Self-identities of young people on a course for those who are not in education, employment or training

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by

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Abstract

From January to March 2014, when this research was taking place, 774,000 young people aged 16-24 were not in education, employment or training (NEET) in England (Office for National Statistics, 2014). Even before the 2008 recession the NEET rate was rising, and despite criticism of the term it continues to be used as a service intervention label. Attempts have been made to try and understand young people who are placed into this category, and their experiences, however few studies have asked these young people how they define themselves and their situation. This research therefore explores the self-identities of a group of twenty seven young people on a course for those who are NEET in an area of the Midlands. The views of these young people were captured through the use of ethnographic research.

While these young people attempted to reflexively create their identities (Giddens, 1991), not all choices about future lifestyles were available to them. Their agency was bounded (Evans, 2007) and they were constrained by their economic and social circumstances, as well as by dominant discourses. Discourses around youth, adulthood, unemployment and individualisation were evident in their narratives. While on the course, the participants built their identities around being students and attempted to show that they were ‘doing something with their lives’. Their future identities were focused around traditional ideas of adulthood. Yet they faced a number of barriers to achieving their aspirations. This research demonstrates that demands for young people to ‘take control’ of their lives ignores the wider structural issues and discourses which shape their experiences. Focusing on individual deficiencies limits the impact of policy and initiatives aimed at NEET young people.
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Glossary

ACEVO: ACEVO stands for the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations and is the UK’s largest and most influential network for Charity and Social Enterprise Leaders.

AimHigher: Scheme aimed at encouraging teenagers or primary school pupils from less-advantaged backgrounds to go to university.

ASDAN: ASDAN is a curriculum development organisation and awarding body which offers programmes and qualifications which ‘grow skills for learning, skills for employment and skills for life’. They provide a range of courses covering ‘preparation for life and work, enrichment subjects, PSHE and Citizenship’ for Entry to University levels.

‘Benefits’: The young people in this research used the term benefits to describe the social security system run by the Department for Work and Pensions under which payments are designed to meet different kinds of need ranging from the state pension payable to those who have reached retirement age to the job seeker’s allowance for those who are out of work and looking for a job. When they speak about benefits they are usually referring to either Job Seekers Allowance, Disability Living Allowance or Local Housing Allowance.

British Cohort Study: Comprises data from over 17,000 individuals born in Britain in April 1970. The sample was followed up at ages 5, 10, 16, 26, 30 and 34.

Connexions: An information, advice, guidance and support service for young people aged 13-19 (up to 25 for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities) created in 2000 following the Learning and Skills Act. It was set up to provide both a universal careers service to all young people and a service to support vulnerable young people to prevent them from becoming NEET. It also offered advice and support on topics including education, housing, health, relationships, drugs, and finance. Since 2010, Connexions has been dismantled by many local authorities after the service was devolved in 2008 from national funding to local authorities.

Economically inactive: Based on definitions recommended by the International Labour Organisation, economically inactive people are those who have not been looking for work and/or who are not available to start work.
Educational Maintenance Allowance: Payments of up to £30 given to 16-19 year olds in low income households if they stayed on at school or college.

Equalist: The belief that all human beings are equal.

Future Jobs Fund: Created by the Labour government in October 2009 as part of the Young Person’s Guarantee where 18-24 year olds reaching the six month point of their Jobseeker’s Allowance claim were guaranteed an offer of a job, training or work experience.

Hoodies: Term given to young people who wear hooded tops, making them appear faceless and intimidating. Hoodies have been linked in the public eye with crime, and hooded tops were banned by a number of UK shopping centres in early 2005.

Intraining: Intraining is a national training provider who specialises in providing individuals with employability skills and qualifications that make a real difference to employers and has links with Job Centre Plus.

Job density: The ratio of total jobs to population aged 16-64.

‘Life skills’: Term generally associated with the skills which young people are viewed as needing in the workplace (similar to the notion of ‘employability’), yet sometimes associated with broader notions of developing abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour to enable people to effectively deal with the demands and challenges of everyday life.

Non-dualist: A term and concept used to define various strands of religious and spiritual thought.

Pansexual: Where you like someone not based on their gender but on their personality (description given by a student who defined themselves as pansexual).

Public Health England’s annual Child Health Profile for Local Authorities: a report designed to help local authorities and health services to improve the health and wellbeing of children.
Third Sector: The part of an economy or society comprising non-governmental and non-profit-making organisations or associations, including charities, voluntary and community groups, and cooperatives.

Unemployed: Based on definitions recommended by the International Labour Organisation, unemployed people are those who have been looking for work in the past four weeks and who are available to start work in the next two weeks.

‘Work Programme’: The welfare-to-work initiative was launched throughout the UK in 2011 and focused on re-engaging the long term unemployed with the world of work through an outsourced and payment by results delivery model.
Chapter One: Introduction

Youth unemployment can be seen to have returned as a “central feature of the social, political and policy landscape of the UK” (MacDonald, 2011, p.430). In November 2011 the number of young people out of work in the UK passed the one million mark, the highest since comparable records of unemployment statistics began in 1992¹, with one in five young people out of work. The wider unemployment rate rose to a 15 year high (Allen, 2011). The youth unemployment rate was more than double the rate of the wider population and almost half a million young people aged 16-24 were claiming unemployment benefit (McDowell, 2012, p.580). This led to fears and warnings in media reports over the creation of a ‘lost generation’, as young people dropped out of the labour market and were potentially discouraged from returning, echoing claims made in the 1980s (Wearden, 2010). The International Labour Organisation raised questions about a ‘generation at risk’, while in England a House of Lords select committee warned of a ‘scarred generation’ (Hutchinson et al., 2016).

This growth in youth unemployment is related to the impact of the 2007 global financial crisis, triggered by the collapse of the US subprime mortgage market and the associated banking crisis, which was followed by ‘the great recession’ (France, 2016, p.37-38). It can be argued that young people were hit hardest by this economic downturn, with increases in unemployment and underemployment having a disproportionately large effect on this group (Bell and Blanchflower, 2010 cited in (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b, p.175)). Youth make up 25% of the global working age population but account for 43.7% of those who are unemployed which means that every other jobless person in the world is between the ages of 16 and 24 (UNDESA, 2007 cited in (Fergusson, 2013, p.13)). Young people are three times more likely to be unemployed than adults (ILO, 2013 cited in (France, 2016, p.113)) and are particularly disadvantaged during periods of economic recession as their employment is more responsive to the business

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¹ Unemployment statistics have been produced quarterly since 1992. From 1984-1992 the Labour Force Survey was only carried out once a year, focusing on the March to May period of each year and therefore these statistics are not directly comparable.
cycle and they tend to be more concentrated in certain cyclically sensitive industries, such as retail and manufacturing. They also hold more part time jobs and temporary contracts than other age groups (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2012). In addition to this, the majority of employers in the UK do not recruit any young people direct from education, and sectors which do recruit school or college leavers tend to offer low-skilled employment (Simmons, Thompson et al., 2014). They are therefore more vulnerable than other workers in the labour market as they tend to be in low paid and low skilled employment. They also tend to have less skills and experience (Russell, 2016).

Both the recession and longer term structural changes to the global economy have had a disproportionate effect on young people (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016). Much youth unemployment is increasingly structural and in more and more cases, youth’s relationship to the labour market is increasingly distant (Ainley, 2013). Jobs traditionally occupied by young people have been lost and they are particularly vulnerable to changes in levels of employment because of their place in the labour queue. As a consequence of a decline in the youth labour market, young people are in an open labour market competing for jobs and training with all age groups.

Due to the impact of the 2008/2009 recession, young people in the UK are facing the harshest socio-economic conditions in which to make transitions to adulthood since the 1980s. The initial response to the economic crisis by the Labour government was to make huge bailout payments to the banks. This was followed by a Conservative led coalition government which aimed to bring the UK economy into surplus by 2015, meaning that austerity became ‘central to the language and policy of government’ (France, 2016, p.59). The overall aim was to reduce the role of the state, alongside reducing taxes and the welfare bill, by making cuts. Policies designed to assist youth transitions suffered from these Coalition government cuts, including the Future Jobs Fund, Aim Higher and the Educational Maintenance Allowance (MacDonald, 2011). Furthermore, young people have seen the trebling of university tuition fees and the recent loss of maintenance grants, the loss of housing benefit for those under 21, and those
under 25 have not been included in the new ‘living wage’. In addition to this, the participation age has been raised. Changes made to social security and the stigmatisation of the unemployed have also had an impact upon unemployed young people.

The recession and wider changes to society and the economy have altered the employment and educational opportunities available to young people (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). Reacting to the August 2011 riots, which began in several London boroughs and spread to areas such as Birmingham and Manchester after a protest following the police shooting of Mark Duggan, Jones (2012, p.xxii) claimed that "there are growing numbers of young people with no secure future to risk". He related this to youth unemployment, the lack of affordable housing, the biggest cuts since the 1920s, and falling living standards which have all left young people with little to hope for; "for the first time since World War II, the next generation will be worse off than the generation before it". An opinion poll by Ipsos-Mori in autumn 2011 found that 64% of people questioned believed that it was unlikely that the youth of today would have a better life than their parents (McDowell, 2012, p.586). As a rationale for raising the participation age, Alan Johnson (DCSF, 2007, p.3 quoted in (Maguire, 2010)) stated that “we have a duty to prepare all young people for a labour market which will be radically different to the one their parents faced”. Even before the crisis, youth unemployment had been gradually increasing in advanced economies; the crisis has just increased the depth of the problem (France, 2016).

As participation in post compulsory education has increased, leading to an overall rise in qualification levels, a gap has grown between those with few or no qualifications and a 'credentialised norm'. Education to all levels has been explicit in ‘upgrading’ occupations in the services, sales, middle management and administration of a post-industrial economy where manual labour, which has not been automated or deskilled, has been exported. Rather than helping young people ‘move up’, securing educational qualifications is now necessary to avoid falling to the bottom (Ainley, 2013). As the supply of qualified labour grows, employers can be increasingly selective, meaning those without the desired credentials are more likely to be cut adrift from the mainstream labour market.
leaving them vulnerable to low pay and insecurity (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). Young people with a lack of skills, education, and jobs are the ones who will bear the main brunt of uncertainty over the next few years and therefore it is an important moment to capture their lives (McDowell, 2012). Youth unemployment, and more specifically young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) were an issue before the recession; they are even more so now. It is within this context that this research looks at the self-identities of young people on a course for those who are NEET, exploring how these political, social and economic changes have impacted upon their lives.

The significance of those who are NEET

The category of NEET and the youth unemployment rate are related concepts but are separate, calculated using different criteria and different data sets. The rate of unemployment is defined by the Office of National Statistics (2016) as a measure of those who are out of work, but have been actively seeking work in the past four weeks and are able to start work in the next two weeks. The unemployment rate therefore records the share of the economically active population who are unable to find a job. Young people in education or who are not looking for work are therefore not included. The NEET rate captures the share of the total population of young people who are not in employment, education or training (Office for National Statistics, 2016). This rate is seen as more inclusive as it identifies people who are unemployed, as well as those who are ‘inactive’; therefore capturing a wide range of categories beyond simply being ‘unemployed’. By labelling large numbers of young people as ‘inactive’ they are effectively removed from the unemployment statistics and active labour market interventions available to those defined as seeking work. For example, those on Employment Support Allowance and Income Support receive less intervention and active labour market support than those on Job Seekers Allowance and are not included in the unemployment count (Maguire, 2015a). Making assumptions about those who are labelled ‘inactive’ has the potential to condemn people to long term disengagement. Official employment statistics therefore provide only a
partial coverage of young people’s activities, recording young people who declare themselves available for, and actively seeking work, and those who are eligible for welfare benefits. As will be discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, the NEET rate embraces a much wider cohort.

The term NEET can provide evidence of the diverse ways that young people are vulnerable, and keeps disadvantaged young people on the political agenda (Furlong, 2006). Yet while David (2014) argues that the category of NEET is complex, it is often reduced to the issue of unemployment among young people and the attention of policy makers is focused on this. Maguire (2015a, p.534) suggests that interventions tend to be targeted at certain groups in the NEET population, leaving swathes of young people, most notably the inactive group, on the side-lines; “If we are going to embrace the term NEET to define youth unemployment, exclusion and disengagement, policy-makers must ensure that adequate interventions are made to both quantify and address the needs of all who are labelled as belonging to this group”. Instead the terms NEET and unemployed are used interchangeably to quantify levels of disengagement and inactivity (Maguire, 2015a). As an indicator NEET has started to replace the traditional measure of unemployment (Furlong, 2006; European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2012).

During the time this research was taking place from January to March 2014 13.1% of those aged 16 to 24 were classed as NEET in England, this equates to around 774,000 young people, rising to 975,000 in the UK as a whole, accounting for 13.5% of the youth population (Department for Education, 2014; Office for National Statistics, 2014). Around 173,000 of these NEET young people were in the Midlands (Department for Education, 2014). Within the city being studied, the estimated number of young people aged 16 to 18 who were NEET was 780 (around 6.3%). The NEET rate for some wards was more than 10%, and for those young people without a fixed address it was 56% (Economic Development Transport and Tourism Scrutiny Commission, 2015, p.26). There was also a high rate among looked after children, young people with learning difficulties, and those known to the Youth Offending Service. Long term NEET in the area compromised mainly learners with learning difficulties or disabilities, young
offenders, children in care, and teenage parents. There was also a high proportion of white males from disadvantaged backgrounds with no or low attainment levels (Enterprise Partnership, 2015). One ward was placed in the top 10% of constituencies in the country for youth unemployment in 2011, leading to concerns over the creation a 'lost generation' of young people in the city.

2014 Local Authority NEET figures (Department for Education, 2015a)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aged 16</th>
<th>Aged 17</th>
<th>Aged 18</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number NEET estimate</td>
<td>% NEET</td>
<td>% not known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>140</td>
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Data collected by the local Connexions in 2011 demonstrated that the NEET rate increased with age as young people left education (City Council, 2012). Yet, figures for those aged 18-24 are not available as local authorities only have a duty to track young people up to the age of 19. Due to this, there is concern among the local council that there is a lack of information about the employment and training of those aged 18-24 (Economic Development Transport and Tourism Scrutiny Commission, 2015). The number of Job Seekers Allowance claimants gives an idea of the related scale of youth unemployment in the area. There were 2,455 claimants aged 16-24 in January 2014 and 1,330 in December of the same year (Nomis, 2016).

Understanding the young people who are placed into this category is important as being NEET is seen to have adverse consequences for the individual, society and the economy. The economic cost of not integrating NEET young people into society in the UK in 2011 was estimated at 1.0-1.5 percent loss as a share of Gross Domestic Product (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2012, p.79). In 2012 the cost of youth unemployment

2 The calculation of Jobseekers Allowance is different from that for unemployment
was £4.8 billion plus £10.7 billion in lost output (Maguire, 2013). Research by the Princes Trust (2010, p.7) suggests that the cost of youth unemployment and inactivity is £22 million per week in Jobseekers Allowance, and between £22 and £133 million per week in lost productivity. While Coles et al (2010) estimated the cost to the public finance over the lifetimes of young people aged 16 to 18 who had been NEET for significant periods (using the figures of those who were NEET at the end of 2008) as between £12 billion and £32 billion, largely due to benefit payments and lost tax receipts. They estimated the overall costs to the UK economy as between £21 billion and £76 billion, reflecting lost productivity and additional welfare payments to formerly NEET young people and their families. Long term effects of NEET are therefore damaging to society as a whole, costing the public purse through welfare benefits, lost tax revenue, increased demand for health and social services, and resources lost by reduced contribution to economic activity (Russell, 2016).

Being NEET does not just have an effect on the wider economy and society, but also impacts upon the individuals who have experienced unemployment; it shapes both the present lives of individuals and their future trajectories (Shildrick et al, 2012 cited in (France, 2016, p.109)). It has social consequences for a whole generation of young adults and can mean the start of long term unemployment, poverty and poor health, early single parenthood, and a cycle of inherited disadvantage (Brooks, 2014). Being NEET can have scarring effects on future labour force participation and earnings. It is also a major predictor for unemployment later on in life (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b) and leads to a higher chance of job insecurity and lack of progression (Simmons et al., 2014). Lack of employment affects an individual’s living standards and ability to access and exploit resources, which impacts on their ability to access and maintain decent paid work. This can lead to a repetitive life cycle effect, labelled by Shildrick et al as the ‘low pay – no pay cycle’ (Russell, 2016, p.162).

According to a report by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2012, p.2), spending time NEET “may lead to a wide range of social disadvantages, such as disaffection, insecure and poor future employment, youth offending, and mental and physical health problems”. The
impact of being NEET is highlighted by the inclusion of NEET figures in Public Health England’s annual Child Health Profile for Local Authorities. In this report NEET figures are classified in the ‘wider determinant of ill health’ category. In 2014 Public Health England produced a report on reducing the number of young people who are NEET, stating that spending time unemployed has been proven to have a detrimental effect on physical and mental health (Bedford Borough Council, 2016). In a different study of 1000 NEET young people, it was found that 39% were suffering from stress and anxiety, 37% barely left the house, and 33% suffered from depression (University College Union, 2013). Similarly, Oliver et al (2014) argue that the adverse outcomes of being NEET include reduced social and community participation, adverse well-being and health, and negative attitudes towards the self.

NEET young people are at greater risk of psychiatric disorders, substance use and suicidal behaviour. NEETs are also at higher risk of being politically and socially alienated; getting 'lost' in the transition from education to work is seen as one of the key risks of social exclusion for young people (Yates and Payne, 2006) leading to a fear that they will not become productive, contributing members of society (Conrad, 2005). In addition to this there is strong evidence of an association between unemployment among young people and social unrest; NEET young people can therefore be seen as a prospective threat to social order (Fergusson, 2013). The term NEET is not problematic in its own right, yet is seen as indicative of young people who may go on to become socially excluded as adults (Sadler et al., 2015). It is correlated with a lifetime of unemployment, with the assumption being made that once someone drops out of the labour market, they are lost forever.

The ability of young people to make a successful transition from school to further education, employment or training has been identified as a crucial safeguard against social exclusion, and for ensuring better pay and employment prospects in later life (SEU, 2004 cited in (Pemberton, 2008, p.243)). Being NEET is viewed as being damaging to health, social engagement, education and employment outcomes for individuals and has far wider damaging consequences for society as a whole. The additional costs associated with remaining NEET far outweigh
those of successful intervention (Russell, 2016). Concern over the outcomes of those who become NEET, and their social and public finance implications, has led to the category being used as a label for service intervention purposes, with the reduction in the numbers of NEET young people becoming a key performance target for youth services (Yates et al., 2011). From the introduction of the term in 1997 under a New Labour government, it has continued to dominate UK youth policy, being the subject of intensive debate amongst policymakers, the media and other social commentators (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). However, despite a host of government initiatives to tackle the NEET 'problem', the NEET rate in the UK has remained fairly constant for over a decade and even before the 2008 recession the overall UK NEET rate was rising (Simmons et al., 2014). After the recession, there had been an increase in the number of NEET young people in nearly all OECD countries, with the biggest and fastest increase seen among 20-24 year olds (OECD, 2014a cited in (France, 2016, p.136)).

Arguably, the broad truths discussed above such as NEET leads to lifetime of unemployment and is correlated with crime and anti-social behaviour have been transformed into absolute rules leading to the demonization of young people. The blame for the wider social problems outlined at the beginning of this chapter are viewed as being located within individuals. Yet NEET young people are not a distinct species set apart from other young people, and for most it is a temporary status rather than a permanent condition. There is a need to go beyond the stereotypes and assumptions associated with the category to look at the individuals who are associated with it. This will help to generate a better understanding of those who are labelled as NEET and the support they need.

**Looking at the identities of NEET young people**

Research has critiqued the term NEET and its use a service intervention label, arguing that it has negative connotations, is a static category which does not capture the dynamism of youth transitions and treats those placed into it as a homogenous group (Furlong, 2006; Yates and Payne, 2006; Nudzor, 2010).
Portrayals of young people not in education, employment or training in the media show images of hooded youths on housing estates, and highlight worries that young people are ‘unfit’ for work; they lack grit, aspiration and the ‘right skills’ (Adonis, 2013; Cohen, 2013). The Coalition government saw NEET young people as disengaged, ‘lost’ teenagers with complex problems who need support to get their lives ‘back on track’ (Department for Education, 2012a). While research into NEET young people has tried to categorise certain groups who are in this situation; looking at the size, composition and characteristics of the group and attempting to outline possible ‘triggers’ of NEET status (Nudzor, 2010; Yates and Payne, 2006). David (2014) argues that much of the literature which has aimed to address the NEET issue has been written by local authorities, educational institutions and central government bodies and has viewed NEET as a problem; with NEET young people themselves either being viewed as victims or as individuals who are incapable of changing their circumstances.

Uncertainty remains over who NEETs are and how they should be defined (France, 2016). The lack of definition relating to the term means that it is used differently by different researchers who have developed broad and narrow definitions of NEET (Furlong, 2006). The move to define a much wider and older group within the NEET category co-exists with a paucity of research evidence about the extended group in terms of its characteristics and diversity (Maguire, 2015a). The policy concept arguably therefore does not fit with the lives and experiences of those it attempts to label.

Understanding the young people who are placed into the NEET category is important, as how the interaction between young people and the world around them is viewed dictates the nature of intervention which is favoured in any type of youth orientated programme or institution, and the social goals which should be met through such intervention (Wyn and White, 1998). Definitions of youth tend to reflect the biases of those defining them; with youth existing and being constructed in a number of social spaces and settings. How youth is defined and understood has an impact upon how policy is constructed; it is built on perceptions about what young people can and should be doing at a particular age. These ideas attached to age provide a framework for young people’s life
transitions and pathways to adulthood. Constructions of youth are shaped by common sense and dominant views of what it means to be young which exist in public perceptions, media representations and political discourses (France, 2016).

