contribution to the systematic consideration of social justice, and explored its relationship to guidance practice (Arthur, 2014; Müller, 2014; Sultana, 2014).

A distinctive approach to social justice is adopted here. A supportive intervention is viewed through the conceptual lens of the Capability Approach (CA). This is derived from the work of economist, philosopher and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen (1980; 1985a, b; 1990; 1992; 1993; 2004; 2009). The CA represents an approach to social justice and freedom which has particular resonance with the concerns of career development (Robertson, 2015).

Conceptual underpinning: The Capability Approach

The Capability Approach (CA) was originally conceived as a humane approach to economic development in emerging nations. As such it seeks to shift the emphasis from seeing people as economic units contributing to the gross domestic product of a nation, towards a view that the economy exists to serve people and facilitate the kind of lives they wish to lead. Through asking the question - 'equality of what?' - Sen (1980) drew attention to a problem of what social justice efforts are seeking to achieve. Rather than prescriptions for redistribution of wealth, or a system of fair rules, Sen's approach draws attention to diversity in human needs and aspirations, and the crucial role of resources ('commodities' in the language of CA) required to achieve a desired lifestyle. Sen advocates supporting people to be and to do that which they have reason to value.

Their potential to access life chances must be real, not hypothetical; Sen's conception demands pragmatism. Freedom and well-being are assessed not just in terms of lifestyles that have been attained, but also those that are genuinely attainable. People may seek life-careers that are culturally specific, but crucially it is they (not governments or other powerful actors) that determine the values that underpin choice. CA is about promoting well-being, but it sees well-being neither in purely economic nor psychological terms. Rather it focuses on empowerment: capability means genuine choice and the realistic ability to implement those choices to achieve a valued lifestyle.

In spite of its origins in welfare economics for developing and emerging economies, CA has been applied to economically-disadvantaged people in relatively prosperous nations. More specifically it has been used as a framework to make sense of support structures for young people in transition to adulthood in Europe (Bifulco, 2012; Hollywood et al., 2012; Otto et al., 2015). This provides a fresh and contrasting perspective to the dominant approaches to

government funded labour market activation measures in the UK (Dean, Bonvin, Vielle & Farvaque, 2005; Egdell & McQuaid, 2016; Lindsay, McQuaid & Dutton, 2007; Orton, 2011). These have tended to focus on rapid placement into employment, known as "work first approaches", and for young people in particular, skills development known as "human capital approaches"[1]. CA considers something these interventions tend to ignore: the personal meaning of career experiences and social identities for young people. Top-down policymaking for youth unemployment may be driven both by economic and compassionate concerns, but has shown minimal interest in what young people want to do with their lives. Sen's CA can help to address this deficit.

CA is an approach, not a theory. Sen's conception is intentionally under-specified, so as to allow its application in diverse contexts. While its lack of content is arguably a weakness, it does make it very adaptable. I have sought to apply CA to the study of careers and career guidance (Robertson, 2015; Robertson & Egdell, 2017), and argued that there is much commonality in the concerns of CA and those of the career development community. This study seeks to further this work by providing some empirical insight into how career capabilities might be understood and developed in one group that is particularly likely to be disempowered. It represents one of a number of recent international attempts to view employment- or education-related interventions through the lens of CA (e.g. Berthet, Dechezelles, Gouin, & Simon, 2009; Egdell & McQuaid, 2016; Galliott & Graham, 2014, 2015; Picard, Olympio, Masdonati, & Bangali, 2015; Picard, Pilote, Turcotte, Goastellec & Olympio, 2015; Skovhus, 2016).

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[1] Walker (2006) similarly argues that CA offers a distinctive alternative view of education, in contrast to the dominant human capital discourse.

The Prince's Trust team programme

The Prince's Trust is an established UK charity focused on supporting young people who are unemployed, facing difficulties at school, or are otherwise disadvantaged in the transition to adult life. The team programme is a 12-week personal development experience for disadvantaged young people, intended to re-engage them in work or learning. It incorporates a residential (outdoor activity) week, a community project, and two weeks on a work experience placement. There is accredited communications skills input in the classroom, job search training and use of visiting speakers (e.g. drug awareness). It is structured such that each week is different, and team-working with peers is a key theme throughout. Tutors provide individual help to support participants to identify their goals beyond the end of the 12-week period. The programme is delivered by other organisations on behalf of the Trust. In the case of this study, the two relevant programme providers were Glasgow Clyde College and Edinburgh College. The latter operates as an employability unit known as West Edinburgh Action (WEACT), in a multi-agency community setting. Programme participants were in receipt of expenses to cover their travel to the college and lunches.

