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**Equalise** Briefing Note on Young People’s Experiences and Views of ‘NEET’ as a Category

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**Background**

The category ‘NEET’ (Not in Education, Employment or Training) is a familiar term in recent UK policy discussions. It first entered the UK policy lexicon in 1996, when a Home Office proposed the term as a way of describing 16–19-year-olds who were outside education, work and training (Cornish, 2023). Although originally intended for 16–18-year-olds, its scope has gradually expanded and it is now routinely used to refer to young people up to age 24, reflecting a broader shift in how youth transitions are understood and governed (Cornish, 2023; Simmons et al., 2014).

The term built on a longer-standing concern with youth transitions into work and a wealth of earlier terms used to denote a similar issue, including ‘Status Zero’ and ‘High Risk Category of Non-college Bound Youth’ (Cornish, 2023). In the UK, ‘NEET’ has become a standard way of tracking young people’s participation in education and the labour market with the Department for Education maintaining a dedicated statistical series and collection on [NEET and participation](#). The NEET category now underpins statistics, targets, funding decisions and programme design across the devolved UK (McPherson, 2021). In short, it is deeply embedded in how the issue is understood and acted upon within UK policy settings.

Yet, while NEET is a useful measurement tool, especially given the regular statistical indicator updates, it has always been controversial as a way of describing people. This is largely because, at its core, NEET is a negative category, which defines young people by what they are not doing. As Nudzor’s conceptual critique argues, ‘NEET’ frames young people in deficit terms and risks obscuring the diversity of their situations (Nudzor, 2010). This matters because how a problem is framed shapes how it is responded to (McPherson, 2021). As wider policy research demonstrates, categories are not neutral, they influence where responsibility is located and what kinds of solutions seem appropriate. In that sense, they reflect and entrench established power hierarchies operating at the discursive level and resulting in inequalities in life opportunities (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Two longstanding concerns follow from this. First, the NEET category (especially when used as a noun) tends to locate the ‘problem’ in young people themselves, so in the skills, motivations or behaviours of young people rather than in the conditions they face.

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Yet, a substantial body of UK and international research shows that young people's transitions into employment or training are shaped less by individual attributes than by wider structural conditions. A longitudinal qualitative study of 53 young people in London explicitly rejects the 'individualisation' implied in the NEET conceptualisation, highlighting the role of labour market change, funding cuts to services and socio-economic deprivation (Lőrinc et al., 2020). More broadly, research shows that transitions into work have become longer, more complex and less secure (Keep, 2012), with segmented labour markets trapping some young people in cycles of low-quality work and unemployment (McTier & McGregor, 2018); all challenges which appear to be increasing in scale (Diniz & Murphy, 2025). Structural inequalities are also evident in relation to education and socioeconomic background: analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England links post-16 risks to disadvantage and low attainment (Dorsett & Lucchino, 2014), while qualitative and quantitative studies show that even where participation in higher education has expanded, advantaged young people remain better able to access secure and professional employment (McCafferty, 2022; Pelikh & Rowe, 2024). In addition, health and caring responsibilities represent significant barriers, with UK data showing rising levels of work-limiting health conditions among NEET young people (Atwell et al., 2026) and large-scale longitudinal analysis demonstrating that young adult carers face poorer education and employment outcomes (Xue et al., 2023). Taken together, this evidence suggests that young people's employment trajectories are best understood as shaped by intersecting structural constraints, rather than individual deficits.

Second, concerns have been repeatedly raised that the NEET category risks flattening what is a highly heterogeneous group, encompassing young people with *very* different circumstances, pathways and support needs. This has been demonstrated in multiple quantitative studies, with a systematic review of 91 studies identifying a wide range of interacting risk factors spanning education, health, family and environment (Rahmani et al., 2024) and a scoping review of policy responses emphasising the need for tailored, rather than one-size-fits-all, interventions (Paabort et al., 2023). Importantly, this heterogeneity is also evident in qualitative research: an ethnographic study with young people in England (Suttill, 2017) found that participants were 'ordinary' young people facing very different challenges, while an in-depth qualitative study of young people categorised as NEET in London found 'an immensely diverse group' (Rajah, 2019). Taken together, this body of evidence suggests that treating NEET as a single, uniform group risks obscuring important differences and limiting the effectiveness of policy responses.