Despite critiquing the category, few studies have actually asked those who are ‘NEET’ how they define themselves and their situation. Goldman-Mellor et al (2016) highlight how NEET tends to be viewed in a negative light, however little is known about how these young people see themselves. Research has been done on the individual experiences of NEET young people (Simmons et al., 2014; Arnold and Baker, 2013) and Phillips (2010) explored the issue of identity; however she focused on the notion of capital and the positive attributes of NEET young people, and did not look at the issue of definition or the impact of NEET discourses on their identities. The label has an impact on policy and provision, but it is not fully clear what impact it has on those who are labelled. It is important to look at what young people think about the policy concept of NEET, as the ideas and discourses generated through policy and the media have an impact upon how these young people view themselves.

This research will focus upon how a group of young people on a course for those who are NEET see their own lives. It will also explore what the term NEET means to them, and the impact that assumptions and generalisations linked to the category have on their identities. It is possible that popular discourses around young people who are NEET may be active processes in their exclusion that, given the nature of the transitional stage they are in, may have longer term implications for their identity and well-being (H. Rose et al., 2012). Young people are caught in a struggle between their ascribed identities, and those achieved in the journey to adulthood. They are engaged in “struggles to be, and to be seen as, who they are…struggles for chosen, against unchosen, social identities” (Bottrell, 2007, p.608 quoted in (Higgins, 2013, p.179)). It is important to focus on who they are, rather than rendering them as invisible within a homogenous population of ‘uneducable and unemployable’ (Simmons and Thompson, 2013, p.7). Research can play a role in challenging some of the more entrenched and inaccurate assumptions about young people that infiltrate political discourse,
public opinion and common sense assumptions (France, 2007, p.165 cited in (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b, p.167)). The research in this thesis explores some of the misconceptions and underlying assumptions about NEET young people, offering different conceptions of them by looking at how they describe themselves.

The issues around the category of NEET will be discussed in Chapter Two which covers the development of the category, the assumptions and generalisations associated with NEET young people which inform policy and interventions, and research which looks at their individual experiences. While successive British governments have changed the programmes and support available, their approaches have generally remained the same and have focused on access and participation in education and training, as well as monitoring and controlling young people, without questioning the quality of provision available. The aim of policy and programmes designed for young people is to improve them as individuals, rather than focusing on the structural and economic factors which impact upon their lives. This focus on individual barriers has led to negative assumptions and generalisations being made about those who are NEET, not taking into account the heterogeneity of the category. In addition to this, NEET for most is a temporary status, and is an issue which a lot of young people experience; these are not a distinct species of young people who are different to others in their age group. This chapter highlights how it is important to look at the young people who are associated with the category as individuals, to go beyond the assumptions and generalisations, and acknowledge the different experiences of those who are associated with the policy concept by hearing from the young people themselves. This can help to generate a better understanding of this group of young people through which the relevance of NEET as a policy category can be explored, and suggestions can be made in relation to policy and interventions which can help young people.

Looking at the identities and experiences of these young people is important. Being NEET in early life can have a lasting effect on the life chances, identities, confidence and motivation of young people. It also has an immediate impact on young people, being associated with low self-esteem and confidence. Identities
play a significant role in grounding people’s social experiences and their relationship to the social and economic world. They provide a framework of meaning and action to help people orient the world; guiding actions, experiences and outcomes (Tomlinson, 2013). How people see themselves can therefore have an impact upon their wider lives in both the present and the future. An individuals' sense of self is often strongly informed by the perceptions of others; identities are produced through categories we form about ourselves and others. The NEET category and ideas associated with it therefore may have an impact on how these young people see themselves.

Issues around identity formation are arguably particularly prominent for young people. The youth phase is seen as a make or break development stage between the dependency of childhood and the autonomy of adulthood (Heath et al., 2009). Transitions are therefore viewed as important in the process of ‘becoming’; they remain a critical feature of young people’s everyday experience and are a major contributor to social reproduction (France and Roberts, 2015). During this period of life it is argued that emphasis is placed on identity formation (Kehily, 2006), as young people have time to experiment with their identities as they grow into adulthood, separate from their families of origin, and develop a sense of self through interactions with others. It is viewed as the time when we attempt to form our identity, struggle with social interactions and negotiate moral issues (Erikson, 1968). ‘Adolescence’ is seen as a period of experimentation when identities are tried for size and boundaries are tested (Henderson et al., 2007). Important relationships are also formed and maintained at this stage (Kagan and Gall, 1998 cited in (Rose et al., 2012, p.258)). In addition to this, the end of compulsory schooling also forces young people to confront important decisions. Giddens (1991, p.106) describes early adulthood as a ‘crisis phase’ in identity formation.

However, this model of ‘normal’ development in adolescence can be viewed as defining young people out of time and context as ‘norms’ are a product of a particular time and place (Griffin, 1993 cited in (Henderson et al., 2007, p.19)). Adolescence can be viewed as a socially constructed concept, open to influence by social ideas, influences and institutions (Rose et al., 2012). Wyn and White (1998) question the appropriateness of the notion of ‘youth development’ as a
universal human experience, arguing that it is based on white, middle class, male experience of the social world which provides a basis for judgemental and marginalising processes directed against particular groups of young people. In this sense NEET young people can be viewed as different as they are not following a ‘normal’ pathway of development. Therefore, rather than focusing on this broader idea of development, it is important to focus on the individual experiences of the young people in this study. Henderson et al (2007) argue that the development perspective prevents us from looking at the lived experience of being young. Instead they suggest that the concept of the reflexive self can capture the immediacy of accounts, highlighting the version of the self the individuals themselves are forging.

These debates around transition and development have been further influenced by literature on late modernity which suggests that transitions from youth to adulthood have changed and become more individualised (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). The concept of individualisation shapes the lives of young people and has had an influence on policy discourse, with being NEET viewed in an individualised way and related to the deficits of those who are unable to get into education, employment or training. Despite NEET literature exploring the role and impact of individualisation (MacDonald, 2011; Yates et al., 2011; Simmons et al., 2014), concepts such as the reflexive self have not often been applied to this group of young people.

The ‘reflexive self’ the young people in this study are portraying through their narratives is explored by engaging with the work of Giddens (1991). However, the discourses which are shaping these narratives are also acknowledged. In this research, young people are viewed as having agency but this agency is bounded (Evans, 2007), with local structures of opportunity, the wider labour market, educational inequality, and other social, political and economic factors impacting upon them. In addition to this, it will be acknowledged that while young people are free to define themselves (Giddens, 1991), they are also defined by others. The meanings that NEET young people construct cannot be viewed in isolation from broader discourses and practices constructed by policymakers, researchers and the media (Simmons et al., 2014). Discussions over changing transitions and
individualisation, the idea of the ‘reflexive self’, issues of structure and agency, and the role of discourse will be outlined in Chapter Three.

To capture the narratives of the participants the research adopts a qualitative approach, carrying out an ethnography at a ‘lifeskills’ centre for NEET young people run by a charity in the Midlands. It looks at the experiences of a group of 27 young people, and attempts to capture the ‘meanings’ they create through ‘immersion’ in their world. The ethnography includes participant observation, the collection of work done by participants during their lessons, and an element of written work done specifically for the study. The methods used to conduct the research will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four which outlines the research approach and design, the setting and participants, the methods of data collection, ethical considerations, and the validity and limitations of the research.

Chapter Five and Chapter Six look at the findings of the research, one outlining the current identities of the young people and the other focusing on their future identities. These chapters will use the data collected to answer the following questions;

- How do young people on a course for those not in education, employment or training define themselves?
  - How do these young people describe themselves and how do they relate to the term NEET?
  - How do they view their current situation?
- What are their aspirations for the future?

**Research context**

Place is important in mediating young people’s experiences; it shapes the kind of youths and adulthoods that young people are able to create. Locality provides more than a backdrop for young people’s lives, offering a collective context that shapes values and meanings. Individual young people are not determined by their localities, yet their options and identities are constrained or enabled by them
Young people react to their local labour market in making decisions about their futures and NEET young people are the responsibility of local authorities, taking part in local programmes. The areas young people live in are therefore important. Local education provision can be complex and unevenly spread, and the nature and availability of education and training depends to some degree on national and local funding priorities (Simmons et al., 2014). Progression routes through education, training and work are forged locally.

In the region where this research takes place the Connexions service still provided support for NEET young people in the city but the service had been ‘wound up’ at a county level in August 2012 as authorities decided to restructure the way that they help 14-19 year olds. With a 75% reduction in the contribution of the City Council to the service, Connexions has been scaled back, with other providers playing a more important role. There has been an increased use of the private sector to deliver local services with contracts offered on a ‘pay for performance’ basis (France, 2016, p.155). Alongside Connexions, provision for NEET young people in the city is available through Princes Trust, voluntary and community sector organisations, and Further Education Colleges and training providers.

Being NEET or being in danger of becoming NEET is often linked to the depressed condition of local labour markets and living in deprived neighbourhoods. There is considerable geographical variation in NEET rates, which tend to be higher in areas of deprivation and high unemployment (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). The NEET issue is therefore in some degree tied to the social, cultural and economic peculiarities of locality (David, 2014). The work of McDowell (2012) has highlighted the importance of place in young people's lives, looking at the connection between place and class. McDowell suggests that the likelihood of a young person not finding employment is significantly related to their possession of skills, their gender and their regional location. She argues that "place at the local scale matters more for young workers than for workers as a whole" (McDowell, 2012, p.580). Local labour market factors also have an impact on aspirations and expectations (Yates et al., 2011).
Green and White (2008 quoted in (Thompson, 2011, p.795)) "found that individual choices about whether and where to work were based on subjective value aspirations, which in turn were limited by the objective opportunities available at a local level, particularly for those facing the greatest labour market constraints". For example, a lack of job opportunities can lead to restricted aspirations, while travel to different areas can be constrained by the cost. The area where this study took place is therefore significant in terms of the opportunities available to young people. It is important to understand the context within which the participants were living their lives and attempting to get into employment, education or training.

The city where this research was conducted has a population of 337,700, and of these 225,700 people are of working age (between 16 and 64 years old). 69.9% of the population are ‘economically active’, while 33.5% are ‘economically inactive’; of this latter category 33.5% want a job and 66.5% do not. The unemployment rate in the area is 8.7%, which accounts for around 13,900 people. This is greater than the unemployment rate in Great Britain as a whole (6.2%). In January 2014 9,905 people (4.4%) were claiming out of work benefits in the city, but by the end of the year this had fallen to 6,235 (2.8%). 63.7% of the population are in employment, with 67.1% of people working full-time and 32.9% working part-time. The gross weekly pay of full-time workers is £474, lower than the national average of £520.40. In 2013 the job density of the area was 0.79. The majority of the population work in services, which accounts for 83.1% of employees. The three industries in the service sector which account for most of these jobs are Public Admin, Education and Health (38.1%), Financial and Other Business Services (16.6%), and Wholesale and Retail (14.6%). Of those who do not work in services, 11.4% work in Manufacturing, and 3.0% work in Construction (Nomis, 2016).3

3 Unless otherwise stated, all data taken from 2014 when this research was being conducted
Employment by occupation: January 2014-December 2014 (Nomis, 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOC2010 Major Groups</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Great Britain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managers, Directors and Senior Officials</td>
<td>12,100</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Occupations</td>
<td>24,000</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Professional and Technical Occupations</td>
<td>16,600</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative and Secretarial Occupations</td>
<td>11,300</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled Trades Occupations</td>
<td>11,100</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring, Leisure and Other Service Occupations</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales and Customer Service Occupations</td>
<td>12,400</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process Plant and Machine Operatives</td>
<td>15,600</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Occupations</td>
<td>27,000</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The city was in the bottom ten local areas in the UK in terms of gross disposable household income per head in 2013 (Office for National Statistics, 2015) and 9.7% of the population have no qualifications (Nomis, 2016). In 2012 deprivation was higher than average, with about 30% of children living in poverty. Life expectancy for men and women is also lower than the England average (Public Health England, 2014). The 2011 census also showed that it is one of the most diverse cities in the UK, with over 40% of people describing themselves as being from ethnic minority communities (Office for National Statistics, 2012).

Local issues affecting school to work transitions include the loss of manufacturing jobs, and greater competition from older and more experienced workers. In

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4 Standard Occupational Classification used by the Office for National Statistics in which jobs are classified into groups according to the concept of ‘skill level’ (duration of training and/or work experience normally required) and ‘skill specialisation’ (knowledge required). The ‘Major Groups’ represent jobs with similar qualifications, training, skills and experience.
addition to this, an issue of major concern is the ‘hollowing out’ of the economy in the region, with middle-management and other interim tiers of employment disappearing. This has meant that young employed workers are finding themselves trapped in low-wage jobs, with little chance to gain advancement, get onto the home ownership ladder or to create stable households. The job market as a whole is seen to have become progressively more unstable and fragmented;

“Too many of our young people are not making a successful transition from education into work and as a result they risk falling into and out of short term jobs without the opportunity to develop careers…Under-employment is as great an issue as unemployment” (Economic Development Transport and Tourism Scrutiny Commission, 2015, p.6).

Research contribution

This research is significant as it is studying an interesting city which has received little focus in the literature on NEET young people. It is also capturing these young people at an important time, when they are not just facing the impact of a recession, but a number of other national and local changes to policy and provision. Furthermore, the findings from the research will add to literature which has criticised the NEET label and its use as a category for intervention, as well as the studies which have focused on the individual experiences of young people in this group. Little existing research focuses on how these young people describe themselves. It is in this area which this study aims to develop the literature on NEET young people.

A key aim of this study is to explore what these young people’s lives are like, gaining an in depth understanding of them by viewing them as individuals rather than part of a homogenous group. NEET young people are described in policy, research and the media in certain ways, with the stereotypes and assumptions associated with the category impacting upon the support they receive and the
provision which is available to them. It is important to hear from the young people themselves, to give them a voice and the ability to challenge these stereotypes.

The research within this thesis will explore how stereotypes related to the category of NEET play out and affect the thinking of young people about their situation. Information about the identities of these young people will allow the experience of NEET to be better understood, giving insights into the support these young people need. Research has highlighted the impact of individualisation on the lives of NEET young people, however by applying the notion of the reflexive self to their narratives, alongside the concept of bounded agency, issues of agency and the role of structure in their lives can be explored in more depth. The voices of young people need to be heard if we are to fully appreciate the ways in which social constraints and institutional structures impinge on them (Wyn and White, 1998). Policy aimed at this group of young people tends to focus on the individual, ignoring the impact of the structural. By highlighting the role of structure in the lives of NEET young people this research will demonstrate why focusing on individual deficiencies limits the impact of policy and initiatives aimed at this group.
Chapter Two: Not so NEET? An exploration of a problematic policy category

Introduction

In 1997 the tackling of youth unemployment under the new label 'NEET' became a key youth policy for the New Labour government as part of a wider initiative against social exclusion. The category continues to be used as a basis for intervention; for government policy strategies, and in the work of youth services. This research adds to a body of work which has critiqued the term NEET and its use as a service intervention label (Furlong, 2006; Yates and Payne, 2006; Nudzor, 2010). The policy concept does not fit with the lives and experiences of those it attempts to define, and is a problematic basis for intervention as it does not capture the diversity of the young people it attempts to label. However, despite critiquing the NEET category, and the assumptions associated with it, few studies have addressed how these young people view and define themselves. It is in this area which this research aims to expand the literature. To do this, this research will focus on the identities of a group of young people attending a course for those who are not in education, employment, or training in the Midlands of England. It offers a chance to view them as individuals rather than as a homogenised group with standardised biographies.

The focus is on how these young people define themselves, their situation, and their future, and how the label NEET, and ideas associated with it, impact upon their identities. This chapter will explore these issues by looking at the development of NEET as a policy category, and the perceptions and generalisations made about young people who are out of work and education which underpin initiatives aimed at those who are NEET. It will outline the challenges in defining the NEET concept and cover Coalition government policy to understand the context within which this research took place. It will then look more generally at the ideas upon which NEET policies have been based to demonstrate the issues surrounding the NEET category. Finally, it will outline research which attempts to combat stereotypes around the label by focusing on
the individual experiences of young people who are not in education, employment or training.

NEET is viewed as a negative situation and NEET young people tend to be presented as 'other', whether being labelled as disadvantaged or 'on the margins' (Furlong, 2006; Simmons et al., 2014). Even the work which tries to combat stereotypes still labels these young people to some extent. This research aims to develop this literature which looks at individual NEET young people further by focusing on how these young people see themselves, including whether they view being NEET as a negative situation to be in and how they relate to stereotypes and assumptions associated with the category. The construction of NEET young people within policy shapes their experiences and future prospects, with stereotypes linked to this group having an impact upon the initiatives which are aimed at them. It is important to challenge these assumptions and hear from the young people themselves. Information about the identities of these young people will allow the experience of NEET to be better understood, giving insights into the support they need.

**Defining the ‘undefined’**

In the 1980s, as part of the then government's response to a record rise in youth unemployment, gradual changes were made to the official status of the young unemployed and their access to benefits (Yates et al., 2011). Due to these changes, the unemployed young person essentially ceased to exist; those under 18 were denied recognition as unemployed workers as they no longer appeared on the official register of those who were 'unemployed and seeking work'. In 1983 benefit sanctions were applied to those who refused a Youth Training Scheme place. In 1988 National Insurance regulations changed so that unemployment benefit was available only after two years of contributions. This was followed by the Social Security Act which removed entitlement to means-tested benefits for most 16-17 year olds (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). Margaret Thatcher declared that "at 16 unemployment should not be an option" (Griffin, 2013, p.63).
This led to a group of 'undefined' young people who were out of work but were not classed as unemployed. Researchers and government officials therefore attempted to look for a new way of labelling those experiencing 'difficult transitions'. One possibility was 'Status Zero', a term developed by Istance et al (1994 cited in (Furlong, 2006, p.554)) in their study of young people in South Glamorgan. It was used to refer to a group of people aged 16 to 18 who were not covered by any of the main categories of labour market status; Status 1 referred to young people in education, Status 2 to those in training, and Status 3 to those in employment. However, the term ‘Status 0’ was seen as having negative connotations of a lack of status (Furlong, 2006); "a metaphor for young people who, in policy terms, at the time counted for nothing and were going nowhere" (Williamson, 2010 quoted in (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b, p.64)). The term NEET (not in education, employment or training), coined by a senior Home Office official in 1996, was therefore established to refer to workless youth as a more neutral alternative (Thompson, 2011) and to draw attention to the range of different circumstances encompassed by the label (Smith and Wright, 2015).

According to policy in the UK, a person identified as NEET is either unemployed or economically inactive, and is either looking for work or is inactive for reasons other than being a student or carer at home (Delebarre, 2016). Young people who are enrolled on an education course and are still attending or waiting for term to start, doing an apprenticeship, on a government supported employment or training programme, working or studying towards a qualification, or who have had job-related training or education in the last four weeks are not classed as NEET (Office for National Statistics, 2016).

Since its conception, the category has expanded. In the Bridging the Gap report NEET was defined as “those 16-18 year olds who neither participate in education or training nor have a job (for at least 6 months during this period)” (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, p.15). It now covers those aged between 16 and 24, reflecting growing concerns over graduate unemployment and the labour market engagement of other young people over the age of 18 (Simmons et al., 2014). This widening of the age range could also be a response to changing youth transitions. School to work transitions have become extended as increasing
numbers of young people have gone on to further and higher education (Furlong, 2006); a change which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. However, local authorities still only have an obligation to track young people until they are 19. Defining and knowing the size of the NEET population is therefore difficult and complex. The term is now widely used to define and capture levels of disadvantage and disengagement among an increasingly diverse population of young people (Maguire, 2015a). It is not always consistently applied and interpreted in the same way.

Estimates of the amount of NEET young people in the United Kingdom are made using the Labour Force Survey, a quarterly sample survey of households living at private addresses in the UK conducted by the Office for National Statistics, which provides information on the employment circumstances of the population. The category of NEET is analysed by a process of exclusion, so someone falls into the category if they are 'not in education' and 'not in employment' and 'not in training'. The number of NEET young people is therefore estimated by deducting those in education, employment or training from the total 16 to 24 year old population. However, this approach may not always capture all types of education and training that young people are engaged with, including young people in part time education. The survey also only gathers information from a sample rather than the whole population and the results are therefore estimates rather than precise figures.

Further statistics on the numbers of NEET young people are available for England. The Participation Statistical First Release uses a number of sources to compile national estimates of 16 to 18 year old NEET rates annually, and the Local Authorities' Client Caseload Information System provides data from local authorities on the activities of young people aged 16-19 (equivalent statistics are

5 These include the Schools Census, Pupil Level Annual Schools Census, the Individualised Learner Record, Higher Education Statistics Agency, Higher Education Students Early Statistics, Labour Force Survey, Mid-Year estimates and projections of population from ONS and Government Actuary's Department.
available from Wales and Scotland). This latter source provides a ‘three month average snapshot’ in which;

"...the activity status of young people in education or employment is not actively checked every month, but has a shelf life depending on the type of educational course or the nature of employment. For young people whose currency is lapsed a historical assumption is made on the proportion NEET, taking into account their previously reported activity." (Department for Education, 2014)

It is part of the duties of local authorities to track what each young person is doing for three years after they take their GCSEs and send this data to the Department for Education. The way the data is created means that the estimates of regional NEET from local authorities tend to be lower than those from the other two sources (Department for Education, 2014). When comparing the sum total of the local statistics with the national statistics at the end of 2013 for NEET young people age 16-18, Brooks (2014, p.11) found that there were 56,000 NEETs ‘missing’ from the local statistics.

This can be linked to the issue that some young people are not in contact with local agencies and therefore do not appear in the official statistics. The percentage of people whose status is not known varies, however in some local authorities it can be as high as one in five (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). When the data is published, assumptions are made about how many of the ‘unknowns’ are actually NEET; that assumption is one in eight which leads to an understatement of the true scale of NEET young people at a local level. There is a wide variation between local authority areas and regions in relation to the proportion of young people whose activity is unknown. In 2014, across all local areas put together, 162,000 young people were classified as unknown (Brooks, 2014, p.11). Brooks (2014) argues that since the Connexions service has been cut, the tracking of young people leaving school has broken down, with official data grossly understating NEET numbers in many local areas. There has also been a reduction in staffing and budgets within individual local authorities since 2010, leading to concerns that tracking and data management systems may not
be sustained if staffing levels continue to be reduced (Maguire and Newton, 2013 cited in (Maguire, 2015a, p.126)). In addition to this the rise in numbers of academies and free schools, which have detached them from local authority management and control, and the transfer of responsibility for careers guidance delivery from local authorities to individual schools and colleges have fractured many links between local authorities and schools and colleges. This has weakened the capacity to collect complete destinations data. While NEET rates among 16-18 year olds in different regions of England more or less plateaued between 2010 and 2013, there was a significant increase from 2010 in the proportion of 16-18 year olds who had no measured destination outcomes (Maguire, 2015a, p.125).