The programme is of particular interest as it falls into neither of the main categories of labour activation programme that dominate approaches to employability: work first and human capital development approaches. The approach of the programme is person-focused; not instrumental in terms of outcomes, as its funding is not tied to outcomes. The emphasis is on social reintegration, and personally chosen goals beyond the end of the programme. Whilst some support is given with core skills development, notably communication skills, this does not dominate the programme.

Method

The sample consisted of 14 young people who were participants in the Prince's Trust team programme in Scotland. Five were female and four were male. Participants were in the age range 18-24 years, and were diverse in their backgrounds and educational achievement, from foundation level qualifications (the most basic available, including accreditation for those with special educational needs) up to Higher National Diploma (the level just below an undergraduate degree). They were referred to the Prince's Trust programme providers from a variety of sources including Job Centre Plus, third sector employability agencies, attendance at a jobs fair, and personal recommendation from friends or family. All participants were approaching the end of their 12-week programme, enabling them to reflect back on the experience. The sample was drawn from four separate cohorts in 2015, delivered by Glasgow Clyde College and Edinburgh College. The young people were given a £10 shopping voucher as an incentive to participate.

Semi-structured research interviews were conducted with each participant averaging 45 minutes in duration. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. They were then subject to qualitative data analysis using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following the guidelines proposed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). This approach is intended to produce and in-depth understanding of the subjective experience of participants, and to understand events through their eyes.

The project was funded by the Richard Benjamin Trust. Approval was obtained from the ethics and research integrity committee of the School of Applied Sciences at Edinburgh Napier University. A critical realist position was adopted, and participants' own understandings of capabilities was the focus. The underpinning research philosophy and

methodological issues arising in applying CA in this study are discussed in more detail elsewhere (Robertson, 2017).

Findings

The themes emerging from participants' accounts are outlined here. These are divided into three broad areas. Firstly, the young people's experiences prior to joining the programme are described, secondly their stories of participation in the programme, and finally their understanding of the personal outcomes of the programme. Three themes are identified in each of these areas, and illustrated with verbatim quotations.

Life before the programme

To understand the impact of the programme on participants, it was necessary to get a sense of their lives before prior to joining the programme. Their accounts focused primarily on three areas: the psychosocial effects of unemployment, lacking a sense of direction, and events or individual factors that represented prominent difficulties in their lives.

Psychosocial impact of unemployment

Unemployment is known to be associated with negative psycho-social impacts (Paul & Moser, 2009). It is unsurprising to find this coming through strongly in the data. Social isolation or reclusive behaviour was a feature of life prior to joining the programme:

> *"I became a hermit for about two years at one point…I never went out at all…even to the shop or anything."* Participant 10 (male)

> *"…I was just wasting my life away in bed. Sleeping all day, up all night, and it was just the same routine. Obviously because I was sleeping all day and never had a social life either, because obviously my friends aren't going to go out at night time, so*

I kind of lost a few friends ...from 13 up until not that long ago, I was really quite depressed and at the doctors' and stuff like that…" Participant 11 (female).

Indeed, direct or indirect references to symptoms of common mental health conditions (anxiety and depression) are evident throughout the sample for example:

"Even though I was unemployed before I wasn't relaxing and I was really, really stressed out and I felt terrible about myself." Participant 12 (male).

The loss or absence of life-career goals.

Several participants reported experiencing a sense of purposelessness, lack of motivation or 'not caring'. In the language of CA, the sample had not identified valued 'beings' and 'doings'. For those who had been in settled employment or study, something had happened to disrupt their career focus. In the absence of life-career goals that they had reason to value, they were floundering. This had left them unable to deploy the strengths and resources already at their disposal in a consistent or focused way.