This tension, between a category that is statistically and administratively useful but socially blunt, sits at the heart of debates about the utility, appropriateness and consequences of the NEET label. The following sections draw on qualitative research (primarily from the UK) to summarise young people's accounts of how they feel about the NEET category and what happens when it is applied to them.

## **What do young people think about NEET as a category, and what are the consequences of this label?**

A consistent picture emerges from qualitative research, particularly from studies that spend time with young people or involve them in participatory work. While relatively few studies ask directly about the term 'NEET', young people's responses to being categorised in this way, and their efforts to resist this kind of categorisation, are clear.

### **Stigma and negative associations**

In an ethnographic study in the Midlands (England), based on in-depth engagement with 27 young people attending a NEET programme, participants demonstrated a strong awareness of the stigma attached to the label (Suttill, 2017). They associated it with being seen as 'lazy', 'non-academic' or 'not employable'. Rather than accepting this characterisation, they actively challenged it, emphasising that they were 'doing something' and presenting themselves as ordinary young people dealing with difficult circumstances. This aligns with Maguire's (2015) UK-based qualitative research and policy analysis, which argues that the category encourages misleading stereotypes about young people's attitudes and aspirations. Likewise, a qualitative study drawing on research with 42 marginalised young people in Scotland finds the NEET label carries inherently negative and deficit-based connotations, defining young people by what they are not and reinforcing associations with worklessness, dependency and failure (McPherson, 2021). It highlights how this framing can stigmatise those categorised as NEET, contributing to moralised and classed narratives about disadvantaged youth and shaping how they are perceived by policymakers, practitioners and wider society (McPherson, 2021).

### **Identity work creating distance from the NEET label**

Across studies, young people rarely adopt 'NEET' as a meaningful identity themselves. Instead, they engage in what can be understood as identity work to distance themselves from the label. For example, Reiter and Schlimbach's qualitative longitudinal study in Germany (2015), based on repeated interviews with 21 young people over time, describes how participants constructed 'rival narratives' to avoid being defined by NEET status. They reframed periods outside work or education as part of broader life



trajectories, or avoided mentioning them altogether. Although this study is not UK-based, the dynamics it describes closely mirror findings from qualitative data in the UK (McPherson, 2021; Suttill, 2017), suggesting that the stigma associated with NEET, and efforts to resist it, may be widespread across similar policy contexts.

### **Consequences for decision-making and service engagement**

The dynamics discussed in the previous two sub-sections are important because they can shape behaviour. The same German longitudinal study found that some young people accepted precarious or unsuitable work in order to avoid being classified as NEET (Reiter & Schlimbach, 2015). This finding resonates with UK-based qualitative insights suggesting that being seen as ‘inactive’ carries social risks that young people seek to avoid (McPherson, 2021; Rajah, 2019; Suttill, 2017).

This raises an important tension for policy: efforts to reduce NEET rates may inadvertently encourage rapid transitions into low-quality or unstable employment, rather than supporting sustainable pathways.

A 2025 Resolution Foundation report by Diniz and Murphy highlights that ‘nearly half [of NEET young people] are not claiming benefits - meaning they are unlikely to be reached by Jobcentre-based programmes’ (Diniz & Murphy, 2025). While the report does not establish why this is the case, the finding points to a substantial group of young people who are effectively outside the reach of mainstream support services. One possible explanation, suggested by some UK qualitative and doctoral research (Maguire, 2015; McPherson, 2021; Rajah, 2019; Suttill, 2017), is that young people may be reluctant to engage with services explicitly associated with the NEET label, either because they do not identify with the category or wish to avoid its stigma. Although this cannot be assumed as the primary driver, it raises an important consideration: the way services are framed and labelled may influence whether young people feel able or willing to engage with them.

### **Impacts on wellbeing and sense of self**

Participatory research provides additional insight into how these dynamics affect wellbeing. A co-designed qualitative study with young women in deprived coastal communities in South-East England (Berry et al., 2024), involving interviews and co-design workshops, found that feelings of ‘failing to keep up’ with expected life trajectories were harmful to mental health and discouraged engagement with services. Similarly, photo-elicitation research with young people in inner London, where participants used images to document their employment experiences, found that the

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NEET classification did not reflect the complexity of their lives, which often involved moving in and out of low-quality work (Levitas et al., 2023).