With all these different sets of data and sources, it is difficult to see how they are coherent enough to influence national policy. The three sources available for England are themselves not directly comparable. It can therefore be argued that official figures cannot be interpreted as an accurate reflection of the numbers of young people who are NEET at any given time. It also highlights the problems with tracking and defining this group of young people. These problems have been exacerbated by budget cuts and changes to guidance and support services, as well as inadequacies in the mapping and tracking systems. Policy developments are currently not underpinned by robust and reliable data about the size and composition of the NEET group.

These policy decisions at a local, national and international level matter as they shape and order the allocation and availability of work, benefits and education, and the nature and delivery of targeted interventions aimed at young people ‘on the margins’ (Simmons et al., 2014). Statistics are used to set targets for measuring the effectiveness of intervention programmes and at a local level are used by local authorities to inform local activity and target setting. For example, the Local Authorities Client Caseload Information System holds a range of information on young people ‘in order to assess progress in local areas on a range of measures, including cutting the number of young people not in education, employment or training’ (Department for Education, 2015a). Significant proportions of young people have no contact with support services,
nor do they have access to intervention programmes. There is little idea or understanding of the circumstances, activities and support needs of a significant proportion of young people (Maguire, 2015a). This can lead to reduced priority locally which means that unknown NEETs miss out on help. NEET statistics are therefore important to the resources being offered at both a national and local level.

Such high levels of ‘unknown’ post-16 destinations, coupled with the extension of the term to include large numbers of 18-24 year olds, who can either be defined as unemployed or inactive, raises questions about the continued validity and accuracy of the term NEET to capture levels of disengagement among young people in England. Due to the diversification of the NEET population, lack of research about the composition of the extended population, and a lack of confidence in the robustness of tracking mechanisms, it has become more complex to plan policy interventions. A House of Lords inquiry into youth unemployment stated that the presence of a number of different definitions was a ‘nightmare’ (House of Lords, 2014, p.13 cited in (Maguire, 2015a, p.124)).

To develop policies that help NEET young people it is important to understand them as individuals, in their own local context, rather than relying on unreliable figures and definitions, and to do more research with those NEETs who are aged 18-24. This study therefore focuses on the individual experiences of a group of young people aged 16-24 on a course for those who are not in education, employment or training, looking at how they define themselves rather than how they are defined through policy in an attempt to understand their situation and outline areas where they would benefit from support. The unreliability of NEET statistics means that there is a need to go beyond the numbers to understand the young people who are associated with this category.
Coalition government policy

In addition to the problems of working out the scale of and defining the NEET population, despite a continued host of initiatives introduced by consecutive governments, the NEET rate in the UK has remained fairly constant; fluctuating around eight to eleven percent for 16 to 18 year olds since 2005, yet dropping below 8 percent from 2012. For 16 to 24 year olds the rate has stayed at around 13 to 16 percent since 2005\(^6\) (Department for Education, 2015b). A report by the Fabian Society (Brooks, 2014, p.xi) found that the number of young people NEET at 18 in 2014 was the same as 15 years previously. Over 10 years to 2010 the proportion of 16 year olds who were NEET fell from 6.7 percent in 2000 to 2.3 percent at the end of 2010. The proportion of 17 year old NEETs fell less dramatically from 7.4 percent to 6.8 percent, while the NEET figures for the post 18 group grew (Maguire, 2013, p.64). The high number of young people who fall into, and remain in, the category continues to challenge policy-makers (Maguire, 2015a). The NEET category therefore remains an important one to study; it is still central to policy concerning youth in the UK, and is an issue of concern during economic growth and stability as well as decline. Young people who are NEET have been a major focus of research and policy interest for over a decade (Maguire, 2013).

Despite this continued focus, there has been a lack of coordinated policies aimed at the NEET group. Simmons \textit{et al} (2014) suggest that, as policies in this area have always involved a range of government departments, coordinated strategies have been difficult to construct, and one initiative has followed another with little sustained effect. At a national level, responsibility for NEET young people sits across the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Yet the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions also have an interest in reducing the number of people claiming

\textsuperscript{6} When looking at the end of year statistics (the percentages vary more widely depending on which months are looked at as there tends to be seasonal patterns in the NEET rates which reflect the academic year) – see appendix A1 for a more detailed breakdown of NEET statistics since 2005
‘benefits’, and departments like Health and Communities have some responsibility in the area of youth unemployment (Brooks, 2014). There is also accountability at a local level, within local councils, and there is involvement from private and philanthropic organisations. This situation makes accountability, coordination and strategic responsibility increasingly complex (Maguire, 2015a). Due to this lack of coordination and changes in government, initiatives have frequently changed, meaning that there has been little stability in the provision available for NEET young people. This changing public and policy agenda operates with a lag in relation to young people’s actual needs, usually producing policy solutions to perceived problems in a piecemeal fashion. Changes to the economy and government policy agendas have a great impact on young people’s lives (Henderson et al., 2007). The lives of the young people in this study need to be understood within the policy context set out by the Coalition government, which shaped their experiences of being NEET.

While the Coalition government in Britain, in power at the time of this research, did develop programmes aimed at ‘vulnerable’ young people and viewed tackling unemployment as a concern, it was not one of its highest priorities. It dismantled much of the infrastructure created by the previous Labour administrations, cutting the funding of some of their key programmes including the Educational Maintenance Allowance and Connexions. Despite these cuts, the Coalition government drew on a similar set of NEET prevention and management strategies to those enacted under Labour with a focus on increasing participation to improve social mobility and stimulate economic growth (Hutchinson et al., 2016). The 16-24 participation strategy outlined in the policy paper Building Engagement, Building Futures included plans to raise the participation age, continuing a policy developed by Labour under the 2008 Education and Skills Act however with the status of the plans changed from mandatory to voluntary. It also aimed to introduce a National Careers Service, increase the availability of apprenticeships, and make cuts to welfare, increasing the conditionality of benefits.

Drawing on ideas set out in the policy paper, the government introduced its flagship policy on NEET and youth unemployment; the Youth Contract which was
launched in 2012. This focused on providing incentives to employers to recruit young people through wage subsidies for taking on young people aged 18-24 who had been claiming Jobseekers Allowance for more than six months, and the Apprenticeship Grant for Employers which offered payments to employers with less than 50 employees to take on young apprentices. £50 million of extra funding was allocated to support new apprenticeships. Alongside this it offered work experience placements, aiming to give all young people aged 18-24 work experience up to 12 weeks, and extra support for 18-24 year olds from Jobcentre Plus including weekly signing on and more time to talk to an advisor. Those aged 18-24 who were on Job Seekers Allowance were also referred to the government’s ‘Work Programme’ after the 9 month point of their claim. Claimants who were NEET were referred after claiming for three months (Delebarre, 2016).

In addition to this, the Coalition government also introduced a Youth Contract for 16 and 17 year olds which aimed to provide tailored support for the most vulnerable young people; to get them 'learning or earning before long term damage is done' (Simmons et al., 2014, p.115). It focused on at least 53,000 NEETs with no GCSEs grade A* to C who were at risk of long term disengagement. Under the Contract public, private and voluntary organisations competed to provide services on a payment by results basis with funding worth £126 million made available across England. Organisations received an initial payment for taking young people on and then were given up to £2,200 for every young person they helped, receiving the full amount if a young person was still in full time education, training or work after six months (Department for Education, 2012b).

In their analysis of NEET policy in England, Hutchinson et al (2016) suggest that there will always be a proportion of young people who experience NEET in their post education years and there is little reason to believe that Coalition policy will be any more successful than that of the previous government. They claim that the policies introduced by the Coalition government did not offer new interventions but drew on a similar set of NEET provision and management strategies to those enacted under Labour. Yet they are concerned that the policies introduced by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition may in
fact lead to a less effective system for dealing with NEET young people due to a reduction in funding and support. The Coalition government were ideologically committed to localism, which can allow for a more responsive and flexible service, yet also can result in a ‘postcode lottery’ of support available (Hutchinson et al., 2016). Cuts to local authority youth spending saw a decrease of over 50% in some areas (NCVYS, 2012 cited in (Beck, 2015, p.485)) impacting upon the support and initiatives which they were able offer. These concerns have also been highlighted by Colley (2012) who argues that austerity has shifted the youth support field from a client-centred ethos, to the meeting of economically driven targets.

A broad range of providers and stakeholders work with the NEET population, however interventions are frequently delivered by voluntary organisations, often with limited funding (Oliver et al., 2014). There is a patchwork of provision with different funding sources, with this funding tending to be short term and initiative led (Smith and Wright, 2015). Programme interventions are increasingly delivered in a climate where financial resources are often scarce and where performance relating to value for money is questioned (Finn, 2010 cited in (Maguire, 2015b, p.526)). This is the policy context within which this research took place and which will have shaped the lived experience of participants in the study, especially as they were attending a course for NEET young people run by a charity organisation with limited funding. The ideas on which Coalition government policies were based are part of a wider set of discourses around NEET which have continued to shape interventions aimed at this group of young people.

**The impact of NEET stereotypes on policy**

Stereotypes can be seen as part of a simplifying mechanism to handle the real world which is too big and complex, where actions are not based on direct and certain knowledge but on the pictures that are made by or given to individuals. We react not to the real world but to our reconstruction of it; the pictures in our
heads (Cauthen et al., 1971). This suggests that we react to the stereotype of the object, not the object itself. People are often judged or stereotyped according to their group membership; once a person is identified as belonging to a certain group they are given the presumed characteristics of that group. Stereotypes can be either positive or negative. Individuals are exposed to stereotypes through socialisation; they can be seen as a product of culture, mass media and social norms. Negative stereotypes often cause negative responses, which can manifest themselves in the stereotyped individual’s reactions, motivation and self-esteem. The threat of being evaluated, judged by, or treated in terms of a negative stereotype can cause individuals to perform worse in a domain in which negative stereotypes exist about a group of which they are a member. This is known as ‘stereotype threat’. Research has suggested that stereotype threat can impact on major life decisions and prevent individuals from reaching their full potential (Gupta and Bhave, 2007 cited in (Singletary et al., 2009)). For example, studies have argued that stereotype threat can lead to decreased intentions to study maths and science-related fields in college, and can influence an individual’s intentions to pursue certain types of jobs. Women may not choose to study STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects or think about entering male dominated professions due to stereotypes about the different skills and knowledge which men and women possess (Davies et al, 2002, 2005 cited in (Singletary et al., 2009)).

The impact of negative stereotyping matters to the lives of individuals, including the individuals within this study, as it can lead to stigmatisation, demonization and exclusion. Negative and discriminatory stereotypes are not simply the fabrication of false images which enable discriminatory practices, they are also a subjectifying force. Through subjectification, people become tied to specific identities and become subjected to the rules and norms engendered by a set of knowledges about these identities. Processes of subjectification are made possible and plausible through stereotypical discourse (Bhabha, 1983, p.19 cited in (Tyler, 2013, p.214)). Goffman argues that stigmatising groups is one way in which society controls their behaviour. The government establishes normal-abnormal categories and people are expected to stay within the boundaries of
normality. Stigmatisation operates as a form of governance that legitimises the reproduction and entrenchment of inequalities (Tyler, 2013).

Stigma can therefore be seen as a relationship of devaluation in which an individual is disqualified from full social acceptance (Goffman, 1963). It is a social reaction that picks out a particular characteristic and uses this to devalue a person’s whole social identity (Fulcher and Scott, 2007). It can take many forms and is rarely based on valid understandings, springing from stereotypes and perceptions which may be false or only partially correct; some contain a grain of truth, while others are simply a mechanism for displacement, in which feelings of hostility and anger are directed against objects that are not the real origin of those feelings (Giddens, 2006). Political rhetoric, policy documents and news media can create stigmatising depictions of marginal populations and groups. Public opinion hardens through repetition and accumulation of beliefs ‘on the streets’ (Hall et al, 1978, p.129 cited in (Tyler, 2013, p.211)).

Stereotypes can become embedded in cultural understandings and are difficult to erode, even when they are gross distortions of reality. Those who are stigmatised find that their lives and identities come to be organised around their deviance. Representational forms work to ‘get inside’ people; instructing, correcting, regulating and shaping their subjectivities (Gill, 2008 cited in (Tyler, 2013, p.214)). They may come to see themselves as deviant, taking on many of the stigmatising attributes of popular and official images. Even if they reject this identity, the fact that they have been identified in this way becomes an important factor in determining future behaviour (Fulcher and Scott, 2007). People who are stigmatised may be able to construct a more positive image of their deviance and build an identity around the rejection of the stigma. They accept the label but construct an alternative view that reflects their own experiences and those of people like them.

Stereotypes and stigmatisation have been acknowledged in previous studies of NEET young people. In the research of Simmons et al (2014, p.30) they found that several of the participants were concerned about the stigmatisation brought about by stereotypes they encountered in the media and their everyday lives,
framing their discussions around terms such as ‘benefit scrounger’ and ‘teenage mum’. Through stereotyping, NEET young people can come to be seen in certain ways, leading to potential stigmatisation and exclusion. Rodger (2012) argues that it is important to construct a problematic identity of those being targeted by policy intervention. They are a category who are not viewed as ‘normal’ meaning they encounter processes of subjectification, governance and control.

Policy is rarely homogenous, coherent or clearly articulated, yet it is possible to identify discourses which position people in particular ways. Assumptions and generalisations are made about young people who are NEET which has an influence on the policies and practices which are created to help them. They are represented as ‘other’ and this is reflected in how provision is conceived (Thompson et al., 2014). Those who are already disadvantaged in the labour market due a lack of qualifications can be further stigmatised through the courses and schemes which are set up for them. Provision for this group of young people is often segregated and they are seen as requiring specialised spaces in the mainstream or separate institutions (Thompson et al., 2014, p.66). While the difficult circumstances young people may find themselves in seem to demand specialist intervention, the very separateness and nature of the programmes set up could reinforce negative experiences and contribute further to social exclusion and inequality (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). It is therefore important to look at how policy is constructing this group of young people and how those who are NEET are experiencing interventions. If programmes are serving to further stigmatise and exclude young people, there is a need to understand their experiences so that support can be better tailored to their needs.

NEET stereotypes form a central aspect of this research, which aims to go beyond these assumptions to look at how these young people describe themselves and their situation, as well as exploring the impact of policy and media discourses on them. To gain an understanding of how these young people are viewed within policy this section will outline some of the main stereotypes associated with this group, the impact it has on provision, and the relevance of these ideas to the lives of NEET young people.
Disengaged youth: NEET as a personal failure

From the outset NEET has been associated with social exclusion and an attempt to integrate people back into society by getting them into education, employment or training. Dealing with those who were 'NEET' first became a key youth policy for New Labour as part of a wider initiative against social exclusion which saw the creation of the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) in 1998 as part of a commitment to identify and address the needs of communities which had become 'marginalised from mainstream society' due to social and economic disadvantage (Maguire and Rennison, 2005, p.188). A mainly individualised approach to social exclusion was adopted by New Labour, concentrating on developing policies and initiatives which attempted to integrate the poor back into society by changing their attitudes, dispositions and habits (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). These policies and initiatives also emphasised the importance of employment and paid work. According to Simmons et al (2014, p.22), rather than focusing on structural process, the focus of the SEU was on describing the condition people were in, largely through their own deficiencies. Social exclusion was used as “a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as employment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health, and family breakdown”. Measures introduced by New Labour were therefore underpinned by the view that access to education and training could alleviate the problems of social exclusion, unemployment and poverty. Introducing a report by the SEU which focused specifically on the problems facing young people Tony Blair, the New Labour Prime Minister, suggested that "the best defence against social exclusion is having a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training and experience" (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, p.6).

Following on from New Labour, the approaches of different governments in relation to policy aimed at NEET young people has been fairly similar, with all major parties in the UK proposing a central role for education in increasing social mobility and enabling young people to take their place in the labour market (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). Getting young people into work is viewed as the way to secure their future wellbeing (Bondi, 2010 cited in (France, 2016,
Initiatives have sought to improve the ‘employability’ of young people, to offer financial support, and to widen choices at post-16.

A number of policies and programmes aimed at NEET young people focus on individuals and their 'employability' (Cieslik and Simpson, 2013), aiming to engage them in 'positive activities' and 'raise their aspirations' (Yates et al., 2011). The notion of 'employability' is associated with individual qualities and skills; these individual young people are assumed to lack the appropriate skills or attitudes for the disciplines of waged work. Many employers who do not recruit recent school leavers report deficiencies in 'soft skills', such as time management and self-motivation, as the key reasons for rejecting young applicants (UKCES, 2011 cited in (Simmons et al., 2014, p.100)). Employers complain that young people lack the right attitudes and personal qualities, and work experience (Economic Development Transport and Tourism Scrutiny Commission, 2015). Young people are therefore not viewed as 'work ready', with employers having to bear the 'risk' of taking on workers who are likely to be a burden rather than an asset. Unpaid labour and subsidies to employers are seen as fair compensation for this (Simmons et al., 2014).

Additionally, young people are expected to ‘invest’ in themselves, with education contributing towards this. Programmes aimed at NEET young people therefore try to help them to overcome individual barriers to participation, to 'cope' with their situation and change it through their own efforts by developing adequate skills in order to keep and find jobs. This ignores social and economic factors and does not consider the broader influences on an individual’s ability to obtain a job. An example of this type of initiative is the Entry to Employment programmes, which offered work related learning to young people considered not yet ready to enter employment, an apprenticeship, or other forms of further education and training. In a study of this provision by Russell et al (2011), they found that the courses not only emphasised work-related learning and basic skills but also focused on developing the self; aiming to reshape learners as individuals and give them a different outlook on life. This included monitoring individual dispositions and treating them as 'barriers to learning' which needed to be overcome, for example issues with confidence and self-esteem. In addition to this, while local authorities
have the role of managing NEET young people, targeting support and provision and tracking young people's activities, the duty to engage is placed on the young person, rather than on the local authority or learning provider (Hutchinson et al., 2016). Furlong (2006, p.553) therefore argues that policy and programmes aimed at NEET young people place “an undue and often misleading emphasis on voluntarism”. Responsibility is located primarily with individuals.

NEET discourse individualises non-participation, replacing the social problem of youth unemployment with the individual problem of disengagement. The idea of unemployment implies responsibility of the state to ensure structural conditions for employment. Employability shifts this onto the individual (Lawy and Wheeler, 2013). Being NEET is attributed to young people themselves and their personal failure to be productive citizens, rather than the failings of the British economy (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2011 cited in (David, 2014, p.470)). The role of policy is to begin a ‘corrective’ process where citizens take their responsibilities to support themselves seriously. The rights of citizenship in the form of entitlement to welfare has shifted to a focus on ‘responsible’ conduct, which includes accepting offered places in education, training or the labour market.

Fergusson (2013) argues that the purpose of interventions is not primarily to reskill or to even occupy young people, but to re-engineer their attitudes, beliefs and understandings to make them responsible, self-sufficient citizens. This can be linked to neo-liberal ideas about the role of the state and the efficacy of the free market. Following this ideology it is deemed unacceptable for governments to try and intervene in the labour and product markets or attempt to actively manage the economy. Skill supply initiatives are seen as one of the few legitimate areas of state intervention (Simmons, 2008). The state is limited to improving educational standards and expanding access to Higher Education; they do not guarantee jobs (this is for the market and the private sector) (Brown et al, 2011 cited in (France, 2016, p.79)). The focus is therefore one sided with education and skills supply side initiatives being developed without accompanying economic policy, or using employment regulation or job creation to stimulate demand for labour. Education and training are used to ensure individual workers
match their skills to those required by the market, with employment no longer presented as an economic problem but an issue of employability.

Due to this focus on supply side initiatives, MacDonald (2011) argues that in youth policy there is a tendency to interpret youth problems in terms of alleged deficits of young people, rather than recognising the political and economic causes of youth unemployment. Levels of opportunity for employment tend to rise and fall with national economic circumstances, and are not caused by the circumstances of individuals (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016). There are also finite jobs, and a surplus of experienced, skilled workers. In addition to this deprivation and deindustrialisation have limited the number of jobs available (Miller et al., 2015).

For many NEET young people their status is an outcome and continuing part of social and educational disadvantage (Thompson, 2011). Family poverty and deprivation affect the prospects of young people, increasing the likelihood of disaffection and educational underachievement, and social class remains the strongest predictor of educational achievement in the UK (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). Growing up in housing estates marked with poverty and lacking good schools are significant risk factors (Bynner and Parsons, 2002). However, the inequalities in resources necessary to succeed in education are often overlooked (Simmons and Thompson, 2011a). Learning is viewed as individual activity, with little acknowledgement of the wider structure of society, or issues of power and inequality.

In 2010 the government classified two-thirds of the NEET population as having 'no identifiable barrier' to participation, but these 'identifiable barriers' did not account for structural opportunities such as poor job opportunities (MacDonald, 2011, p.431). Issues such as low attainment, restricted aspirations, and negative behaviours and attitudes are regarded as properties of young people, families and communities, rather than as consequences of structural inequality (Thompson, 2011). The unemployed are labelled as a deficit group lacking the qualities and skills required to be employable, rather than a group whose lives have been constrained by class, gender or location (Lawy and Wheeler, 2013).
Young people are viewed less as products of social and economic environments that the government have the power to improve, and are instead constructed as individualised authors of their own futures in given environments (Fergusson, 2013), a notion which will expanded upon in the next chapter.