"I was like unemployed, but employed, I was like getting jobs and not going to them…I just didn't really bother about life." Participant 12 (male)

"I dabbled in a few jobs but there was nothing I really wanted and then, honestly, the majority of the time I did nothing at all…I was in that state of mind when I was young where I didn't really care about working and stuff, but obviously that wasn't very good…I've had a lot of personal problems…that stopped me believing in myself and

doing what I wanted to do. I just kind of didn't care about anything until I got older now, and a lot of my friends had jobs and they were all doing something with their lives." Participant 11 (female).

"Well it was just that I was losing momentum, because I was applying for tons and tons and tons of jobs. With some of them I was getting to interview stage, but when I had to declare my record they were like, no, see you later...In total I have got 93 offences on my record. So it's not a few petty things. It is quite big stuff." Participant 1 (male).

Important factors and life events

Most participants gave accounts of life events and discontinuities that had had an impact on them prior to joining the programme. Some of these were unique to individuals in the sample, such as a bereavement, and in another instance a substantive mental health issue. Three participants were raised and educated overseas and had relocated to the UK; five had experienced unstable housing. Job loss also featured.

"I am an ex-care kid. Between the ages of 5 and 18 – this will shock you: was in 42 different care homes…" Participant 1 (male).

"My family, we were refugees...I left home…I could either stay in the supported accommodation or go to college and be homeless…that's why I took a year out because I couldn't go to college. I couldn't live at home…" Participant 4 (female).

> *"Then I was a chef...I was pretty awesome at the job, but they chucked me out for, not for any reason, I wouldn't think, but maybe there was a reason I couldn't grasp."*
> Participant 9 (male).

Several participants, all males, reported periods of weeks or months lost to alcohol or drug use:

> *"I moved out when I was about 17, 18, and lived in [location] ...and that's high rises. Apparently one of the roughest places you can go in Glasgow. I lived there for six months. I didn't really eat a lot, I only ate biscuits and drank tea, I was smoking cannabis at that point ..."* Participant 9 (male).

For three male participants, this behaviour extended to serious and persistent anti-social criminal offences, including violence, which attracted a custodial sentence:

> *"...I am also an ex-gang member...I left the gang when I got out of gaol, when I got off from my four-year sentence."* Participant 1 (male).

Experiences of the programme

Programme activities were fresh in the mind of participants, so they were able to discuss in detail their experiences and feelings about them. Three themes emerged here: the importance of the peer group, overcoming fear, and a sense of having had memorable experiences.

The importance of the peer group.

The peer group featured as an important and positive part of the experience for most participants. The groups were so diverse (socially and educationally) that this initially presented a challenge to young people who had previously been isolated. Shared experiences seem to enable them to ultimately overcome initial discomfort.

"It was really nerve racking just because there was people coming from all walks of life and I had no idea of any of them…I never knew what to expect I was quite scared, quite nervous and anxious and stuff…Like the first two weeks, it was kind of, I didn't really talk to anybody. I was kind of having issues with, like, voicing my opinions and saying how I felt but when it came to the residential, which was the third week, that's when I started realising that maybe I should start breaking out to doing things I don't really want to do, and have my own opinion, so that's what I started doing…" Participant 6 (male).

"…at the first communications class…we basically found out that the level we were doing was an intermediate one, so I was a bit like a couple of months ago I was doing an HND in Journalism, why am I sitting here?…So I wasn't really ecstatic about that…I suppose I was quite judgemental because some of the people who were there…I'm like, why am I kind of, at the same level as these people are? I know that sounds really bad…So I was a bit apprehensive, but I thought I'd give it a go, and I've made some good friends." Participant 4 (female) [was subsequently given higher level communications work]

"…everybody was on the same boat, but everybody was complete opposite." Participant 12 (male).

Peer support became important during the emotional challenges presented by the programme. Many reported having 'fun', and this was not a peripheral feature; rather it seemed to be an important to giving value and meaning to the programme experience:

"For me I think – personally – it's just been a laugh all the way really. I mean there's been a few boring days when [the tutor] just sat there and gone through paperwork…nine times out of ten it's just been a laugh all the way. I don't know what other way to explain it. I mean you're having fun but picking up new stuff at the same time…" Participant 1 (male).