Together, these studies suggest that the label can contribute to:

- reduced self-worth
- anxiety about judgement
- a sense of being out of step with expected norms

### **Challenging the category through participatory research**

Participatory and co-produced research offers a particularly clear challenge to the NEET framing. In a UK action research project in North-East England (Campbell & Trotter, 2007), six young people were trained as co-researchers and played a central role in shaping the study. They rejected the researchers' initial framing and instead organised their findings around, 'People, Places and Money' (Campbell & Trotter, 2007). In other words, they proactively reframed the 'problem' away from a focus on individual deficits, towards relationships, contextual factors and resources.

There is relatively little evidence that young people have been directly asked what alternative terms they would prefer. However, across qualitative and participatory research (see, for example, a review by Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012), a clear direction emerges with young people responding more positively to approaches that:

- avoid deficit-based language
- describe situations rather than identities
- recognise non-linear transitions
- foreground capabilities, relationships and context

### **Concluding discussion – ways forward for Equalise**

This briefing makes clear that the term NEET is doing more than measuring. It shapes how young people are understood, how they are treated, and, importantly, how they see themselves. It also implies a policy logic that centres young people as the problem, masking diversity of experiences and circumstances, and reinforcing narratives that place responsibility on individuals rather than on the conditions they face.

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Young people are not passive recipients of this label. Across ethnographic, longitudinal and participatory studies, we find young people consistently resist the 'NEET' label. This includes work to distance themselves from it, to reinterpret it, and challenge the assumptions it carries. Yet, the term can nonetheless influence decision-making, placing young people under pressure to enter unsuitable work which may harm longer-term trajectories, it can affect their sense of themselves and their wellbeing (e.g. in response to feeling stigmatised), and may be shaping their engagement with services.

However, the NEET category is likely to remain relevant with Equalise research with a focus on work and young people. It is embedded in datasets, policy frameworks and institutional practice to be replaced and, as a shorthand for identifying patterns of non-participation which policy audiences understand, it remains useful.

This poses a challenge for Equalise. It suggests that, while it remains an important category for our partners working in policy, we should be careful about how we engage with and use it, especially in our public facing outputs. Where we do use the term, we should remember that, as an institutionally constructed category, it plays a role in shaping young people's positioning within social power structures, and therefore has implications for these young people (Anthias, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2015).

At a minimum:

- We should **avoid treating NEET as an identity**. This means we should use formulations such as 'young people in the NEET category' rather than 'NEET young people' or 'NEETs' (as a noun).
- We should **acknowledge the limitations of NEET as a concept**, particularly the tendency to mask heterogeneity and the way in which this problematisation draws attention away from structural circumstances and wider policy levers (e.g. around job creation). Accordingly, we should interrogate if and how the concept masks, maintains or creates inequalities between young people.
- When discussing research, we should **distinguish between the material and socio-economic implications of NEET as a policy category and the individual experiences of young people** as 'members' of the NEET group.
- We should **always use alternative language** when in contexts where engagement and trust with people, especially young people, matter, unless young people have specifically said they want us to use the term NEET.

- And we should **take care when using the NEET category in policy environments**, ensuring we note the limitations and surface assumptions.

More fundamentally, we need to ask whether the category is doing more harm than good in some contexts, and what better alternatives might look like. At present, there is a gap in the evidence when it comes to alternatives. While participatory research shows that young people consistently reject deficit framings, they have rarely been asked directly how they would prefer their situations to be described. For this reason, we recommend taking this issue to the Equalise **Public Scrutiny Panel with young people in Bradford**. This would provide an opportunity:

- To explore what young people involved in Equalise think about NEET as a term and what they think the consequences are for young people's engagement with services and opportunities
- To discuss how Equalise should approach the term
- And, potentially, to co-produce alternative ways of describing these experiences.

This could help move this debate forward, going beyond critique of NEET as a problematic category to the collective development of less stigmatising alternatives. It would help demonstrate that we are willing to reflect on how the categories we use shape the realities we are trying to change, and be an early opportunity to engage young people in one of Equalise's PSPs in making an important contribution to our work.

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