**Non-academic young people: the status of vocational education and the issue of churn**

Provision for NEET young people makes assumptions about the forms of learning which are appropriate for those who fall into this category. Those with low levels of education are three times more likely to be NEET compared to those with tertiary education (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2012, p.2) and those who are “disaffected with schooling in the form of exclusion, truancy or bullying” are also found to be at an increased risk (Maguire and Rennison, 2005, p.196). A report by the Fabian Society (2014) suggests that rather than being from low income families, being deprived, excluded and hard to help, and having special educational needs, the defining characteristic of most 18 year old NEET young people is low qualifications, especially in Maths and English. Therefore, instead of a focus on in depth knowledge and the acquisition of specific skills, training for this group is organised and based around notions of work based-competencies and basic skills; the focus is on enhancing skills concerned with ‘employability’, concentrating on how to get work and be ‘job ready’.

It is assumed that these are lower attaining young people who are ‘practical’ rather than ‘academic’. In their study of Entry to Employment programmes Russell et al (2011) found that the discourse being used described learners as non-academic and unable to cope with extended periods of classroom activity. They were constructed as a homogenous group of learners who would benefit from basic skills and work related learning as an alternative to the academic curriculum which had failed them at school. The work of Higgins (2013) constructed this group of young people in a similar way. The study, conducted in
New Zealand on the return to education of NEET young people, suggests that rediscovering an ‘educational sense of self’ can be a struggle for this group as they have often experienced earlier failure. They were therefore seen to have ‘fragile learning identities’.

Programmes that target the most ‘vulnerable’ and ‘problematic’ in education tend to push them towards more vocational forms of education as a way of keeping them engaged in the education system (Tomlinson, 2013 cited in (France, 2016, p.142)). Post-16 choices can be seen as socially stratified in terms of status and value of qualifications. Significant inequalities exist within educational systems with marked differences in the nature and quality of people’s educational experiences and outcomes (Tomlinson, 2013). Different forms of engagement are intended for different categories of young people, with distinctions made between being ‘practical’ and being ‘academic’.

Work based learning has been posited as an alternative to academic study by both the Coalition government, and its Labour predecessors being positioned as a second best pathway for lower-attaining young people with options tending to consist of low status training schemes or further education courses with little labour-market value (Simmons and Thompson, 2011a). Since 2001 UK government policy has viewed the apprenticeship system as a vehicle for the pursuit of social inclusion (Simmons et al., 2014, p.107). However, the attractiveness of apprenticeships have not been matched by their availability. The work based learning route is open to fewer and fewer young people as the total amount of employer-funded training and work-based learning for 16-18 year olds fell by over 40% over the past 20 years, while increases in apprenticeships have seen a growth in numbers for older age groups (Brooks, 2014, p.26). From 2009/10 to 2012/13 the proportion of those starting on an apprenticeship under the age of 19 fell from 42% to 23%, for 19-24 year olds it fell from 41% to 33%, while it rose for those over the age of 25 from 18% to 45% (House of Commons Library, 2014 cited in (Maguire, 2015b, p.528)). Ainley (2013) suggests that the vocational relevance and turn to apprenticeships ignores the fundamental fact that most employers no longer require apprentices.
A report by the House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility (2016) argues that young people are being let down by an over-emphasis on higher education and a lack of training options. It outlines a culture of inequality between vocational and academic routes into work. This is despite the fact that the majority of young people in the UK do not opt for academic study after the age of 16; “in England, in 2013-14, of a total population of 1,285,800 16 and 17 year olds, only 47% (601,500 people) started A-levels, whereas 53% (684,300) did not do so” (Sellgren, 2016). Similarly, Brooks (2014, p.39) highlights that in 2013 half of all 16-18 year olds nationally were attending Further Education colleges, with 80% of them studying vocational programmes; around half at the equivalent of A Level standard, and around half the equivalent of GCSE or below. Further Education colleges provide for a higher share of young people who are previously low attaining, come from disadvantaged backgrounds, or face learning difficulties.

The research by the Lords Select Committee found that for those who do not follow the academic route, the system is complex, confusing and incoherent. It argues that “careers advice and education are being delivered in a way which means that too many young people simply drift into further studies or their first job, which often has no real prospect of progression” (Sellgren, 2016). In addition to this, while government policy has protected schools and university funding, it has not protected the budgets of post-16 colleges, with a university student receiving about £6000 more per year in public funding than a young person attending college (Sellgren, 2016). Post 16 education has shifted from a choice to an expectation with the raising of the participation age, however it has been implemented at a time when expenditure on education and training is at its lowest level for many years (Maguire, 2013).

Due to the quality of provision, young people can become trapped, churning between different courses and schemes; "many young people who spend their final years of compulsory schooling achieving useless qualifications are then directed onto further courses and schemes offering qualifications that prove equally worthless" (Roberts, 2009, p.361 quoted in (Russell et al., 2011, p.496)). Henderson et al (2007) found that this was an increasingly common route among the young people in their study. They struggled to maintain a connection with
education, building a portfolio of vocational courses which might lead nowhere, whilst working in dead end jobs. Likewise, a Fabian Society report (2014) found that many unemployed 18 year olds took successive courses at the same level of difficulty and skill, in different vocational areas, and never entered any of those professions. Research into courses for NEET young people have uncovered a similar process of churning. Thompson *et al* (2014) outlined how young people can become trapped in a cycle of ‘inadequate provision’ and even found examples of young people returning to the same training providers where they repeated the same or similar low level training courses.

This has led to concerns about young people being “warehoused” in education (Thompson, 2011). Simmons and Thompson (2011b) suggest that some forms of work-based learning have tended to operate as substitution programmes or extensions of schooling attempting to compensate for a shrinking youth labour market. It is an attempt to manage the unemployed in an environment where work remains scarce, with vocational educational training courses filling the vacuum left by the decline in youth jobs and traditional industrial apprenticeships (Ainley and Allen, 2010 cited in (France, 2016, p.84)). Higher levels of participation in further and higher education should be viewed in the context of structural changes in the British economy which mean that the job opportunities that traditionally existed for school leavers no longer exist (Simmons, 2008). Rather than employer demand for skills, it is absence of work (particularly the disappearance of youth specific jobs) that has been the reason for young people staying in full time education longer (Ainley, 2013).

Continued participation in education or training can therefore be seen as the result of having no or few alternatives, merely postponing entry into the NEET status (Thompson, 2011). Among the tutors of the Entry to Employment programmes in the research of Simmons and Thompson (2011b) there was a feeling that, because of the relatively short term nature of the provision and the shortage of progression opportunities, the programmes could be more about temporarily reducing NEET figures than transforming lives. The risk with the raising of the participation age is that it will compound and maintain the warehousing and ‘churning’ of 16 and 17 year olds, rather than getting them into
work. Local authorities are charged with the responsibility to deliver the policy but it is unclear what constitutes ‘appropriate’ education and training, or how young people will be tracked (France, 2016, p.144). Ainley (2013) argues that schools, universities and colleges are in danger of becoming ‘holding camps’.

It can be questioned whether there is value in imposing extended periods of learning on young people without there being a beneficial impact on future labour market trajectories (Maguire, 2013). While the focus of government policy is on skills development, little attention has been given to the types and quality of jobs young people are able to access as a result of gaining these skills. The focus is on access and participation, meaning that questions about what is learnt and the quality of provision are not raised. The assumption is that learning leads to the acquisition of economically useful knowledge and skills. For example, the rationale for raising the participation age centred on the argument that a prolonged period in education or training would improve all young people’s qualification attainment and acquisition of skills, as well as their future earnings potential (Simmons, 2008). The key focus is on getting young people to find work, to ensure they do not create a financial burden on the state (Ainley and Allen, 2010; Standing, 2011; Tomlinson, 2013 cited in (France, 2016, p.82)).

‘Inclusion’ in education or training does not always seem to mean progress, with some courses and training schemes offering little benefit in terms of labour market advantage or educational progression. Progression from low level pre-vocational training programmes into higher-level study or employment is often low (Wolf, 2011 cited in (Simmons et al., 2014, p.188)). Alternative educational provision can therefore serve to reinforce disadvantage, and by concentrating on certain forms of low level vocational education, may ultimately exclude participants from ‘jobs with economic power’. What is on offer is destined to leave young participants to a future of insecure, poorly paid and low skill work (Smyth et al., 2013). However, Ainley (2013) suggests that cutting back on post-compulsory education would relegate more people to the corrosive consequences of unemployment that are much more costly in the long term.
Emphasising 'skills' as the solution to unemployment or low paid jobs ignores "the scale and persistence of low-paid employment within the UK economy" (Keep and Mayhew, 2010, p.569). In the UK the demand for high level knowledge and skills is exaggerated. Policy is based on the belief in the emergence of the ‘knowledge economy’, consisting of a high-tech future of highly paid knowledge workers, and the desire to have a highly skilled workforce that is able to compete in the global economy. The knowledge economy places new demands on individuals who need to prove their worth, be flexible, and continually enhance work related knowledge and skills; the economy is viewed as being increasingly driven by the knowledge, creativeness and enterprise that individuals possess (Tomlinson, 2013).

However, the prevalence of the scale of the knowledge economy has been questioned. The labour market can be viewed as characterised by over-qualification, underemployment and marginalisation (Avis, 2014). There is a minority of high-skill jobs and a mass of low-skill, low-waged employment (Simmons, 2008). A large number of ‘new jobs’ created are in low-skill and low paid areas (MacDonald, 2013 cited in (France, 2016, p.82)), mainly in the service economy. In the UK, since 2008, part time and casual work, alongside self-employment, has dominated the new jobs being created (IPPR, 2010 cited in (France, 2016, p.123)). Byrne (2005 cited in (Simmons et al., 2014, p.96-97)) suggests that the UK labour market has been split into three parts; a small elite of privileged workers; an intermediate category of workers, who despite being better qualified than their parents, are often less well paid and have insecure jobs; and a large pool of disposable labour engaged in poorly paid, precarious employment. Employees are viewed as a disposable resource, with young people often being vulnerable to exploitative conditions (Simmons et al., 2014).

Young people are more than twice as likely to be employed in voluntary, part-time, and temporary work as any other age group. There has been an expansion in temporary work for young people; between 2005 and 2010 the number of young people finding temporary work increased by 40% and the number of young part time workers increased by nearly 400,000 (France, 2016, p.123). Those aged 16-24 also account for 31% of the workforce on zero hour contracts (ONS,
France (2016) therefore argues that flexibility and casualisation have become central to the youth labour market, increasing the precariousness of youth employment through unstable, insecure, casual and part-time work. Poor labour market experience is linked to NEET status (Bynner and Parsons, 2002) with the chance of becoming NEET higher for young people who have been in work with no training (Middleton et al, 2004 cited in (Pemberton, 2008, p.255)). Casualisation of the labour market tends to have the biggest impact on the most vulnerable and insecure, this includes those with low attainment levels at school (France, 2016).

The quality of work available to young people significantly affects their ability to obtain and retain employment (Simmons et al., 2014). Young people are characterised by their ambition, talent and wish to secure a good job, however appropriate employment simply does not exist for all; the market does not meet the needs of everyone in society (Roberts, 2009 cited in (David, 2014, p.471)). France (2016, p.136) argues that many of the policies which focus on getting people into work aim to regulate and control the poor, and the young in particular, and push them into ‘poor work’. Learning providers are part of this poor quality system that trains NEET young people to meet their low expectations of work in low pay, low skilled employment (Beck, 2015). There are therefore clear problems with emphasising ‘skills’ as the solution to unemployment, as NEET young people are expected to engage in vocational courses with little labour market value. Viewing these young people as non-academic shapes the opportunities available to them.

Troublesome youth in need of surveillance and control

In the absence of work, it is arguable that education has little economic rationality and has no further function than as a means of social control (Ainley, 2013). France (2016) suggests that the range of policies which aim to target and re-engage NEETs by changing the landscape of education and training for those aged 14-18 offer a preventative and supportive focus yet are linked to
conditionality, surveillance and monitoring. They operate to monitor and police ‘the poor’, based on the notion that ‘the poor’ are untrustworthy, feckless and immoral. They also grow out of the perceived need to monitor transitions to adulthood, during which time young people are regarded as particularly vulnerable to risk taking and negative influences and therefore deemed to require special guidance and protection from adults (Heath et al., 2009).

Placing NEET young people onto programmes can be seen as putting them under social control and surveillance, offering them something to occupy their time, therefore discouraging youth delinquency and deviance. The Connexions service was a means of keeping track of the movements of young people; an attempt by the state to "monitor and control a group that may be excluded both from the discipline of regular workplace involvement and from the jurisdiction of the benefit agencies" (Furlong, 2006, p.557). While local authorities still have a duty to track the activity of young people aged 16 to 19 resident in their area (Department for Education, 2014).

UK government policies have reflected and influenced public opinion and the way young people have been regarded in society. Over decades the focus has shifted back and forth between positions of care and welfare, to punishment, reform and control (Henderson et al., 2007). Simmons and Thompson (2011b) suggest that there is a 'dual narrative' in NEET policy where these young people are simultaneously regarded as in trouble and as trouble. They are a source of trouble in need of control, or victims of trouble in need of protection. Concerns about young people outside education and employment are often motivated by notions of youth as in trouble or at risk of social exclusion. Yet these concerns lie alongside moral panics about idle and troublesome youth which have dated back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Simmons and Thompson, 2013).

Young people “sit on the cusp of our compassion towards children, just as it tops over into fear of young adults” (Brooks, 2014, p.17). These are people who require help to prevent negative consequences now and later on in life, yet they are also viewed as a drain on resources or as people who engage in criminal or
anti-social activity. Simmons et al (2014) found this tension between youth ‘in trouble’ and youth ‘as trouble’ apparent among the practitioners in their research who were struggling to reconcile their role of supporting young people with their responsibility to monitor and discipline on behalf of the state. In a section on the costs of being NEET on a charity website, issues of poor wellbeing and reduced self-confidence are listed alongside the financial cost of Jobseekers Allowance and the cost of youth crime (Wooden Spoon, 2016).

As well as low educational attainment, homelessness, teenage pregnancy and care needs, the NEET label has been associated with gang membership, early criminalisation, drug culture and dependency, and prostitution (Hodgson et al, 2009 cited in (David, 2014, p.468)). It has been claimed in government reports (Department for Education and Skills, 2007) that those who are NEET are more likely to offend, be anti-social and cost the state large amounts of money through their need for welfare support and health care (Rodger, 2008 cited in (France, 2016, p.139)). The practitioners, including job centre advisors, in the research of Simmons et al (2014) tended to associate NEET young people with poor family backgrounds, particularly families in which relationships between parents, or between young people and their parents, had broken down. Explanations of some of the young people’s behaviour was associated with cultures of worklessness and welfare dependency, and practitioners spoke about challenging a 'cycle of deprivation'. These examples demonstrate that being NEET is viewed as a negative situation connected with disadvantage (Yates and Payne, 2006).

Through provision and policy NEET young people are presented as troublesome. This is based on the notion that young people’s unstructured free time is a breeding ground for social problems (Griffin, 2013) and links to wider longstanding concerns over unruly male working class youth and the moral character of working class girls (Avis, 2014). In their study of NEET young people’s drinking habits, Nelson and Taberrer (2015) made the link between unsupervised time and inactivity, and alcohol. Representations of youth lifestyles as problematic abound in the media, where young people are portrayed with a broad brush as deviant, dangerous and out of control. Content analysis of local
and national press by MORI over a one week period during the summer of 2004 found that three in four articles about young people were negative in tone, and that the majority were about young men and violence (Goddard, 2004 cited in (Henderson et al., 2007, p.59)). Images of young people as yobs, thugs and vandals, as a group to be feared, who lie beyond the boundaries of citizenship and respectability, continues to be widely and regularly reflected in the media (Henderson et al., 2007). Media representations feed into young people’s lives and often into policy.

The negative connotations of NEET status in policy documents and the media "have come to stigmatise and marginalise young people" who are perceived as feckless and lacking in aspiration and employment related skills (Thompson, 2011, p.792). Recent stories in the media which have reported on issues related to youth unemployment and NEET young people have discussed young people having a lack of skills (Adonis, 2013), being 'unfit' for work (Cohen, 2013), and highlighted the negative prospects for those who do not do well at school (Dunn, 2013). Simmons et al (2014, p.1) suggest that "popular images of NEET young people often evoke pejorative stereotypes of 'hoodies' and 'pramface girls' destined for a life on benefits". Similarly, in a report on NEET young people, Brooks (2014, p.17) asks the reader to close their eyes and bring to mind an image of two young people who are NEET;

“Many readers will have imagined a pair of male teenagers leaning on an estate wall or standing on a street corner. They are probably wearing hoodies, tracksuit bottoms and trainers. There might be a tower block, chain link fence or a battered playground in the background, under a grey sky or neon lights”

He suggests that this is the kind of image the media places alongside articles about NEET young people, to imply that they are deprived, excluded and on the edge of trouble. Those who are NEET are therefore viewed as troublesome and in need of surveillance, with policy and interventions aimed at monitoring and controlling them.
NEET as problematic category

Being NEET is linked to low educational achievement, low aspiration and disadvantage. Policies and programmes aimed at these young people are therefore focused on keeping them under control, and overcoming individual barriers to participation in work, education or training. This focus on the individual has led to an often unrelenting negative discourse that constructs NEET young people as ‘other’ (Russell et al., 2011). Being NEET tends to be seen as a ‘problem’ with young people (MacDonald, 2011) and they are viewed as needing help. However, being NEET is not always a negative or problematic state. Those who are potentially ‘better off’ and are experimenting with life-style choices, postponing firm occupational commitments and perhaps enjoying gap years are counted equally alongside unemployed youth whose agency is more ‘bounded’ by restricted resources and opportunities (MacDonald, 2011).

The category covers those who are available for work and seeking employment and those who are not, drawing in a range of individuals who would not traditionally have been regarded as unemployed; from January to March 2014 52% of young people in the UK classed as NEET were available for work and seeking employment, the rest were either not looking for work and/or not available for work (Office for National Statistics, 2014). It also combines those with little control over their situation with those exercising choice. It is misleading to assume that the most vulnerable or marginalised groups compromise the majority of the NEET group, even though policy interventions tend to focus on these groups (Maguire, 2015a). It is therefore important to look at the individual experiences of young people in this category, to gain an understanding of their experiences and how they view their situation in an attempt to outline the heterogeneous nature of those who are viewed as NEET. The stereotypes and assumptions used to generate policy and practice are insufficient to understand the lives of this group of young people.

NEET is experienced differently by young people, dependent on their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Using the term as a basis for intervention in policy and practice can be seen to obscure the differences between people who are
placed into this category. Yates and Payne (2006, p.329) claim that it is a “problematic concept that defines young people by what they are not, and subsumes under a negatively-perceived label a heterogeneous mix of young people whose varied situations and difficulties are not conceptualised.” These young people have very different potential needs for intervention (Nudzor, 2010). They are grouped together because of their current status, but have different experiences and characteristics, and are facing different challenges. The category includes “those young people who are long-term unemployed, fleetingly unemployed, looking after children or relatives in the home, temporarily sick or long-term disabled, putting their efforts into developing artistic or musical talents or simply taking a short break from work or education” (Furlong, 2006, p.554-555).

The extension of the age category has increased the heterogeneity of the NEET group. The category includes graduates seeking work as well as teenagers with few or no qualifications. Young people with five GCSEs grade A*-C form a significant proportion of the NEET population and in the UK 10-13% of NEET young people aged 16-24 have achieved tertiary level qualifications (Simmons et al., 2014, p.56-57). In their study of the drinking habits of NEET young people, Nelson and Taberrer (2015) found that not all their participants were the same; in their sample there was a university drop out, and three who had attended college or sixth form. In addition to this those who are NEET have similar attainment levels to those in education not following higher education programmes (Crawford et al, 2011, p.7 cited in (Simmons et al., 2014, p.61)).

The highest levels of NEETs tend to be among those aged 20 to 24 as participation in post-compulsory education has increasingly become the norm for 16 to 18 year olds; meaning that those who are NEET make up a small, but significant, portion of the 16 to 18 age group. These are potentially the more difficult cases who are facing more serious barriers. They can remain in or re-enter education with relative ease. However, beyond the age of 18 educational participation is considerably lower and educational opportunities are more restricted (Simmons et al., 2014). Simmons et al (2014) found that experiences of engagement with the welfare regime of the young people who turned 18 during
their research changed from being a benign regime in which engaging in learning was prioritised, to a more adult world in which getting a job took precedence over other ambitions. The age of a young person who is categorised as NEET is therefore significant as it is likely to influence an individuals' access and entitlement to services and support (Hutchinson et al., 2016). Core policy has been to target 16-17 year olds who are either ‘at risk’ of becoming, or already are, NEET; for example the introduction of EMA, and the raising of the participation age. However, 18-24 year olds are more likely than those aged 16 and 17 to be outside of education, employment or training.

Due to the heterogeneous nature of this group, using NEET as the key point of focus for targeting services can lead to a ‘fire-fighting’ approach in which attention is concentrated on those who can relatively easily be moved to the EET category (Nudzor, 2010). Targets to reduce NEETs are met by concentrating on sub-groups who are not particularly disadvantaged (Furlong, 2006). As a way of trying to avoid providers only working with those who were quick to turn around, the government introduced differential pricing which meant higher rewards for getting the hard-to-engage into work. However, this payment by results model is not suitable for clients with ‘multiple barriers’ as providers focus on those who are ‘job ready’ and the cost of providing support for those most in need has been too high (Department for Work and Pensions, 2014 cited in (France, 2016, p.155-156)).

Studies into Connexions found that while a holistic approach and focus on ‘soft outcomes’ were seen as vital, these kind of practices were discouraged and came into conflict with NEET reduction targets (Colley, 2012; Yates and Payne, 2006). There is a conflict of interest between engaging and supporting the needs of the NEET group, and the drive to increase post-16 participation and training and increase qualification levels (Maguire, 2013). On these programmes, the concern is with achieving a change in status but not on sustaining such a change which can lead to an attempt to provide short term solutions rather than thinking about longer term prospects. A preoccupation with inclusion can result in coercive initiatives that attempt to ‘reinsert’ young people into particular spheres of activity, such as education and employment, whilst ignoring the value of care.
work, voluntary work, friendships, inclusive activities and other spheres of inclusion (Axford, 2008 cited in (Rose et al., 2012, p.258-259)).