Overcoming fear

The programme presented participants with new experiences and these could be anticipated with some anxiety. Tutors encouraged rather than pressurised the participants to engage in activities that they were initially uncomfortable with, thus giving them opportunities to overcome fear. This was most vivid in accounts of the outdoor residential element of the programme. This included unfamiliar activities, some of which involved coping with fear of heights. Enduring this with the support of peers seemed to provide participants evidence of their ability to cope with challenging emotions such as fear.

"Went on a residential trip which was pretty fun, we went away for four days to Auchengillan and there, I'm not really an outdoorsy person and they made us do all these kind of outdoor challenges, you know, like abseiling and stuff. I have a major fear of heights. But I felt kind of proud of myself that I still did them. Even though scared I still did them, I overcame my fear and stuff. So it was pretty good that way." Participant 6 (male).

For other participants, giving an oral presentation was described in similar terms, and represented an emotional challenge that was good to overcome:

"I think one of the things that was terrifying for me actually was presenting myself to an audience, which is what I had to do several times. They are probably a good thing for me to do that, and I passed my intermediate II, which was good." Participant 7 (female).

More than one participant talked in terms of being pushed outside of their comfort zone:

"Yeah, it was more useful being pushed outside my comfort zone, yeah. It's like it wasn't to begin with. I wasn't really good at socialising, so I kind of in my shell and stuff, but since coming here for 12 weeks I've come out of my shell quite a lot, I've started socialising and stuff like that." Participant 6 (male).

The end result of these experiences was a sense of achievement, which helped to bolster self-esteem:

"I've kind of enjoyed everything that we've done. Obviously some things could be quite stressful but once it's over it's like a sense of accomplishment you get once you've done it. That was a good feeling, yeah." Participant 11 (female).

A sense of having had memorable experiences.

For some the programme represented a maturational experience. Participants spoke in terms having grown up, and having done a great deal in a short space of time. For some, it appeared to be landmark in their development to adulthood.

"Yes, I think I became more mature in a way, I guess. Like taking care of myself more than what I did before and taking more responsibilities and knowing how to stay safe there, in a way. So I think I have changed…" Participant 2 (female).

The eventfulness of the programme could be all the more striking in contrast to the preceding period of stagnation:

"Yeah, I'd say the course has helped me to mature as well because obviously I'd never had any experience of doing anything from 17 to 20, but now I do." Participant 11 (female).

One participant stressed the value of having a structure to her time and being kept busy was important. The notion of time structure as a psychological benefit of work that may be denied to the unemployed, was introduced by Jahoda (e.g. 1982), and continues to have currency (e.g. Martella & Maass, 2000).

"Just to have a reason to get up every day and have a structure to my day…I find it helpful that it's five days a week." Participant 4 (female).

Outcomes of the programme

This study contained no longitudinal element, so the extent to which any benefits from participation in the programme may endure cannot be assessed. Furthermore IPA as a method of data analysis is not designed to project into the future. Nonetheless participants were seen close to the end of their programme and were able to articulate their experiences of the impact the programme had on them, and what they expected to take away from it. Three themes emerged here: improved confidence, life-career goals, and an expectation of ongoing social relationships.

Confidence

Improved confidence was the strongest theme emerging in participants' accounts of the impact of the programme.

"But I think it's actually helped me be a wee bit more confident" Participant 14 (male).

Some participants couched this in terms of improvements to self-esteem:

"So then this course helped me to gain…some qualifications and work on my self-esteem so then, being on this course has been positive in that way, I guess. Now I can say that I have improved…" Participant 2 (female).

For some it appeared to be a growth confidence in social situations that was particularly important, and this improved their ability to speak up for themselves. This appears to connect with the capability of "voice" highlighted by Egdell and McQuaid (2006). The capacity for self-advocacy that this represents seems to be important aspect to the empowerment of NEET young people:

[referring initially to a charity fundraising task] *"Gained new skills, gained more confidence speaking to people, because I was on the tombola stall, which was really good. People were talking to you, I was taking back. So I definitely got something out of that...because when I first started I never said a word unless somebody spoke to me, but now I can start conversations with people, talk more in groups, I give more out."* Participant 3 (male).

"Communications, because I find in communications I've been more active, more able to walk in and help people, talk to people, let them know my feelings, try and help their feelings. It's nice. I like it. The Trust is good. It's a good programme. It's helped me a

lot, so it has. Not many people come out of prison get a chance like this…" Participant 5 (male).