Colley (2012) found in her study of the Connexions service that management instructed the staff to engage in ‘unethical’ practices including delaying recording clients who had entered the ‘NEET’ category in the run-up to audits, submitting young people onto training courses in which they had no vocational interest in order to get them off the ‘NEET’ register, and coercing young people who were unhappy on their placements to remain rather than leave and become ‘NEET’. This focus on targets can mean that young people with multiple or profound problems are pushed into education or training (Yates and Payne, 2006). A young person’s NEET status may not be the most salient or useful thing to know, and a focus on this may divert attention from other more immediate risks which might exist in their lives, such as health or housing. Learning and employment may not feature prominently on their list of immediate priorities. They may need to overcome other problems before being ready to move into education, training or work. In addition to this, progression targets may vary according to the age of the young person, the types of funding regimes, and changing policy initiatives. What may be deemed a positive outcome for a young person at the age of 16 may be regarded in a different way later on (Simmons et al., 2014).

Targets to reduce the numbers of young people who are NEET also means that there is little incentive for practitioners to concern themselves with young people who are holding down a series of insecure jobs. Yates and Payne (2006) found that young people at ‘high risk’ but who were already in education, employment or training were neglected by the Connexions service. Rather than looking at issues of social exclusion more broadly, the NEET category has narrowed the focus. While it includes a wide range of individuals, it can be seen to have drawn attention away from those who occupy precarious insecure positions in the labour market.

The growth of precarious work, including temporary and casual forms of employment and underemployment could be seen to challenge the "traditional focus on unemployment as the measure par excellence of labour market
vulnerability" (Furlong, 2006, p.567). The Teesside Studies of Youth Transitions and Social Exclusion found that churning between insecure low-paid jobs, poor quality training schemes and unemployment was the norm for the young people in the neighbourhoods focused upon, and was a long term pattern stretching into middle age (MacDonald, 2011). The NEET category can therefore be seen as inadequate for understanding this wider notion of vulnerability and the experiences of youth in today's labour market. It fails to capture the significant number of young people who are ‘churning’. By focusing on a single issue the category of NEET suggests that the vast majority of young people are not facing any problems, creating a false impression of a homogenous, adequately catered for 80 to 95% of young people on the one hand, and a relatively small minority of ‘at risk’ on the other (Wyn and White, 1998, p.29).

Due to the criticisms discussed above, subcategories have been identified through research in an attempt to understand and help those who are NEET. Yates and Payne (2006) discovered three broad but fairly distinct groups of NEET young people: those who were in temporary transitional states that involve a period of being NEET, young parents who make the conscious decision to be NEET for a time while looking after their children, and young people who are NEET and also exhibit a number of complications or ‘risks’ in their lives. Research by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions identified five main subcategories of NEET which included a mix of ‘vulnerable’ and ‘non-vulnerable’ young people: the conventionally unemployed; the unavailable, including young carers, young people with family responsibilities and young people who are sick or disabled; the disengaged, including those who are not seeking jobs or education and are not constrained from doing so; the opportunity seekers who are actively seeking work or training, but are holding out for opportunities related to their skills; and the voluntary NEETs including those who are travelling or constructively engaged in other activities (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2012, p.24). While, the National Foundation for Educational Research viewed NEET as a problem with participation, identifying three categories of NEET young people; open to learning, undecided and sustained (Spielhofer, 2009 cited in (Smith and Wright, 2015, p.402)). However, these attempts to more clearly define the NEET
category have led to a range of definitions and subcategories being used by different researchers (Furlong, 2006).

As well as subcategories, ‘risk indicators’ have been developed to attempt to identify those at risk of becoming NEET; the aim is to tackle the ‘causes’ of being NEET using early intervention and prevention strategies. Different authorities use different ways to identify those who are ‘at risk’, ranging from demographic data to individual or behavioural factors (Filmer-Sankey and McCrone, 2012 cited in (France, 2016, p.141)). For example a Risk of NEET Indicator tool was developed and introduced into upper schools in Bedford in September 2015 to help schools identify young people from the age of 13 upwards who are at risk (Bedford Borough Council, 2016). Research has shown that some of the factors associated with becoming NEET include educational attainment; negative educational experiences including exclusion, truancy and bullying; disadvantage; class; family poverty and deprivation; having parents who have experienced unemployment; qualifications of parents; divorce; having your own child; responsibilities as a carer; having a disability; supervision by the youth offending team; disclosed substance abuse; and living in deprived neighbourhoods (Maguire and Rennison, 2005; Yates et al., 2011; Simmons and Thompson, 2011b; Delebarre, 2016). Research has also suggested that there are differences in reasons for NEET status between males and females. For males the risk lies in growing up in low cost city housing estates, and for females it is residing in families where there is little educational commitment, as well as the role of teenage pregnancies and motherhood which means that females are likely to remain NEET longer than males (Bynner and Parsons, 2002).

These subcategories help to outline the diversity of the NEET population and can be used to create targeted interventions and initiatives. However, the ‘source’ of the ‘problem’ of being NEET is defined in many different ways which creates confusion over how to identify and target resources to them (Tomlinson, 2013 cited in (France, 2016, p.141)). An ACEVO Commission Report (2012 cited in (David, 2014, p.468)) identified five distinct subgroups of NEET young people with only one common characteristic; being unemployed. Finlay et al (2010 cited in (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b, p. 70-71)) argue that even splitting the
NEET category into subgroups (or looking at 'risk factors') is unhelpful as people who share similar characteristics may have differing experiences and requirements for support.

Risk factor analysis is unpredictable and can potentially alienate young people further from the mainstream (France et al, 2012 cited in (France, 2016, p.142)). Measurement instruments used to identify young people are framed in narrow and individualistic terms with the ‘problem’ minimised to being one of particular youth. Wyn and White (1998) argue that the aim of identifying ‘at risk’ youth is to provide them with programmes and support to ensure they become more like ‘mainstream’ youth. A narrow problem centred framework provides the simplicity often demanded by policymakers but does not offer a suitable basis for addressing youth marginalisation (Wyn and White, 1998). When looking at a concept like NEET there is not a ‘one-size-fits-all theory’ as each individual is affected by different factors and has different reasons for being placed into the category (Arnold and Baker, 2013). It can therefore be argued that interventions need to be planned at an individual level, something which was attempted through the Connexions service with the use of personal advisors.

To further outline the problems and heterogeneity of the NEET category, recent research has gone beyond splitting NEET young people into subgroups, to look at the individual experiences of those who are classed as NEET. It is within this literature that this study aims to make a contribution. Looking at the individuals who fall into the category will allow the experience of NEET to be better understood, giving insights into the support they need. There is a need for an approach to understanding young people and targeting intensive support that takes into account characteristics, situations and difficulties they actually experience, rather than an overriding focus on their NEET or EET status (Yates and Payne, 2006). NEET young people are described in certain ways in policy, research and the media; it is important to hear from the young people themselves.
The focus on individual experiences

Studies of individual NEET young people have been conducted to demonstrate that the political and media discourses which present them in negative terms are inadequate to understand the lives of young people on the margins of education and employment (Russell et al., 2011). A 2010 House of Commons Education committee report acknowledged this, noting that "...the term 'NEET' is imperfect...its use as a noun to refer to a young person can be pejorative and stigmatising" (Shannahan, 2012, p.318). Simmons and Thompson (2011b, p.117) argue that the discourse surrounding NEET "tends to highlight the situation of young people who conform to its stereotypes, constructing them as more typical than they really are". The work of Phillips (2010) attempted to challenge the notion that these young people are deficient in some way; with her research focusing on what NEET young people have, rather than what they are seen to 'lack'. She looked at the identities of NEET young people, exploring their hopes and concerns, aspects of their lives which are important to them, their sources of self-esteem and their means of support. She focused on their positive attributes; on their personal qualities, talents and interests.

In their research, Simmons and Thompson (2011b) also attempted to challenge the conventional stereotypes of NEETs as dysfunctional and lacking aspiration by looking at the lived experience of being NEET. The young people they worked with during their research on Entry to Employment programmes were not being drawn from an 'underclass' of families with anti-social attitudes, little history of employment and an antipathy to education, they were 'ordinary people' not much different from working class learners in more mainstream provision. Half had experience of paid work, only a quarter had no GCSE passes and their family backgrounds were generally of people in relatively low-paid, unskilled or semi-skilled employment, with more than 80 percent of them coming from households with at least one parent in paid employment (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). They also generally had quite traditional aspirations for a job, a home and a family life and had not become disconnected from the values of mainstream society. The young people in their follow up study of NEET young people were similar, with parents who largely had engagement with working class employment and
experience of churning between different jobs and periods of unemployment (Simmons et al., 2014).

However, research which has critiqued the NEET category, still has a tendency to portray the young people associated with it as 'different'. For example, Furlong (2006) highlighted how young people who had never been NEET have different characteristics than those who have, including a more positive educational experience and a more advantaged family background. This ‘othering’ is an inherent issue with researching policy relevant ‘problem groups’. While the NEET term is critiqued, most researchers choose to retain it. In his research, Shannahan (2012, p.319) suggests that this is due to an "attempt to subvert the stigmatising and objectification of the unemployed youth to whom the term has been exposed". NEET is a label of deficit, of a group outside the norm who do not conform to the national agenda of economic competitiveness at an individual level and/or who are a drain on ever scarcer economic resources. The category supports a totalising discourse that seeks to normalise participation in education and training (Smith and Wright, 2015). The NEET individual is ‘othered’ making policy intervention desirable and necessary. These young people have been placed into a category which sets them apart. By acknowledging and using this category this research has therefore also labelled them as different. It looks at the individual experiences of these young people, and seeks to highlight their voice, but it is important to be aware of the impact of placing them into social categories. Researchers can be complicit in the objectification, control and governance of young people (Heath et al., 2009).

Studies which have focused on the individual experiences of being NEET, in an attempt to highlight the heterogeneity of the NEET category, also seem to focus on a generic experience. While it is misleading to assume that the most vulnerable or marginalised groups compromise the majority of the NEET group (Maguire, 2015a), research has tended to focus on those who are in this situation, rather than engaging with those who are NEET by choice. For example, Simmons et al (2014) found that a majority of the young people they worked with had negative experiences of education, few academic qualifications, were largely from working class backgrounds, often came from difficult family circumstances
and had lived most of their lives in deprived areas. They viewed the young people they worked with as 'marginalised', as their lives were played out in places and practices on the margins of society. The participants had spent significant periods of time outside of education and work, the jobs they found were largely insecure and poorly paid, and their education and training was disconnected from 'real opportunities' for advancement.

Arnold and Baker (2013), who conducted interviews with young people and 'key individuals' in their lives to highlight the complexity of those within the NEET category, found that the young people had 'complex and chaotic lives' with many sources of instability and that they lacked confidence. The young people they interviewed had similar characteristics to the assumptions and generalisations made about NEET young people; three were teenage parents, they all had poor attendance or behavioural issues at school and all came from homes where their parents had separated. In addition to this, while they attempted to use unstructured interviews to allow the participants to talk about their experiences freely, when reading the interview transcripts published in their book, at times the agenda seems to be controlled more by the interviewer and the focus on ‘risk factors’. For example, in one interview the interviewer asks a young person whether they have ever been in trouble with the police, an issue which had not been brought up by the participant (Arnold and Baker, 2013, p.69).

In addition to this, while Pemberton (2008) critiqued the UK policy around NEET young people for failing to acknowledge structural factors and offering an individualistic approach, his research into individual young people in Greater Merseyside served to stigmatise the people in this community. He referred to ‘cultures of worklessness’ and the importance of intergenerational factors. His research led him to outline the need for a greater emphasis on positive parenting, raising aspirations and addressing family breakdown. The focus here is not on individual deficiencies, but the broader deficiencies of the families and communities the young people are in. While broader trends are apparent in research and generalisation is necessary to develop arguments, this should be balanced against an understanding of the different ways in which young people
describe their situation, the courses of action they take, and the identity work in which they are engaged (Simmons et al., 2014).

Despite this focus on the individual experiences of NEET young people, there is a lack of discussion about how these young people label themselves and whether the stereotypes and assumptions associated with the category have an impact upon their self-identities. Simmons et al (2014) looked at the ways in which the construction of NEET young people in social policy shaped their experience and future prospects, however they do not outline how it shapes their sense of self. This research therefore aims to look at how young people who are placed in the NEET category relate to the term and how they consider their circumstances.

In research by Conrad (2005), who worked with a group of High School students in Canada deemed 'at risk', she found that the label 'at-risk' was deemed offensive by them. They rejected the notion on the grounds that their 'risky' behaviour was a matter of choice, giving them a sense of agency and control over their lives. The work of Macdonald et al (2005 cited in (Thompson, 2011, p.790)) highlights a different response to being labelled. They found that that their participants were 'bemused' by the idea that they might be socially excluded. While Rose et al (2012) looked at the meaning of social inclusion for young people who are NEET. This work acknowledged that the social inclusion of young people is a contemporary concern in policy discourses and is viewed as a term defined by adults and imposed on young people. Rose et al outline how there is little understanding of what ‘social inclusion’ means to young people; it is difficult to define and little research has looked into how people make sense of the concept. Similar ideas can be raised about the term NEET.

Previous research has found that young people do not describe themselves as NEET, nor do they identify with the concept, which raises questions about its meaningfulness and places it firmly within the discourse of policy makers (Yates and Payne, 2006; Rose et al., 2012). This study explores this issue further to look at how young people understand the term NEET and seeks to examine how the label, and ideas associated with it, impact upon the young people who are placed into the category. Being NEET does not just have a potential lasting impact upon
the identities, confidence and motivation of young people, it can also have an immediate impact, being associated with low self-esteem or confidence. Therefore, while young people may not associate themselves with the category, discourses around NEET, and their experiences of policy and interventions aimed at this group, may have an impact upon their sense of self. Discourses can shape experiences, and the negative discourses associated with this group could be having a negative impact upon young people who are classed as NEET.

Assumptions and generalisations are made about NEET young people being a problem group from poor backgrounds. However, the fact that young people may share a similar characteristic does not mean that is their main distinguishing feature, or that other characteristics or aspects of their lives are at all similar to others in the same sub-group (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). Being NEET is also viewed a normal phase or issue which a lot of young people experience (this contradiction is evident throughout the literature and this chapter). "NEETs" are not a distinct species set apart from other young people and it is important to recognise that NEET (for most) is a temporary status rather than a permanent condition. NEET constructs activity as static and a moment in time, however young people are not fixed in this category and therefore the composition of the group is constantly changing.

Young people can experience episodic experiences of being NEET, entering this status for short periods; "only 1% of young people are NEET at age 16 and 17 and 18“ (Newton, 2009 quoted in (MacDonald, 2011, p.431)). In 2010, 14% of 19 year olds had been NEET for over a year at some stage (Delebarre, 2016). It is often a dynamic experience, where young people churn between various forms of participation and non-participation. The largest number of new NEETs are those who were previously in poorly paid, low skill and insecure jobs without training (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2011 cited in (David, 2014, p.471)) and the Audit Commission found that being NEET at least once before did make becoming NEET again for six months or more 7.9 times more likely (Delebarre, 2016). Young people are rarely continuously NEET, however the outcomes and long term implications of being NEET seem to be better understood than the routes into and out of the NEET status (Hutchinson et al., 2016). This highlights
the need to look at how young people who are labelled as NEET define themselves, as for many it is only a temporary category, it is potentially therefore not of salience or significance to their sense of self. Understanding these young people as individuals will help to generate different discourses which can potentially shape policy and interventions that fit better with their lives and experiences.

**Conclusion**

Criticisms have been raised about the category of NEET and its use as a label for intervention, however it continues to be used in the development of policy and programmes. The approaches of successive British governments have generally remained the same, focusing on education and training, as well as monitoring and controlling young people, without questioning the quality of provision available. The aim of initiatives is to improve NEET young people as individuals, rather than focusing on structural and economic factors.

In an attempt to 'deal' with this problematic category assumptions are made about those within it, generating stereotypes which stigmatise and marginalise young people, producing a negative discourse which constructs them as ‘other’. They are viewed as deficient, troublesome and non-academic. However the category encompasses a heterogeneous group, made even more so by the extension of the age range, and young people have different reasons for being NEET and different needs. For most NEET is a temporary status. There is a need to go beyond NEET statistics and targets, and the assumptions and generalisations made about those associated with the category, to understand the experiences of individual young people. Developing a better understanding of those who have experiences of being NEET can help to generate suggestions for more effective policy interventions.

Despite research focusing on the individual experiences of young people who are placed into this category, there have been few studies in the UK which ask
how these young people define themselves and their situation. NEET tends to be viewed in a negative light, with the discourses around the political category being seen as inadequate to understand the lives of those who are not in education, employment or training, however little is known about how these young people see themselves (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016). Assumptions and generalisations have an impact upon policy and provision, but it is not fully clear what impact these stereotypes have on young people who are labelled as NEET. This research therefore aims to look at this group of young people as individuals, exploring their self-identities, and how they relate to dominant discourses about NEET young people. Hearing from the young people themselves enables the research to explore the heterogeneity of this group and gives the participants the ability to challenge the stereotypes associated with being NEET as they are able to tell their own stories about their experiences. As the focus of this research is on identity, the next chapter will outline how this complex concept is being viewed in this study.
Chapter Three: The reflexive project of the self: choice, agency and individualisation

Introduction

Despite recent studies which have looked at the individual experiences of young people who are associated with the diverse, problematic category of NEET (Phillips, 2010; Simmons et al., 2014), there is a lack of discussion of how young people who are placed into this category relate to the term and how they talk about their circumstances. Ideas and discourses generated through policy and the media can have an impact upon how young people view themselves. They can be active in processes of exclusion and may have longer term implications for identity (Rose et al., 2012). In addition to this, how these young people are defined and understood has an impact upon how policy is constructed. The NEET group is currently being viewed in a negative light. Understanding how these young people define themselves can challenge misconceptions and underlying assumptions, offering different conceptions of those who have experiences of being NEET.

The work of Giddens (1991) and his idea of the ‘reflexive self’ will be used to explore the narratives of the young people in this research. While literature acknowledges the role of individualisation in the lives of NEET young people, the concept of the reflexive self has not really been applied to those who are associated with this category. Giddens ideas are useful in helping to answer the research questions of this study which examines how young people on a course for those not in education, employment or training describe themselves, their current situation and their aspirations for the future; as he takes into account past, present, and future narratives and how these are brought together to construct a self-identity.

For Giddens (1991) having a sense of self identity is having a sense of the self as ‘alive’, within the scope of reflexive control, rather than having the inert quality of things in the object world. An emphasis solely on the structure within which people live diminishes the role of human choice and action. Using his work
therefore offers an agentive approach to looking at NEET young people, which Lumby (2012, p.266 cited in (Beck, 2015, p.486)) argues can counter the depiction of them as predominantly at risk because they have the “capacity, even in challenging circumstances, to lead a life they value, and others view positively”. This acknowledgement of agency is important as much of the discourse around the term NEET objectifies young people, ‘robbing’ them of their agency (Shannahan, 2012, p.318). The importance of agency in the lives of young people associated with this category has been highlighted in previous research. Phillips (2010) acknowledged that the lives of the participants in her study were not just determined by having specific characteristics or coming from a particular background, they had a sense of agency developed through, what she suggests, is their ‘personal capital’. Likewise, Russell et al (2011) found that the young people in their study did have agency, finding this was expressed in the discourse of progression.

This chapter will acknowledge the agency of young people in making decisions and in creating their identities highlighted in the work of Giddens (1991), but will also outline the role of structure, acknowledging that the narratives that people construct are socially and culturally located. The idea of ‘bounded agency’ will be used to explore this (Evans, 2007). The impact of discourse on the narratives the young people are able to create will also be discussed. Reflecting the work of Wyn and White (1998), this research follows the idea that structural factors and social contexts are integral to the process of identity formation and the negotiation of individual life patterns. Young people negotiate their own futures, lives and meanings, but do so in the context of specific social, political and economic circumstances. Identities are developed through an interplay of agency, institutional structures and social circumstances. The chapter will begin by exploring the role of individualisation in the lives of NEET young people, to demonstrate why the notion of the reflexive self may be useful in looking at how these young people construct their self-identities.
Research has highlighted the relevance of individualisation to the lives of young people who are NEET (MacDonald, 2011; Yates et al., 2011; Simmons et al., 2014). For example, studies have indicated that they often attribute their status to individualised factors such as low ability, lack of work experience and low confidence or self-esteem (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). The NEET category signifies a conceptual shift away from youth unemployment to more individualised ways of thinking about the labour market vulnerability of young people (Simmons et al., 2014). As highlighted in the previous chapter, individualisation forms part of the discourse which shapes policy aimed at NEET young people. Being NEET is attributed to young people themselves, constructed in terms of their alleged deficits such as lack of skills and motivation or being viewed as delinquent and dysfunctional (Yates et al., 2011), rather than recognising political and economic causes such as the decline in demand for labour and the failings of society. Social problems are viewed as consequences of individual failing, blamed on personal characteristics and lifestyles. Policies pay attention to the individual, ignoring broader structural issues. Individualisation is therefore used to justify individual level solutions to social inequality.

Individualisation also plays a wider role in the lives of young people, with the work of Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) offering a useful framework through which to consider their experiences in post-industrial capitalist societies (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). Late modern theorists, including Beck, Giddens and Bauman, suggest that social divisions such as gender and social class, and predictable life patterns of the past, may be eroding. Giddens (1991) argues that it is no longer possible to simply seek to be like our parents and there are no jobs for life. Individuals are increasingly free to construct identities that, in the past, were defined by tradition and social institution. In traditional cultures transitions in individual's lives were ritualised in the shape of 'rites of passage' when the individual moved into adulthood. This change happened on a collective level, with things staying more or less the same from generation to generation, and the changed identity was clearly staked out. Transitions were based on established
and set social and economic boundaries and tended to be predictable and routine, dominated by customs. However, in modernity, ritual activities in relation to major transitions of life have declined and instead the self has to be reflexively explored and constructed (Giddens, 1991). Young people have been cut off from previous forms of identity and collective support mechanisms, and forced to participate in new forms of decision making to create their own pathways and futures (Beck and Beck-Gernstein, 2002 cited in (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b, p.175)). Reflexive modernisation is seen to have altered the ways in which individuals make sense of and navigate the world around them (Tomlinson, 2013).