Some participants reported an enhanced sense of personal agency. Even when marginalised, young people can and do exercise some personal agency (Russell, 2016). There are relevant psychological explanations such as Seligman's concept of learned helplessness (e.g. Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978). and particularly Bandura's (e.g. 1997) concept of 'self-efficacy'. The latter has been successfully applied to career development (e.g. Betz & Hackett, 2006; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994 Gainor, 2006) and is of direct relevance to the needs of disempowered groups in society such as NEET young people.

> *"…I became more outgoing, I realised I can accomplish things, that it's not…every time I try something…because I thought every time I tried something I was going to fail. So then I didn't try but now I realise that not…every time I fail is not a bad thing…you can take something away from it, it's a learning experience."* Participant 6 (male).

> *"I didn't believe I could do stuff and go out and actually achieve stuff, but now I do. I know what I'm capable of now and I know how to use my skills to do stuff."* Participant 11 (female).

Personal agency is a central concern of CA. To this extent it has commonalities with these psychological approaches. However, Sen's conception of agency is far broader in scope. It encompasses not just individual mind-sets, but also the economic, political and legal environments within which the freedom to act is facilitated or obstructed. This might suggest a more cautious interpretation, as confidence is not a sufficient condition to achieve desired lifestyles.

Life-career goals

Many participants reported developing or regaining a sense of direction from the programme. In the language of CA, they emerged with a clearer sense of the 'beings' and 'doings' that they had reason to value.

> *"For example, I learned how to set goals…my one for the first week was to gain confidence, arriving on time, and self-esteem. They were the goals I made for myself … so now I can make bigger goals in life, for example getting into college, work and all that stuff."* Participant 2 (female).

This included occupationally specific goals, or study plans leading to a work. Some were engaged in career exploration or job-seeking activities. Some found new goals, but often it was reconnecting with their pre-existing aspirations.

> *"Yeah, I've applied for 'Getting into Hotels', which is a five-week course. It's also with the Prince's Trust. It's two weeks in a classroom just preparing us, and then three weeks' placement at a hotel, and you're more likely to get a job at the end of it."* Participant 3 (male).

> *"Yeah, then I can get my FLT. I've already done all the research on it: where I am going to do my forklift truck licence, if I get the award, how much it costs, when the course runs – I've got all the information already."* Participant 1 (male).

> *"I have got a place at college to do Highers…So doing the Highers give me a chance, like…because in the future after Highers* [the Scottish equivalent of A levels] *I want*

to do Ambulance Studies and become a paramedic, but even if I do change my mind, Highers is still something quite general that if I do change my mind from that I can use it for something else." Participant 4 (female)

The valued goals described appeared to be pragmatic or economically instrumental in most cases. As might be expected with a group of young people, a minority described goals that related more to personal growth. Two had plans involving overseas travel, and another planned to study a cultural-related programme of further education. Proactive behaviour was evident: participants were engaging in career exploration. They were encouraged and supported by their tutors who adopted a non-directive approach:

"Well I have found I am applying for a lot more jobs; I've got a momentum to go forward, because now I know when I don't have to declare my record…So I have pretty much studied that…and after I started applying for all different jobs. It's all done online, so it's just a matter of sending a CV off. With me being pretty clued up with all this CV stuff…" Participant 1 (male).

[referring to tutors] *"Yes, like, they do help us…they don't choose anything for us, they do ask you, do you want to study, volunteer, get a job or go into training after this…"* Participant 4 (female).

The notion that goal focus is important is far from new, and emerges from a variety of perspectives. For example, Heckhausen, Chang, Greenberger and Chen (2013) concluded: "In short, enhanced educational attainment, psychological well-being, and satisfaction with job and career progress is selectively due to the motivational commitment guiding youth's

experiences and behavior during their transition into adult life." (p1397). There is an established perspective in career theory and research that sees the development of career goals in youth as a progressive focusing which requires a reconciliation between interests or aspirations, with achievements and environmental constraints, a process shaped by considerations of gender (Hirschi & Vondracek, 2009, is a recent example).

Among authors adopting CA, there is some debate about how best to interpret Sen's notions of functionings and capabilities, and how a valued life is determined (and by whom). One distinction made by Sen is useful here: that between 'opportunity freedom' and 'process freedom' (Qizilbash, 2011). Opportunity freedom requires that there are opportunities that can be realistically accessed, whereas process freedom relates to how choices are made: being able to choose autonomously without interference or pressure. It is clear that short programmes cannot impact on demand side factors in the labour market; opportunity structures continue to be powerful (Roberts, 2009). Nonetheless, the Princes Trust programme appears to have been successful in facilitating process freedom in supporting the autonomous choice of goals by the participants.

Expectation of ongoing social relationships

Several participants hoped or expected to retain friendships with peers beyond the end of the programme, in contrast to their pre-programme acceptance of social isolation. When asked what they would take away from the programme, answers included:

> *"Most likely my new-found confidence and this optimistic outlook on life as well.*
> *And I'm hoping that I keep in touch with some of the guys as well, but I don't know.*
> *Because I know some of the girls are going to come back to this college after August,*
> *so then I think I am coming back as well."* Participant 6 (male).

> *"I have a lot of good memories from this course. I've had fun and I have made a lot of good friends."* Participant 11 (female).

Some similarly had expectations of ongoing advice or support from programme tutors beyond the end of the programme which appeared to give them some comfort.

> *"Yes, and also what I found helpful was, like, the fact that I can come to [tutor] for a reference in the future, so [it's] good."* Participant 4 (female).

The cross-sectional design of the study means it is impossible to know if these expectations are valid, but it seems likely that social ties built during a programme will tend to erode with time.

Conclusion

It is important to stress that this study focused on the self-reported experiences of participants close to the end of their programme. It had no longitudinal element. As a result, the evidence available is limited to a subjective perspective at one point in time. The extent to which effects reported are enduring, and result in tangible outcomes such as sustainable employment or attainment of study goals cannot be assessed. Participants' experiences offer an incomplete view of the programme, but nonetheless a valid perspective.

All the participants reported finding the programme of positive value to a greater or lesser extent. However different elements of the programme were impactful for different people; there was no single active ingredient, rather unique reactions to experiences. It seems that the combination of confidence-building activities and a refocusing of life-career goals allows participants to deploy their capabilities, and to use their available resources.

A striking feature of the design of this programme was that it was not likely to make a substantial contribution to the human capital of its participants; it was brief and thus making

only a modest offer in terms of skills development. Nonetheless participants viewed it very positively. In the language of CA, the young people would not have acquired new 'commodities'; they left the programme with no additional money and with relatively modest development of generic or vocationally specific skills, and social networks. Nonetheless they felt empowered because they were better able to deploy the existing resources at their disposal. They reconnected with former work or study identities. Furthermore, they identified life-career goals which acted as a focus for this renewed confidence. Again, in the language of CA, this might mean they were better able to convert their available resources into desired and realistically attainable lifestyles: valued 'beings' and 'doings'.

It seems that short programmes to re-engage NEET young people may benefit from the following features:

- Diverse activities allowing participants to find something within a programme that is personally meaningful to them as a growth experience.
- Elements that challenge the participants, as they can build confidence and provide evidence of their ability to overcome anxiety and difficulty.
- Opportunities to experience enjoyable shared challenges with peer group support.
- Support to identify life-career goals, with the choice made by young people according to their own values.

Whilst this prescription is likely to be unremarkable to those involved with guidance for youth, it is worth noting that welfare-to-work provision targeted at NEET young people has rarely prioritised making friends, having fun, and having lots of memorable if occasionally scary experiences. There have been attempts to measure or place a value on personal development or attitudinal change in employability programmes by introducing notions of

'soft outcomes' or 'distance travelled' (e.g. Dewson, Eccles, Tackey & Jackson, 2000), to contrast with hard outcomes such as placement into employment or achievement of qualifications. These approaches are attractive to some employment support agencies, but to date there has been little progress in persuading policy makers to adopt them. To do so would be challenging the underlying assumptions of government funded welfare-to-work interventions aimed at young people.

The Capability Approach challenges the economic and philosophical bases of established policy by suggesting that young people's values and priorities do have a place in programme design, and in the way in which outcomes are evaluated. Young people themselves may then choose to be economically active in a focused and sustainable way.

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