Changes in wider society have therefore made the life course less clearly defined and transition routes and identities have become more uncertain and problematic (Beck, 1992). Beck views modernity as a ‘risk society’. He suggests that the disintegration of the certainties of industrial society have led to a compulsion to find and invent new certainties. Job insecurity and unemployment are no longer confined to the ‘bottom rungs of society’ and are now more widespread and endemic. Work has become individualised with little recourse to social networks of labour organisations. The ways of life established in industrial society have been replaced by new ones in which “individuals must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves” (Beck et al., 1994, p.13). Collective experiences have been replaced by unique biographies and ambitions.

Beck (1994) suggests that there has been a movement from ‘standard biographies’, where people fulfil pre-existing roles and life plans, to ‘chosen biographies’, where individuals are responsible for who and what they become. Increasing responsibilities are placed on individuals to take charge of their lives, meaning that people’s social and economic experiences have become increasingly individualised. Society has moved from one in which identities and behaviours were clearly mapped and collectively understood, to one in which there are multiple maps, few agreed routes and high levels of anxiety about whether individuals are ‘doing the right thing’ (Henderson et al., 2007). There are new fields of decision making in which individuals must participate and
opportunities and risks are now perceived, interpreted, decided and processed as individuals rather than by social class or community.

In earlier decades a large majority of young people expected to enter the workplace after completing their compulsory education, making collective transitions from school to the factory or mine. However due to a breakdown in these collective transitions with clearly defined roles associated with de-industrialisation in the late 1970s and 1980s, the movement from education to work has become more fragmented and less certain with people having to work out their roles for themselves. The research of Yates et al (2011) support this observation that traditional class-based routes to secure employment have broken down, finding that significant numbers of young people from low socio-economic backgrounds in the British Cohort Study aspired to occupations other than those suggested by their social backgrounds or were uncertain about what jobs they wanted to do.

However, Goodwin and O'Connor (2005) argue that transitions were never as collective or smooth as theories about industrial society suggest. The uneasy transitions of some young people were hidden by low levels of unemployment and the constant job-changing of others was masked by the relative availability of work. Precariousness and non-standard work are therefore not a new concept for the young. Even in times when transitions from school to work seemed unproblematic, many young people had non-linear, complex and risky experiences, including changes of jobs, and periods of inactivity and unemployment (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2005). In addition to this, for young women work has always had strong elements of flexibility, casualisation and insecurity (Crompton, 1997 cited in (France, 2016, p.112)). ‘Insecurity’ and unemployment for the most marginalised and vulnerable young people have always been an issue (MacDonald, 2011).

Yet, changes have occurred; with periods of dependency and work insecurities increasing (France, 2016). Generally, transitions have become extended or delayed as young people have longer periods of dependency on their parents, tend to stay in education for longer periods, and usually enter the labour market
at a later age than in the post-war era (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). Increasing numbers of young people are now participating in further and higher education due to the decline in the youth labour market and changes to the participation age. Young people now continue in education well into their early 20s with unprecedented numbers involved in higher education, while paid work has become harder to get and it takes longer for young people to achieve the careers they desire (France, 2016).

The emergence of the NEET category itself can be seen to reflect the normalisation of full-time post-compulsory education or training as the initial stage in school to work transitions, as it highlights the concern over those who want to leave education and training at the age of 16 (Simmons et al., 2014). "Sixteen-year-olds who insist that they want proper jobs and who try to avoid all alternatives have become a new problem group" (Roberts, 2009, p.358). Investment in education and training is of central importance in making successful transitions and emphasis on individual aspiration and capacity in government policy indicates that young people’s transitions have become more individualised (Yates et al., 2011).

The age of first marriage has also increased, with people marrying later and having children later; the average age of women for the birth of their first child has risen from 21 in 1971 to over 30 today (Ainley, 2013, p.56). This is partially due to difficulties in the employment transition as young people are hindered in their ability to make the family transition as they do not have the material resources necessary to set up an independent household (Hopkins, 2010). In addition to this more people are cohabiting and having children outside of marriage, and there have also been social transformations in feminism, contraception and secularization. More young people are also living in shared housing which can be regarded as experiencing an extended transitional period where adulthood is placed 'on hold' until an independent adult home can be established (Kenyon, 2003). In the economic sphere young people find it hardest to 'grow up' as they remain financially dependent upon their parents until a much later age.
Simmons and Thompson (2011b) argue that it is an oversimplification to describe youth transitions as delayed or extended. The nature and structure of life in the twentieth and twenty first centuries has rendered traditional theorisations of transition largely redundant (Beck, 1992). Transitions have been described as fractured or broken, or through using different terms such as trajectories, routes, pathways, journeys and navigations (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). The linear model of young people's life patterns is misleading (Wyn and White, 1998). Access to traditional 'signifiers' of adulthood have become disordered or suspended, with employment, marriage and parenthood not taking place in a particular order, or sometimes not taking place at all.

Transitions to adulthood have become increasingly diverse and therefore viewed as more individualistic; through having to navigate opportunities young people's biographies have come to be viewed as the outcome of individual choice, aspiration or failure. Individual responsibility has increased, with the relevance of individual agency in relation to institutional and structural factors becoming increasingly visible (Pemberton, 2008). Individuals have to be flexible and adaptable, and are expected to be 'free choosers' bearing in full the consequences of their choices (Bauman, 2007). A one dimensional perspective which reduces youth transitions to successes and failures according to linear standard trajectories does not take into account the diversity of transition patterns. It has become difficult to define what success is (Walther, 2009). It can be argued that there is no simple destination for growing up, with everyone existing in a vivid present, attempting to get somewhere, but to an elusive place. Henderson et al (2007) suggest that adulthood does not exist but has to be invented. The concept of adolescence as a 'transition to adulthood' is itself socially constructed. The social idea of what it means to be an adult varies widely across cultures and over time (Rose et al., 2012). Transitions may not have been as collective and smooth as theories about industrial society suggest, however there have been changes which have impacted upon the lives of young people, with periods of dependency and insecurity increasing.

Changes to the youth labour market over the last few decades have particularly affected the pathways to employment of lower achieving young people and those
with a lower socio-economic status. These groups have disproportionately experienced the effects of fragmented and insecure transitions (Yates et al., 2011). Research argues that a substantial number of NEET young people experience ‘non-linear’ transitions (Furlong et al, 2003 cited in (Pemberton, 2008, p.244)). They are viewed as ‘different’ as they are not following a ‘normal’ pathway of development. Within policy, transitions tend to be reduced exclusively to the achievement of qualifications and labour market entry, with success or failure related to individuals’ responsibility and rationality in making decisions regarding education, training and employment (Walther, 2009). However, the consideration of what transitions might be ‘normal’ or otherwise is increasingly inappropriate (Yates and Payne, 2006). The experiences of NEET young people therefore need to be understood within these broader changes to life patterns and transitions.

Individualisation has shaped policy and the way in which young people experience the transition from youth to adulthood. It has also been found to have impacted upon how young people view their lives. Evans (2007), whose research covers both the UK and Germany, found that the group of young people in the UK generally believed in the idea of meritocracy; if you 'failed' in life this was probably your own fault and down to a lack of effort and determination. They generally held the view that opportunities are open to all and ability will be rewarded. The overriding perspective was that the future is in one's own hands, which demonstrates a strong belief in agency. Similarly, Brannen and Nilsen (2005) found that, in their study of youth transitions, discourses of autonomy and independence were strong, and the young people subscribed to notions of 'individual choice'.

These ideas about individualisation have been emphasised through state and youth policy, which provide a backdrop to the experiences which young people have. Government policy in the UK, based on neo-liberal free market ideas, is focused on people ‘taking control’ of their own lives. Self-management through choice is framed as an ethical duty to self and society (Rose, 1992 cited in (Skeggs, 2004, p.57)). Cronin (2000 cited in (Skeggs, 2004, p.61)) suggests that we are now in a period of 'compulsory individuality'. Within this the notion of
'choice' becomes an ideal and route to the expression of individuality. We therefore have no choice but to choose if we are to express ourselves as individuals. The young people in this research are constructing their identities within structures which highlight the merit of individual choice. Youth policy emphasises the ‘entrepreneurial self’ which requires young people to be rational, autonomous and responsible, as well as being free and prudent in their decision making; it advocates for a person to be responsible for themselves (Kelly, 2006 cited in (France, 2016, p.55)), for managing their own life and being responsible for their own success. Alongside this there has been a gradual and consistent withdrawal of communal, state endorsed insurance against individual failure. The social state is being cut back and the arrangements for collective self-defence, such as trade unions, have been increasingly disempowered (Bauman, 2007). Individuals are expected to take responsibility for their own lives. It is within this context that the participants in this research are constructing their identities. Individualisation is shaping their transitions and the policies they are experiencing.

The reflexive self

Despite acknowledgement of the role of individualisation on young people’s lives in the NEET literature (Simmons and Thompson, 2011a; Yates et al., 2011; Simmons et al., 2014), little research in this field explores the relevance of concepts such as the reflexive self to this group of young people. Using the notion of the reflexive self can enable an understanding of how these young people attempt to take responsibility for their own lives, and how they try to navigate the choices which are available to them to create their own pathways and futures. By looking at ‘projects of the self’ it is possible to understand the work young people are doing in the present in order to claim a sense of adulthood (Henderson et al., 2007). It allows a focus on how NEET young people are experiencing individualisation and the resources they have available to them in helping to navigate options and construct their self-identities.
The context these young people are in also makes the concept of the reflexive self useful for exploring their self-identities. While questioning whether the reflexive project of the self can be applied to all people, May and Cooper (1995) do acknowledge that there are moments in individuals' biographies where there is sufficient time and space for these creative resources to be voluntarily deployed. Similarly there are moments of great crisis when 'self-authoring' is forced upon us. Giddens (1991, p.143) refers to these periods as 'fateful moments' which are “times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands at a crossroads in their existence or where a person learns of information with fateful consequences”. The key element of a fateful moment is that the individual considers the consequences of particular choices and actions and so engages in an assessment of risk. They can be potentially empowering experiences with consequences for self-identity and future conduct as they may play a role in the ordering and re-ordering of narratives. As the participants in this research are on a course for NEET young people during which they are trying to figure out the next steps to take in their lives, they are being asked to work out who they are and who they want to be; to think reflexively and make decisions regarding their future. Due to the centrality of the notion to this research, this section will outline Giddens' ideas to demonstrate what he means by the concept of the 'reflexive self'.

According to Giddens (1991, p.75) the self is not a passive entity, but is forged by individuals; "we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves". Self-identity is not something that is just given, and is not a distinctive trait, or collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual; "it is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography" (Giddens, 1991, p.53). Giddens therefore suggest that people engage in creating a reflexive project of the self which "consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives" (Giddens, 1991, p.5). People construct a self-identity by forging a set of narratives about themselves, bringing narratives about the past into line with their new identity and experimenting with narratives to find out who they are or could be; in other words the individual appropriates their past by sifting though it in the light of their anticipated future.
The reflexive project of the self has to be accomplished amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities (Gauntlett, 2002). Each of us has, and lives, a biography reflexively organised in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life. An indefinite range of potential courses of action is, at any given moment, open to individuals, with choice being the fundamental component of every day activity. Tradition or established habit orders life within relatively set channels, however modernity confronts the individual with a complex diversity of choices and offers little help as to which options should be selected (Giddens, 1991). For Giddens (1991), in a post-traditional order, the signposts established by tradition are blank. What used to be laid down in advance, whether by tradition or class, increasingly gives way as new spaces for decision open up; as specialised knowledge becomes more widely available in public life, people free themselves from social structures to define their own lifestyles and identities (Tucker, 1998). In increasingly more situations, individuals are confronted with the need to make decisions, and they are increasingly alone in making them because their trajectories differ from those of their parents as well as their peers (Walther, 2009). There are increased opportunities for choice in areas such as education and work, and people freely create their identities through the fluidity and mobility offered in late modern society.

Lifestyle choices are therefore seen as important in the construction of self-identity. Giddens (1992) argues that such choices are not just external or marginal aspects of the individual's attitudes, but define who the individual 'is'; lifestyle choices are constitutive of the reflexive narrative of the self. Individuals embrace a lifestyle, which Giddens (1991) defines as a more or less integrated set of practices, to give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity. This lifestyle is 'adopted' rather than 'handed down'. All choices are decisions not only about how to act, but who to be (Giddens, 1991). The lack of a reliable prescribed pathway requires young people to make their own life plan, the viability and end result of which is highly uncertain. Individuals are asked to choose and decide for themselves, in the knowledge that they will be ultimately responsible for their decisions (Walther, 2009).
Living in a ‘risk society’ therefore refers not just to the fact that there are new forms of danger within modern social life which humanity has to face, but also means living with a calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action with which we are continuously confronted in our contemporary social existence (Giddens, 1991). Giddens (1991) suggests that the more the individual seeks reflexively to forge a self-identity, the more he or she will be aware that current practices shape future outcomes. To live in modernity is to live in an environment of chance and risk, where future events are shaped by human intervention regulated by risk assessment (Giddens, 1991). To deal with the pace of change in modern society, people attempt to focus on things they believe they can influence; they try to calculate and minimise risk (Bauman, 2007). Giddens (1991) claims that individuals attempt to 'colonise the future for themselves', or in other words seek to stabilise outcomes through risk assessment, as part of their life planning. ‘Futures’ are reflexively organised in the present. The reflexive self entails people making choices about their life among a range of options, continually reflecting on, and calculating the risk of these choices. Through making these lifestyle choices people construct their own identity, and reflexively create a biographical narrative of constancy over time.

A person with a reasonably stable sense of self-identity has a feeling of biographical continuity which they are able to grasp reflexively and communicate to other people. For Giddens (1991) identity is not in the behaviour or the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. However, if an individual is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day to day world this narrative cannot be wholly fictional; it must continually integrate events which occur and sort them into an ongoing ‘story’ about the self. Identity is the creation of constancy over time; "In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going" (Charles Taylor quoted in (Giddens, 1991, p.54)). This is based on the premise that to be a human being, is to know both what one is doing and why one is doing it. Giddens argues that reflexive awareness is the characteristic of all human action. All human beings continually monitor the circumstances of their activities (Giddens, 1991, p.35).
Giddens views self-identity as both robust and fragile. Fragile because the biography the individual reflexively creates is only one story among many other potential stories which could be told; a self-identity has to be created and more or less continually reordered. The narrative of self-identity has to be shaped, altered and reflexively sustained in relation to changing circumstances of social life. The self can therefore be revised as new information becomes available.

Giddens (1991) also acknowledges that individuals adjust their appearance and demeanour 'somewhat' according to the perceived demands of a particular setting, the narratives of people are therefore 'occasioned' being closely tied to the circumstances in which they are told. Yet, despite suggesting that the narratives which people create are constantly changing, Giddens does not view people as having multiple selves with no 'inner core of self-identity'. He acknowledges that this is in contrast with discussions of the self and modernity, including ideas of the self in modern society being viewed as 'frail, brittle, fractured, fragmented' and post-structuralist notions of the 'decentred subject' which finds identity in the fragments of language or discourse (Giddens, 1991).

Giddens views self-identity as more robust because he suggests that a sense of self identity is often securely enough held to overcome tensions and transitions. In addition to this, despite people adjusting their appearance and demeanour in different settings, Giddens argues that people maintain constants of demeanour across varying settings to help preserve the coherence of self-identity.

Through the notion of the reflexive self and the importance of lifestyle choices in relation to this, the individual is viewed as an active, agency-seeking subject who endeavours to establish some level of control over their place in the world (Archer, 2007). Giddens suggests that 'lifestyle choices' are not just made by affluent groups or classes as choice transcends all class differentiation. Its influence is more or less universal, no matter how limiting the social situations of particular individuals or groups may be. He claims that even someone who concentrates on 'surviving' cannot be said to have abandoned all autonomy over his or her life circumstances and decisions can be taken under conditions of severe material constraint; to survive is to be determined to ride out and overcome the trials life presents (Giddens, 1991). He is therefore arguing that the individual is not passive in relation to external social forces. The reflexive
construction of a personal narrative allows an individual to understand themselves as in control of their lives and futures (Jenkins, 2008).

Using Giddens’ ideas will allow this research to explore the narratives these young people attempt to create in relation to their past, present and future identities to generate some sense of a coherent self, and how these narratives change as they explore different choices. The notion of the reflexive self enables a focus on how people may feel they have choice and control over their lives and, through creating a set of ‘narratives’ about themselves, there is an attempt to show how they have become the person they have and how they will become the person they want to be in the future. It ascribes them with a sense of agency, not viewing their identities as something which is given to them passively, such as their association with the NEET category, but as something which they are able to actively construct. This is important in relation to the aims of the research which attempts to focus on these young people as individuals and to hear about their experiences. In particular the emphasis is on how these young people describe themselves and how they view their current and future identities, enabling them to create different discourses about being NEET outside of the stereotypes and assumptions associated with the category. The reflexive self enables a focus on the version of the self which individuals are forging. It also acknowledges the role of individualisation in the lives of young people. While this has been highlighted in the NEET literature, it has not been fully explored in relation to the concept of the reflexive self. It is not clear how this view of the creation of self-identity applies to young people within this category.

The reflexive self enables a focus on the narratives of NEET young people and their attempt to control their lives and futures, however reflexivity does not lead to a situation in which we are masters of our own destiny as the notion of ‘risk’ is central to modern culture (Giddens, 1994). Despite attempts to control it, life is unpredictable. There are therefore questions around how much control people have over their lifestyle choices and decisions. While it is important to acknowledge the agency of the young people in this research, the role of structure within their lives also needs to be recognised.
Acknowledging the role of structure: the impact of resources upon choice

Making lifestyle decisions can be seen as individuals being able to exercise their agency, however individualisation is arguably not based on the free decision of individuals; people are condemned to it. Giddens (1994, p.75) argues that all individuals are compelled to make lifestyle choices; "we have no choice but to choose". People are called upon to plan, design and act or suffer the consequences (Beck *et al.*, 1994). Individualisation is therefore not necessarily positive or empowering.

Giddens argues that there is a difference between making choices and making decisions. Day to day activities are open to choice, however all areas of social activity come to be governed by decisions. For Giddens who takes those decisions, and how, is fundamentally a matter of power. Lifestyle options are very often bounded by factors out of the hands of the individual (Giddens, 1994). People manufacture, design and self-stage their own biographies, commitments and networks but under the overall conditions of the state, impacted by things such as the education system, the labour market and the housing market (Beck *et al.*, 1994, p.14).

Giddens (1991) therefore alludes to the issue of inequality and limits of choice. He suggests that "class divisions and other fundamental lines of inequality, such as those connected with gender and ethnicity, can be partly defined in terms of differential access to forms of self-actualisation and empowerment" (Giddens, 1991, p.6). He also acknowledges that life chances relate to the availability of potential lifestyles/lifestyle choices; not all choices are open to everyone, and not all people take decisions about options in the full realisation of the range of feasible alternatives. The selection or creation of lifestyles is influenced by group pressures and the visibility of role models, as well as by socio-economic circumstances.

While Giddens highlights that lifestyle options are ‘bounded’, a sustained recognition of the limits placed on the ‘search for self-identity’ by material and cultural conditions is neglected (May and Cooper, 1995). He has a tendency to
understand identity and the self mainly in response to the social dynamics and ever-changing nature of society. Identity becomes a question of redefining oneself in relation and response to this. Structural constraint therefore seems generally to disappear from his work on modernity (Loyal, 2003) and he underestimates the complex relationship of the self and social world, particularly the practical restrictions which people face (Tucker, 1998).

Giddens fails to provide an “adequate characterisation” of the relationship between agency and structure (Loyal, 2003, p.125). He has difficulty in accounting for how social systems can be imposed on people and pays inadequate attention to who can structure social relations, and who is being structured by them (Tucker, 1998). Skeggs (2004, p.53) argues that Giddens conceptualises a self detached from structure; “there is no sense in Giddens that the possibility of having a self may be a classed, raced or gendered issue”. Savage (2000 cited in (Skeggs, 2004, p.53)) sees this as problematic as social differentiation and positioning can help to understand the type of personhood we inhabit. The degree of agency which any individual or group is able to exercise remains structured by a range of social, economic and cultural factors (Beck, 1992). We are shaped and affected by social structures; they limit our range of possible choices of action and thought. Although a young person may be outside education and employment for various and often individualised reasons, opportunity structures and other socio-economic factors play an important part in creating the conditions under which contingencies occur (Simmons and Thompson, 2013).

Experiences of young people cannot be accounted for purely in terms of individuals and the choices they make. Youth transitions may have become more individualised and many young people embrace the notion of creating their own identity, yet structured inequalities continue to exist (Bynner, 2005 cited in (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b, p. 175)). Processes of individualisation have only obscured the ways in which social and economic structures shape young people’s lives. Ideas about individuals and choice have eclipsed attention to the contexts and conditions under which choices are made (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005). The stories which some people tell about their lives may be permeated by
a sense of agency and reflexivity, while the lives they live continue to be contextually embedded. This was highlighted in the work of Furlong and Cartmel (1997) who claim that the social world has only come to be regarded as unpredictable and negotiated on an individual level, while structural forces still operate as powerfully as ever; people tend to see themselves as agents capable of controlling their own lives and are somewhat blind to the existence of structural constraints.

Life chances remain highly structured but people increasingly seek solutions on an individual rather than collective level. Inequalities have not disappeared but merely become redefined in terms of an individualisation of social risks (Yates et al., 2011); “the reflexive conduct of life, the planning of one’s own biography and social relations, gives rise to new inequality, inequality in dealing with insecurity and reflexivity” (Beck, 1992, p.98). The supposed historical break from tradition, including the weakening of class, community and family ties, has thrown people onto their own resources and their own fate in the labour market. Freedom of choice comes with risk of failure and such risks may be unbearable for many people, exceeding their personal ability to cope (Bauman, 2007). Individual choice, participation and engagement are problematic for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged sections of the population (Yates et al., 2011).

Therefore, while reflexive identity work is an important part of the identities of young people as they re-define themselves in response to an ever changing society, this takes different forms depending on the resources young people have available to them. The individualisation of transitions is not experienced equally by all young people (Yates et al., 2011). Giddens (1991) presents the self as a neutral concept available to all, with the constructing of a biography seen as a neutral method rather than something dependent on access to discourse and resources. Giddens relies on everybody having equal access to resources by which the self can be known, assessed and narrated. However, research has shown that these resources are not available to everyone. May and Cooper (1995, p.79) suggest that making decisions about identity depends on the availability of considerable creative resources and relies on individuals having considerable autonomy and freedom. They suggest that the reflexive project of
the self "assumes the expenditure of much effort on deciding who and what we are" and "demands enormous resources of leisure".

While opportunities have expanded and more are able to glimpse new economic opportunities, not all may get the chance to fulfil them. Social exclusion still exists and dominant social groups are able to deploy additional economic and cultural resources to achieve relative advantages (Tomlinson, 2013). For example, what is supposed to be the 'normal' trajectory of school followed by higher education is enormously demanding in terms of resources and resourcefulness (Skeggs, 2004). Bryant and Ellard (2015) found that the capacity to formulate a biography is shaped by the kinds of social and economic capital which people possess, which in the case of the disadvantaged young people in their study was very little. Despite promises of 'choice for all', those at a structural disadvantage may have little freedom to choose anything other than fulfilling the required responsibilities (Duckworth and Cochrane, 2012).

Structural inequalities have a continuing significance, providing the parameters within which individuals choices are made (Nilsen and Brannen, 2002). The social and material environment in which young people grow up shapes their values and identities, the 'choices' they make, and the resources available to them in attempting particular life pathways (Holland, 2007, 2009 cited in (Edwards and Weller, 2010, p.127)). Differential access to economic, social and cultural resources significantly influence, not only what young people are able to reasonably contemplate, but also what they are able to achieve (Lawy and Wheeler, 2013). Bauman (1988) argues that asking who you are only makes sense once you believe you can be someone other than who you are. Individuals are not simply free to choose who and what they want to be (Henderson et al., 2007). The time and space, as well as the material resources, available to most people for projects around self-identity are therefore problematic. Individuals have access to different resources and opportunities in navigating through their lives, while social inequalities are increasingly reproduced through individual decision making (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Walther, 2009).
Brannen and Nilsen (2002) suggest that the resources on which individuals draw may be critical to how choice appears to them. The positive rhetoric of choice therefore has more appeal to, and relevance for, young people whose social background and education provide the resources necessary to think they are the creators of their own destinies; "when structural forces and personal resources...support one another there is a tendency for the structural resources to take on an 'invisible' quality" (Nilsen and Brannen, 2002, p.42). While for the less privileged that choice rhetoric can serve to worsen their situation since, according to such an ideology, there is no one to blame but oneself. They focus on individual shortcomings, rather than processes largely outside their control, and develop a sense that they alone are responsible for their labour market and educational outcomes. Young people have a tendency to blame themselves rather than social or economic factors for any failure to achieve educational or occupational objectives (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Roberts, 1995 cited in (Henderson et al., 2007, p.46)).

Social structures around young people therefore can enable or constrain their actions. Research into NEET young people has demonstrated that while they have agency, they are shaped and influenced by cultural and structural factors; choices are not made in an economic and social vacuum. The choices of young people, to some extent, are shaped by opportunity structures, leading to low expectations rather than low aspirations. They observe the opportunities and outcomes experienced by others by them, and cultural norms and expectations channel them into traditional occupational and social roles. The attitudes and behaviours of NEET young people are shaped in the same way as other people's, by the conditions in which they live and work, by the challenges they face, and by the resources available to them (Simmons et al., 2014). Becoming or remaining NEET is deeply embedded within the interplay of structure and agency, with broader social structures having a significant influence (Simmons et al., 2014). Responses to NEET status are influenced by a number of factors including peer groups and family; the levels of local labour market supply and demand; and experiences of poverty (Hutchinson et al., 2016).
The literature has demonstrated that resources are important in the choices that young people are able to make, and their lives remain contextually embedded. Structure can operate as a ‘silent discourse’ with young people outlining the importance of their individual choices and decisions. Brannen and Nilsen (2005, p.418) suggest that "silence about the structural side of the dynamic does not mean it is unimportant to people's lives. Rather structure and context form part of the taken for granted aspects of life that are omitted from people's narratives and accounts". Therefore, while people highlight their agency, structure still has an important impact upon their lives.

Due to the continuing impact of social structure, previous research with young people has highlighted the limitations of the notion of the reflexive self in relation to their lives and construction of their identities (Devadason, 2007; Henderson et al., 2007). For example, Devadason (2007) found that the young people in his study did not all make choices based on a reflexive engagement with the project of the self, but as a reactive response to immediate difficulties. Due to this they struggled to create coherence from the disparate events in their life histories. Research with NEET young people has also highlighted the limitations of choice. Nudzor (2010) suggests that a key characteristic of the group is an absence of educational pathways, employment and training opportunities. Therefore, while young people do attempt to make choices and have a sense of agency, as highlighted in the work of Giddens, it needs to be acknowledged that this agency is ‘bounded’.

**Bounded and contextual agency**

The work of Evans (2002; 2007) demonstrates how young people’s agency is restricted; she views agency as something which is developed gradually and through experience. In relation to the role of structure and agency in peoples’ lives and their work transitions, Evans views agency as the input of young adults themselves on an individual basis, while structure is the input from organisations at a national and local level, the effects of labour markets, and the influence of
broad social characteristics. Agency is viewed as something which young people possess which is ‘bounded’ by society; it is ‘socially situated’. The concept of bounded agency therefore views actors having past and imagined future possibilities which guide and shape their actions in the present; linking to the notion of the reflexive self. Evans also acknowledges the subjective perceptions of the structures young people have to negotiate, and the social landscapes that affect how they act, which means that it is not always possible to have personal control of such processes (Evans, 2007). Her study into experiences of control and agency of 18-25 year olds found that the young people were ‘bounded’ by wider societal features, as well as by their social background and institutional environments (Evans, 2002).

Evans’ work takes into account the notion of reflexivity, but goes beyond the ideas of Giddens by acknowledging that young people are not always in control of their choices, developing a clearer account of the role of structure. Through her ideas, agency is viewed as emotionally and socially structured, interlinked with the resources available to a young person (Aaltonen, 2013). It can be constrained by personal characteristics and circumstances, and local contexts and structures. Similar to the work of Evans, Wyn and White (1998) suggest a contextual model of young people’s agency. They view agency as how young people negotiate, contest and challenge institutionalised processes of social division within which they are situated. Social structures act to both constrain young people in certain ways and as important sites of resistance and contestation. While institutions constrain actions they do not eliminate agency; institutions and rules leave gaps, ambiguities, unforeseen elements, and opportunities for political struggles to emerge.

The notion of bounded agency has been related to the experiences of NEET young people. For example, Beck (2015) looked at how relationships between learning providers and NEET young people impacted upon the agency development of the young people; finding that providers facilitated the development of individual agency in the form of self-esteem and motivation, however they also added additional barriers and challenges, in particular in relation to the low expectations of the providers in relation to the young people.
Previous research has also demonstrated the relevance of the contextual model of young people’s agency highlighted by Wyn and White (1998). This has highlighted that the lives of NEET young people are shaped by social exclusion, stigmatisation and marginalisation, however they develop ‘resistance’ to these structures (Shannahan, 2012; Thompson et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2015; Russell, 2016). In the work of Shannahan (2012) this resistance came through young people attempting to create an alternative discourse through music which offered a chance to ‘lay down their story’. While the young people in the work of Miller et al (2015) who felt rejected or ejected attempted resilience through finding their own networks.

Thompson et al (2014), in their ethnographic study of NEET young people in northern England, also uncovered discourses of resistance. The young people endeavoured to establish and maintain a sense of agency in the face of identities projected by the state or the disruptions of sometimes chaotic personal circumstances. This led to narratives of conflict and resistance between official conceptions of legitimate activities and the participants’ sense of self, belonging and aspiration. Thompson et al (2014) suggest that this group of young people who 'lacked control' expressed agency and resistance through avoidance and self-exclusion, taking refuge in familiar surroundings where they have some degree of autonomy.

While many NEET young people negotiate their way through the oppressive nature of various interacting structures, they simultaneously remain agentic by sometimes resisting and actively working against such structures. Russell (2016) found that the young people in her study worked voluntarily, aspired to gain secure employment, and showed resilience in the face of poverty. She viewed them as agentic individuals who were resisting, yet still sometimes accommodating to, certain class stereotypes. Previous research with NEET young people has therefore highlighted how their agency is bounded and how they are constrained by, but also resist, social structures as outlined in the work of Wyn and White (1998). The research in this thesis will therefore add to this previous literature, looking at how these young people relate to institutional
discourses around NEET young people, and the impact these discourses have on their agency.

NEET young people are stereotyped, with these assumptions impacting upon policy and provision and therefore upon the experiences of young people who are associated with the category. As the previous chapter demonstrated, within NEET policy there is a focus on looking at the deficits and individual problems of young people without taking into account the impact of structure. A long standing problem in youth policy and research is the inability to properly grasp the relationship between individual agency and structural constraint. Due to this there has been a tendency to interpret youth unemployment as a problem with young people (MacDonald, 2011). Young people are viewed less as products of social and economic environments that the government have the power to improve, and are instead constructed as individualised authors of their own futures in given environments (Fergusson, 2013). It is therefore important to acknowledge the structural constraints the young people in this research are facing, as well as their agency.

Evans’ work on ‘bounded agency’, alongside that of Wyn and White, acknowledges the role of structure, helping to explain the ways in which the decisions and aspirations of young people are shaped by the barriers and contexts within which they find themselves. Their work takes into account the impact of society and organisations on the agency of young people. This is important as the young people in this research are being constructed as NEET and defined in a certain way by society and organisations, which has an impact upon their choices and identities. An important element of the structural conditions which impact upon them are the discourses through which they are constructed.
The role of discourse

As highlighted in this chapter, previous research with young people has demonstrated the impact of resources on their ability to make choices and develop a reflexive self-identity. However, the impact of discourses on young people’s choices and self-identities are not covered in as much depth. The ways in which young people are represented can have a powerful effect on their lives. Depictions of youth shape public opinion, policy agendas and wider cultural understandings in society. They also have an impact on the life chances and social identities of young people themselves (Cieslik and Simpson, 2013). The practices in which young people engage and the meaning they construct therefore cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader discourses and practices, and must be interpreted in relation to the discourses constructed by policymakers, researchers and the media (Simmons et al., 2014). Language and ideas used by organisations can structure the ways that young people see themselves and the social world.

This is evident in the experiences of NEET young people outlined in previous literature. Thompson et al (2014) suggest that political and media discourses around benefits, unemployment and early parenthood were seen to shape the lived experiences of the NEET young people in their research, leading them to voice a lack of control over their lives, and a feeling of not being listened to, as they felt pushed into certain places. Several participants were also concerned about stigmatisation brought about by stereotypes. Furthermore, Miller et al (2015) found that the young people in their study felt situated on the margins of their communities due to the way they were perceived and treated; with feelings of negativity directed at them from formal and traditional structures through prejudice and surveillance. Age, gender and area were all seen to impact upon how they believed they were perceived, with incidents of labelling and stereotyping mentioned frequently. It is therefore evident that discourse, as well as resources, impact upon the choices and lives of NEET young people.

As the focus of the reflexive self is on the narratives which people create, discourse forms a central element of this approach. However, Giddens (1991)
does not really take this into account. He does acknowledge that the ‘content’ of self-identity varies socially and culturally, suggesting that narratives are ‘occasioned’, being closely tied to the circumstances in which they are told. Giddens also highlights how the reactions of others can influence the feelings of an individual towards their narrative. He (1991, p.65) suggests that shame, which corrodes a sense of security in the self, depends on feelings of personal insufficiency and can be seen as anxiety about the adequacy, coherence and social acceptability of the narrative by means of which an individual sustains a coherent biography. While pride or self-esteem stems from confidence in the integrity and value of the narrative of self-identity. Yet this pride is continually vulnerable to the reactions of others.

While Giddens does acknowledge the role of others in the creation of narratives, the impact of being constructed by others is not well developed in his work. This demonstrates why the concepts of bounded and contextual agency are being taken into account within this thesis alongside his work, as they acknowledge the role of institutions and society on the lives of young people, viewing agency as socially situated. They also enable a focus on the discourses which young people are able to create as they draw on existing narrative repertoires that reflect the cultural and social resources that they have access to (Henderson et al., 2007).

We are not simply authors of our own destinies, but are located in time, space and social structure (Henderson et al., 2007). While young people may have become more conscious of their identity, and may experience their lives more in terms of personal narratives, these narratives are shaped by the discourses available to them. People reflexively construct their identities within the confines of culturally available ways of making the self. While they are a device through which people represent themselves; “they do so within the context of cultural narratives which delimit what can be said, what stories can be told” (Lawler, 2008, p.242). Identities are therefore contingent on social and cultural contexts through which individuals lived experiences are framed (Tomlinson, 2013). How young people relate to one another and understand their identities are made possible through language operating in societies. Lingual tools set limits to what is possible for young people to think and do (Cieslik and Simpson, 2013). The role
of discourse in bounding the agency of the young people in this research will therefore be highlighted, going beyond the focus on resources outlined in some of the literature, and adding to discussions which have demonstrated the impact of discourses around marginalisation and unemployment on the lives of NEET young people. This research has acknowledged the impact of stereotypes on the experiences of this group, however there is a lack of discussion of how these generalisations and assumptions shape their self-identities, an element which is explored in this thesis.

Conclusion

The idea of the reflexive self will be used to look at how the young people in the study construct their identities and will allow an exploration of their past, present and future selves, as well as how they attempt to demonstrate that they have control over their lives by making choices. The focus on narratives will also acknowledge the importance of the voice and experiences of the young people. Previous research with NEET young people has demonstrated the impact of individualisation on their lives, however there has been little engagement with the idea of the reflexive self. It enables a focus on how NEET young people are experiencing individualisation and the resources they have available to them in helping to navigate options and construct their self-identities. Literature suggests that Giddens’ work overplays the agency of the individual and their ability to make choices. Life chances remain structured and are influenced by broader social and economic contexts, with the resources and discourses available to young people shaping their decisions. The notion of ‘bounded agency’, and the ideas of Wyn and White, will therefore be used to acknowledge this.

This research studies how young people on a course for those who are not in education, employment or training describe themselves and how they view their present situations and future identities. It will focus on how these young people define and label themselves, rather than being defined by others. It will also look at how labels and assumptions made about NEET young people shape their
identities, building on research which has acknowledged the impact of discourses around marginalisation and unemployment on the lives of NEET young people. The work of Giddens will be critically engaged with to outline the agency of the young people in this research, but also to highlight his lack of acknowledgement of structure and discourse. Through engaging with these ideas issues of agency and the role of structure on the lives of NEET young people can be explored in more depth. Emphasising both is important as policy tends to focus on the individual. In the next chapter the methods which will be used to capture the narratives of the young people in this research will be outlined.
Chapter Four: Methodology

Introduction

The term NEET has been criticised in earlier studies for being too broad and having negative connotations (Furlong, 2006; Yates and Payne, 2006), however little research has actually asked those who are placed in the category how they define themselves and their situation. Definitions of youth tend to reflect the biases of those defining them, therefore this research will focus upon how young people see their own lives. I am aware that by carrying out my study at an organisation which aims its educational courses at NEET young people, the research is taking place in a youth specific context. The participants are experiencing youth specific policies, as well as wider policies relating to education and unemployment, and the implementation of these at a local authority level. By focusing on a course aimed at this group of young people I am engaging with the NEET category. The participants have therefore already been defined by the context the research is taking place in. The construction of these young people by others and their experiences of the course they are on form a central part of this research.

The project seeks to examine young people attending a course for those who are not in education, employment or training. It looks at how they create their identities through the concept of the reflexive self and how their narratives are influenced by the institution they are attending, as well as broader discourses associated with the category of NEET. To capture the narratives of these young people, the research will adopt a qualitative approach, carrying out an ethnography at the centre the participants are attending. An ethnographic approach allows the perspectives and attitudes of the participants to be understood within the context of their surroundings. This chapter will outline the research approach, the setting, and methods used to conduct the study. It will also discuss ethical issues which were confronted, and the validity and limitations of the research.
**Research approach and design**

As the aim of the research is to focus on young people’s understanding of themselves, their feelings and their experiences this study will adopt a qualitative methodology which emphasises meanings, experiences and descriptions (Coolican, 2014). Qualitative research allows researchers to explore the understandings and perceptions of individuals, and how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives; looking at how people learn about and make sense of themselves and others (Berg, 2009). Scope is generally sacrificed for detail, with this detail being found in people’s understandings and interactions (Silverman, 2010). Qualitative research therefore enables a focus on the perspectives of participants, taking into account different viewpoints (Flick, 2009), with the raw data outlining what people have said or a description of what has been observed. It often validates trying to see the world from the natives’ point of view as it makes possible broader and richer description and sensitivity to the ideas and meanings of individuals (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). The focus is on seeing through the eyes of actors to generate an in-depth understanding, allowing respondents to identify the issues which are salient to them (Barbour, 2014).

Qualitative research therefore suits this project as the focus is on the young people themselves and how they create meaning and see their own world. As the previous chapter discussed, theoretical approaches to identity are being used to achieve an understanding of this group of young people. For this study identity is being viewed as a reflexive project (Giddens, 1991) where people bring narratives about the past into line with their new identity and experiment with narratives to find out who they are or could be. Qualitative research enables the detailed narratives of young people’s lives to be captured, and can emphasise creativity and agency (Cieslik and Simpson, 2013). However, these narratives are shaped by the discourses which are available to the young people and by wider society. This research therefore is interested in the meanings young people create, but this is balanced by an awareness that discourse and ideological, as well as structural, forces operate on the subjects being studied. Young people are viewed as having agency, but this is bounded by the impact of structure; they
are not being viewed as ‘victims or dupes to structure’, nor celebrated as ‘completely free actors’ (Stephen and Squires, 2003, p.161 cited in (Heath et al., 2009, p.13)). Qualitative research also takes this into account as it is well suited to studying context. It is oriented towards analysing cases in their temporal and local particularity, and starting from people’s expressions and activities in their local context (Barbour, 2014). It offers possibilities for focusing on local patterns, cultural and institutional context, and meaning creation (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000).

To capture the subjective understanding of the young people and the context within which their ideas are being created, this research takes a social constructivist ontological orientation. The emphasis is on the ways in which individuals interpret their social world and the research approach acknowledges social reality as a "constantly shifting emergent property of individuals' creation" (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p.38). The world does not contain any transcendent meaning, we make meaning up as we go along, filtering the world through language. “Qualitative research eschews notions of one single knowable account of social reality, and instead emphasises notions of situated knowledge and subjective understanding” (Heath et al., 2009, p.106). Meanings are therefore varied and multiple. The world is being viewed in this research as socially constructed. Knowledge is situated socially and based in the context which it emerges, through the cultural and institutional life of a given community, and historically, by shared traditions of knowledge production (Smith, 1998). The focus of the research is not just on what the participants are doing and what is happening to them, but also looks at how they construct the world around them; on their views of the situation being studied. Social reality is viewed as an ongoing accomplishment of social actors rather than something external to them and that totally constrains them (Bryman, 2012).

The research follows an interpretivist epistemological position; viewing meaning as subjective and therefore giving priority to seeing the world through the eyes of those who are being researched (Bryman, 1998 cited in (Heath et al., 2009, p.80)). The social world is understood through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants which implies that social properties
are the outcomes of interactions between individuals (Bryman, 2012). Humans are viewed as actors in the social world, rather than as simply reacting to objects in the natural world. The aim of research is therefore to make sense of the meanings that others have about the world; to gain access to people’s ‘common sense’ thinking and interpret their actions and their social world from their point of view (Bryman, 2012). Social constructivism and interpretivism are part of the main qualitative traditions which explicitly and implicitly view the world and people’s understanding as being socially created. This approach emphasises the contingent nature of knowledge and reality. The social world exists in the eye of the beholder and individuals are free to make their own attributions (Barbour, 2014). In order to understand the social world, we therefore need to get inside the heads of the individuals and groups we study and understand their meanings about what they are doing.

Yet, this behaviour also needs to be understood within the context of a particular culture or society (O'Reilly, 2005). While people have agency, and the ability to create their own reality, this reality is socially constructed within a wider social, economic and political context. NEET itself is a politically constructed category and the way these young people are defined needs to be taken into account. Subjective meanings are formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives (Creswell, 2013). The meaning of an object for a person grows out of the ways in which other people act towards the person with regards to that object. Their actions operate to define the object for the person (Berg, 2009). The categories which people employ in helping them understand the world are social products which enable shared meanings and understandings. However these shared meanings and understandings tend to be defined by the most powerful. Individuals and groups attempt to define reality and present themselves and their version of events in such a way as to prevail over other versions. Yet it tends to be the more powerful who are the most successful at having their version of events predominate (Burr, 1995 cited in (Andrews, 2012)). They can therefore have control over how things are defined, with dominant discourses being created by those with the power to do so. People do not just define the world, but react to and take into account the
definitions of others. People engage with the world and make sense of it based on their historical and social perspectives.

In order to understand the ‘meanings’ created by the participants some immersion into their world is needed. An ethnographic approach enables this ‘immersion’. Ethnography provides information on the behaviour of people in groups, organisations and communities, and also on how these people understand their own behaviour. Collections of ‘natural’ conversations through ethnographic methods can uncover the accounts that people use to explain and justify their actions, as it is through talk that people persuade each other of the reality of their social world (Fulcher and Scott, 2007). It enables the researcher to capture naturally occurring discourses of meaning (Shannahan, 2012) as people may tend to behave more naturally in the world of everyday life than might be the case in interviews or other settings; "when they talk about what people do they are talking about what they saw them do under the conditions in which they usually do it...They are seeing the 'real world' of everyday life, not some version of it created for their urging or benefit" (Becker, 1996, p.62-63 quoted in (Simmons et al., 2014, p.71)).

Ethnography is therefore a good approach for this study as it is useful in obtaining people’s own perspectives on issues. Answers come through experiencing life as people themselves see it rather than being filtered through the researcher’s perspective (Angrosino, 2007). The approach is concerned with the ‘native’ point of view, in this case the young people who were attending the centre, as the researcher becomes involved in people’s lives for an extended period of time, studying their actions and expressions in every day settings. It enables a preference for adapting the focus to what proves available and interesting, rather than imposing an outsiders sense of what is going on; it can be viewed as a ‘method of discovery’ (Gilbert, 2008). Using ethnography was an attempt to allow me to discover, rather than impose, categories or ideas upon the participants which may have been irrelevant or unintelligible to them.

Ethnography allows space for negotiation of meanings, making more complex and varied positions possible (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). It enables the
researcher to see things from the perspective of those in the study before stepping back to make a more detached assessment (Gilbert, 2008). According to Montgomery (2006) an ethnographic approach can illustrate and illuminate young people's lives and is one of the best ways of getting information about them. It also has the potential to provide "space for the articulations and experiences of the marginalised" (Schostak, 2006, p.23 quoted in (Duckworth and Cochrane, 2012, p.585)). Ethnography has been used previously in studies of subordinate youth groups. In order to understand and explore their practices and views it was felt that they were best researched from the 'inside' or from 'alongside' (Walther, 2009). This approach can therefore be seen as useful for researching both marginalised groups and young people.

An ethnographic approach fits with the theoretical underpinning of the study, which acknowledges the individual agency of young people, yet views this agency as 'bounded' by structures. It allows the recognition of structural constraints on actions, as well as individuals' agency and abilities to be reflexive and challenge the circumstances they are in. It does this as it encompasses the collection of a broad range of data on different layers of the phenomenon under study (Meo, 2010). Ethnography is useful as it combines an exploration of people's perspectives and attitudes with a more detached analysis which seeks to understand a culture or community (Russell et al., 2011). It should not merely produce descriptions of facts and immediate appearances, but capture and contextualise the lived experience within the social location and significance of the field (Denzin, 1994, p.83 cited in (Simmons et al., 2014, p.67)). Ethnography allows an understanding of the young people in the context of their surroundings, enabling the research to explore the impact of the institution they are attending on their identities. The research is therefore not confined to the 'voice' of the young people alone. The experiences of the participants are located within the wider social context.

Ethnography is based on observation within particular fields, institutions or sites. It therefore lends itself to case study research. Due to the time-intensive and in-depth nature of ethnographic studies, practicalities often dictate that it is only possible to study one setting (Gerring, 2008 cited in (Barbour, 2014, p.74)). In
some research, this study of one setting can be described as a case study. Hammersley and Gomm (2000, p.3) suggest that case study research "refers to research that investigates a few cases, often just one, in considerable depth". A case can be defined as a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context. It can therefore be many things; an individual, a small group, an organisation or a community (Punch, 2005 cited in (Tight, 2010, p.330)).

Focusing on a single case offers more depth, sense of context and richness. It enables the researcher to focus on social interactions and the developing meaning that participants in a system attach to each other, and how they interpret each other's acts. Doing a case study can also highlight the existence of different or contrasting views (Swanborn, 2010). Yet it can be argued that all social research is about cases, therefore it can be difficult to define what a 'case study' is. It can be seen as a method, an approach, a research design, a strategy or a style of research. Tight (2010) argues that the term is used as a convenient label for research, to attempt to give it some added respectability, however we should just call this research small-sample or in-depth.

According to the definition outlined by Swanborn (2010, p.13), this research can be described as a case study. It is the study of a social phenomenon and was carried out within one social system related to the phenomenon under study. In this research a specific case was chosen to illuminate the experiences of young people who have spent time being NEET. The choice of the research site, being a specific institution which worked with a particular group of young people, was part of the research approach. This organisation was chosen as it allowed me to gain certain insights which other organisations would not be able to provide (Siggelkow, 2007). The sampling decisions involved will be discussed further in the next section. The research monitored the phenomenon studied over a certain period and focused on both the social processes which unfolded between participants, and on the participants themselves; their values, expectations, opinions, perceptions, resources, decisions, mutual relations and behaviour. It kept an open eye on the unexpected and collected data from several data sources. Swanborn (2010) argues that a case study is associated with intensive research focusing on the perceptions, interactions and decisions of people.
A case study approach allowed me to look beyond generalisation, to pay attention to direct experience. As highlighted in Chapter Two, generalisation can foster misunderstandings or distract attention from direct experience, viewing things in a simplistic way (Stake, 1978). This research focuses on what the situation is like in one selected case, studying the characteristics and relationships of people (Swanborn, 2010). It aims to provide detailed information about the complexity of this particular case (Gomm et al., 2000) and how things work within it. Individuals are not set apart from their normal life situation and, through studying this natural context, the significance of structural processes on their lives may be outlined. Case studies recognise the embeddedness of individuals. This approach therefore enables the ‘bounded’ nature of the participants agency to be explored.

A case study not only investigates a phenomenon in depth within its real world context, but also acknowledges that the understanding of this real world context is likely to involve important contextual conditions pertinent to that specific case (Yin, 2014). Case study research can be seen as useful for developing a nuanced view of reality. Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that knowledge and experience are context dependent; it is therefore important to understand things within the context in which they are taking place. The research captures the features of the centre the participants are attending and explores their self-identities within this context. Overall, a qualitative, ethnographic case study approach enables a focus on capturing the meanings these young people are creating through ‘immersion’ in their world, taking into account the context these meanings are being created in. The setting of this research is therefore important in relation to the narratives and meanings these young people are able to create.

Setting and participants

One of the main challenges of working with NEET young people is gaining and maintaining access (Russell, 2013). This population can be hard to find, and therefore is hard to reach. Simmons et al (2014) suggest that the most vulnerable
young people are not accessed by researchers because they stay out of reach of support agencies, whilst 'ordinary' young people whose NEET status is short lived and who form a large proportion of the NEET population may also evade research designs which focus specifically on the NEET category. The population is constantly changing as being ‘NEET’ is often a dynamic experience, where young people churn between various forms of participation and non-participation in education, employment and training (as highlighted in Chapter Two). In addition to this, those young people who are not in contact with local agencies do not appear in the official statistics. The percentage of people whose status is not known varies, however in some local authorities it can be as high as one in five (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b, p.70). Due to these difficulties, I initially planned to focus on NEET young people who were engaged with the Connexions service in a city in the Midlands through which I hoped to gain an understanding of the young unemployed in the area, who they are, how they see themselves, how those helping them see them and how they are being supported. I also wanted to look at the work of Connexions to see whether targets to reduce the numbers of NEET meant that the right kind of help was being offered to the young unemployed. However, during the first year of my research the Connexions service in the region was reorganised and I had to rethink my project as I was unable to ascertain what the remit and structure of the new service would be.

A different way to access young people who had experiences of being NEET was discussed with my supervisors, one of whom had a contact at a local college who works with a number of third sector learning providers that run programmes for NEET young people in the Midlands. The contact at the local college recommended a few programmes run for NEET young people which were based in an urban area and had general courses focused around 'life skills' or 'employability', therefore meaning they did not attract a specific gender. In their research in the North of England, Russell et al (2011) encountered 'gendered' provision I therefore wanted to try to avoid this to get a wider understanding of the experiences of young people, not just focusing on those who are male or female. The contact also suggested approaching what he called ‘Third Sector organisations’ as he claimed that would mean that the young people they work with are "closer to being NEET rather than seeing themselves as college
students” (Meeting Notes, 06/09/2013). Rather than attending a local college, these young people were attending courses run by charity organisations.

This selection of a research site was a form of purposive sampling, which aims to select a group in order to ensure that certain types of individuals or people displaying certain attributes are included in the study (Berg, 2009). Cases are selected according to the intensity with which the interesting features, processes, or experiences are given or assumed in them (Flick, 2009). By focusing on certain types of organisations it enabled me to select both female and male subjects who had experiences of being NEET. In addition to this purposive sampling can be seen as a criterion of convenience which involves the selection of cases that are easiest to access under given circumstances (Patton, 2002 cited in (Flick, 2009, p.175)). As highlighted previously, the population of NEET young people can be hard to find and hard to reach. Choosing a course which is aimed at NEET young people enabled easier access to this population.

Gaining access to educational establishments can be difficult with problems faced including fear of ‘bad publicity’, and placing pressure on overworked staff (Heath et al., 2009, p.107). The centre where the research was conducted was one of three organisations who fulfilled the criteria of a third sector organisation running general courses for NEET young people, and who responded to an email asking for participants sent out by the contact from the local college (see appendix A2). One replied to the initial email but did not respond to follow up emails, while the other did not have any suitable participants on site. Relationships with gatekeepers were therefore paramount to this study as access was dependent upon them before consent could be gained from the young people themselves (issues around this will be discussed later on in the chapter).

After an expression of interest by the manager of the centre via email, I had a telephone conversation with her to discuss my research, after which I sent her a copy of my proposal, ethics approval, DBS check, and a covering letter from my supervisors. She verbally agreed to me doing the research but preferred that I volunteer as a classroom assistant alongside doing my observation of the young people at the centre. This voluntary aspect was also discussed in the initial
meeting with my first contact from the local college, and my experience of working with young people and ‘challenging learners’ was highlighted in the call for participants (see appendix A2).

The centre where the research took place, which describes itself as a ‘lifeskills centre’, is run by a charity in the Midlands and was newly set up in 2013, running its first course in October, however it was not officially opened until January 2014. When the first group started at the centre it was still being refurbished, the students therefore were expected to help out, loading up rubbish into vans and setting up new classroom spaces. The one course which was being offered at the centre was a post-16 course for NEET young people with a focus on basic skills through which they could gain qualifications in Maths, English, ICT, and Digital Arts and Media. They also did one week of work experience, got help with job searching, interview skills and their CVs in their ‘employability’ sessions, and took part in personal and social development sessions. The scheme of work aimed to help students gain qualifications but also tried to help them get to where they wanted to go.

The young people attended the centre for 21 hours a week, over three and a half days, for 16 weeks. They had a guided learning requirement of 6 hours a day and were expected to achieve around 90% attendance. There were three tutors at the centre, each who had subject specialisms; one focused on media, one on ‘functional skills’, and one on ‘life skills’ and employability. Each group of young people had a ‘form tutor’ who they worked with for three out of the four mornings, with the tutor deciding what to do in these sessions. From the course the students were encouraged to go on to further education or to get a job. By the end of my research the centre was in transition and was getting a new manager.

The charity which runs the centre started in 2007 and since then they have worked with over 2000 young people in the region, mainly through an original lifeskills centre based in a different city. The Chief Executive of the charity which runs the two ‘lifeskills centres’ claims that they are driven by the potential of young people and they want to help every young person to “achieve a vision of themselves, who they are, and what they could be” (Field notes, 31/01/2014).
The charity is ‘future focused’ meaning that they aim to capture the students in the moment and look forward (Field notes, 23/01/2014).

At both the centres they aim to take at least 15 students from each group from start to finish so that they do not lose money, with a particular focus on 16 to 18 year olds as there is more funding available for this age group. Young people who are NEET are referred by professionals, families or themselves. The centre mainly runs through self-referrals as they would rather have people who "want to be there", rather than those who "have to be there"; although they do have young people who are referred (Meeting Notes, 28/11/2013). They mainly recruit from other organisations in the area including Connexions and the Job Centre, as well as other training providers. However there has been a reduction in services that they historically relied on to bring young people to them, meaning they had to up-skill the staff to track down and draw in young people. As a small scale provider, there is a chance that this organisation is working with some of the more complex cases of NEET. Beck (2015) suggests that the easy to place youths tend to be ‘creamed off’ via involvement with large scale schemes.

At the centre I worked with two groups of young people who were between the ages of 16 and 24. Group One comprised of 17 members (9 female, 8 male), while Group Two was made up of 10 (7 female, 3 male). I did not ask the students about their ages, therefore I only know about this if they decided to tell me. I did not ask specific demographic questions, as I wanted the young people to define themselves in their own terms, if their age or other background information was not an important part of how they saw themselves, this did not come up in my conversations with them. Of those who disclosed their ages, one was 16, two were 18, three were 19, two were between 17 and 19, one was 20, one 23, and one 24. They therefore covered the whole age range of the NEET category.
An outline of the participants in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (pseudonym)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Qualifications</th>
<th>Time spent unemployed</th>
<th>Living arrangements</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Stayed on the course?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Under 19</td>
<td>Level 1 Maths and English</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lives with nan</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Level 2 Childcare</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lives with mum and sister</td>
<td>Depression and anxiety</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Entry Level 2 Maths</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lives with mum, stepdad, two sisters and one brother</td>
<td>Epilepsy and learning difficulties</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lives with mum</td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Lives with dad</td>
<td>Dyslexia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>‘Some’ GCSEs and an Asdan Award</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lives in council housing with daughter</td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabby</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Over 17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lives with mum</td>
<td>Anxiety, epilepsy and ADHD</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Level 1 Maths and English</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lives with mum</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danny</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duncan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lives with dad</td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lives with nan</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leanne</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>‘Better than expected’</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Lives with foster family</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>Level 2 Maths</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Lives with parents</td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age/Status</td>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Living Situation</td>
<td>Condition</td>
<td>Note</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neil</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>Since March 2012</td>
<td>Lives with mum and sisters</td>
<td>Epilepsy</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonnie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Over 17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Level 2 Maths</td>
<td>Lives with mum</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Homeless (YMCA)</td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sofa surfing</td>
<td>OCD</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lives with mum</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tania</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lives with mum</td>
<td>On Disability Living Allowance</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>Level 2 Maths and English</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demi</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Lives with parents</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lives in a hostel</td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>Lives in a hostel</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mel</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Epilepsy</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the urban region where this research took place over 40% of people describe themselves as being from ethnic minority communities (Office for National Statistics, 2012). However, the participants in this study did not reflect this; although I did not ask them about their ethnic backgrounds so would not like to speculate about what these were. There are generally low numbers of young people from ethnic minority backgrounds in the NEET population as a whole and there is also evidence that certain groups of families are less likely to engage with service providers (Katz et al, 2007, p.8 cited in (Simmons et al., 2014, p.160)). Simmons et al (2014) suggest that families from ethnic groups are disproportionately at risk of living in poverty and having poor working conditions, which can affect the time and resources available to engage with services. In addition to this, service providers themselves may lack the expertise to engage with certain family backgrounds and there may be cultural barriers to taking part in certain forms of provision. A local council report suggested that in communities which were made up of Asian families “there tends to be a high level of support, including providing private tutoring, for children with an expectation that they would proceed to higher and further education”. However, in other communities there was not this pressure or expectation on youngsters to go onto further education or training (Economic Development Transport and Tourism Scrutiny Commission, 2015, p.25).

The first group I worked with began their course in January, with the second starting in February. All the young people from these two groups chose to take part in the research. These were the first two groups to start at the new centre and therefore the sample was one of convenience, as they were the only young people I had access to. This category of sampling is also sometimes referred to as accidental or availability sampling and relies on the availability of subjects; those who are close at hand or easily accessible (Berg, 2009). Due to the ethnographic approach of the study, the sampling was less focused on the people to select for the research, than on the selection of a site for observation (Angrosino, 2007). Sampling proceeded from the relevance of the participants’ experiences of being NEET, as they were attending a course aimed at NEET young people, rather than their representativeness in relation to the NEET population.
Initially I was just going to work with one group of young people, but when the second group started, due to my voluntary role at the centre, I was expected to help out with both groups. I therefore decided to include both groups in my research. This enabled me to collect more data and have a larger sample. However, of the 27 young people, four students from Group One and one from Group Two left or were thrown off the course fairly early on, and attendance of certain members of both groups was sporadic (the impact of this will be discussed more in the section on validity and limitations). It therefore helped to have a large sample due to the loss of some participants, and the lack of engagement with others.

**Methods of data collection**

I spent two days a week at the centre over a period of five months, from January to May 2014. There can be problems around how long a researcher should stay in a certain setting, with Gilbert (2008, p.276) suggesting that leaving should occur when the researcher is confident that they have “identified the chief assumptions and themes of this particular world view”. I left when the research came to a natural end, staying until the first group I was working with finished their course. While at the centre, I carried out participant observation of lessons on a Monday and a Wednesday, staying for the full day from 9.30am to 3.30pm. This meant that I was generally involved in the same sessions with Group 1 which focused on employability, English and Maths, as well as a Monday morning tutorial session. I also attended a few media sessions with Group 2. I chatted with the young people who attended the centre both in lessons and during their breaks. I also had access to the materials Group 1 created in their employability, and personal and social development lessons (for examples of this work see appendix A3). For their employability sessions I collected material about team work, SMART targets, dream jobs, learning styles, ways to job search and apply for jobs, interviews and work experience. In their personal and social development folders there was material about self-awareness, aspirations and healthy living, which included work on stress and depression.
I was a participant at the organisation in my voluntary role as a classroom assistant. I was therefore not a detached observer, but due to this role could be seen as a member of the organisation (Adler and Adler, 1987). On Gold’s (1988 cited in (Angrosino, 2007, p.6)) continuum between complete participant and complete observer, I would be closer to the participant as observer role; where the researcher is immersed in the community but is known to be conducting research and has permission to do so. The ethnography was overt, and those at the centre knew I was a researcher from my first day of attendance. Covert observation can be viewed as unethical as it violates the confidence of participants and the principle of informed consent. Using overt research helped in allowing the young people to give informed consent to participate in the research, and also enabled me to conduct other research activities alongside the observation (which will be discussed later in this section).

Due to these dual roles, I had to develop competence and skills as both a participant and a researcher. I was given some flexibility in my voluntary role; if for certain sessions I just wanted to sit back and observe I could, as long as I made the tutor aware of this. However, I found it was difficult to take field notes. While at the centre I kept a research diary in which I wrote about my observations, conversations and also reflexive thoughts about my position as a researcher (see appendix A4 for an example of this). I did not sit and write field notes during my observation of sessions but took time afterwards, sitting and writing in the staff office at the centre, or at a coffee shop away from the centre. I made these field notes when I could, mostly on a lunchtime and at the end of the day. Memory decay is not related to time, so much as new input (Gilbert, 2008), I therefore tried to make mental notes when it was not feasible to make written ones or wrote jotted notes outlining key words, phrases or quotations. I typed up these jotted notes into full field notes when I got home while they were still fresh in my mind.

With ethnography the researcher tries to get close to the community being studied, and relies on their accounts and observation of a variety of naturally occurring events. Bryman (2012) suggests that with lower levels of participation there is a greater reliance on interviewing and a lower level reliance on observation. The quality of relations with young people under study affects the
success of observational work (Walsh, 2012). Due to my role as a volunteer, my levels of participation were high, and therefore I relied more on observation, generating a lot of my data through the collection of detailed field notes. Yet to further capture the perceptions, understandings and accounts of respondents, interviews or less formal spontaneous talks between research informants are almost always an important complement to this method (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). I did not carry out formal interviews with the participants, but I did have informal conversations with them which were noted down. The relationships I developed with the young people over my time working with and observing them enabled me to have these more in-depth conversations as I built up a greater mutual trust, rapport and understanding of them than would be possible in a one-off interview. The participants began to relax in my presence as I became part of their lives for two days a week.

Interviews allow young people to talk about their experiences in their own words, trying to induce the interviewees point of view and offering an opportunity to see "the world through the eyes of those being researched" (Heath et al., 2009, p.80). A life history interview approach would have captured the narratives of the participants, enabling a look at the ways in which they make sense of their lives through the stories they tell about themselves, and what these stories reveal about their identities. This would have fit with ideas about individualisation and the reflexive self. However, this approach can over-emphasise individual agency as, in stories about themselves, young people are placed centre stage and can tend to downplay the influence of external structures and constraints, as well as the impact upon their lives of the decisions of significant others (Heath et al., 2009). Therefore it would not have helped me to explore the issue of bounded agency in much depth. Ethnography allowed me to consider the broader structural contexts of young people’s lives and also their agency. It also enabled me to explore their lives in a group context, looking at their interaction with others and the construction of shared meanings (Heath et al., 2009).

Initially I had planned to include an interview element in my research. As I got to know the young people by spending time with them, I picked up on certain themes and developed an interview guide which I was hoping to use (see appendix A5).
However, after talking to the participants in this study it became clear that they were reluctant to the idea of interviews, and I did not see it as beneficial to force them into participation. This reflects the difficulties encountered by other studies. Russell et al (2011) found that a reliance on interviews with NEET young people would have limited their data considerably as although some participants could express themselves well, others were less forthcoming. Some young people are better able to tell stories about their lives than others. Likewise, Finlay et al (2013) argue that the NEET participants in their study were unlikely to be stimulated by traditional questionnaires, interviews or focus groups. Shannahan (2012) also suggests that the young men in his study of NEET young people would have found the format of formalised interviews alienating. Beyond the reluctance of the participants, there were also problems with finding time to conduct interviews. The students had pretty full days and had a lot of work to cover during their four months at the centre. They liked to leave the centre at lunch breaks, and tended not to hang around for too long at the end of the day. I therefore had to think of alternative methods of capturing their narratives.

Ethnography allows for a multiplicity of research techniques to be used to collect rich data (Duckworth and Cochrane, 2012). As a method it relates to a wide range of data collection including “direct observation of relevant events, some formal and a great deal of informal interviews” (McCall and Simmons, 1969 quoted in (Gilbert, 2008, p.148)). The collection of different sources of evidence enabled an understanding of the complexity and nuance of the particular case being studied. Documentation about the centre was collected to understand how it was run, and the stated aims and objectives it was working towards. This documentation also provided an understanding of how the young people were viewed by the centre and how they were being supported. As has already been highlighted participant observation was undertaken, which enabled an exploration of the real world setting of the case. Field notes therefore not only noted what the participants did and said, but also explored what they learnt at the centre, their relationships with people there, and their interactions with their environment. It also documented the spaces the young people were working in; for example, outlining where they sat in the classroom and what posters were placed up on the wall. The data collected tried to understand the role of the centre
in the self-identities these young people were creating. The participant observation, field notes and documents collected all helped to develop an understanding of the setting the research was taking place in.

Using different ways of gathering data is also beneficial when working with young people (Russell, 2013). For example, Thompson et al (2014) used photographs taken by both the researcher and the participants and life history maps, alongside interviews, as part of their longitudinal ethnographic study of NEET young people. In addition to this, as social phenomena are multi-layered and dynamic, it is necessary to collect different views and types of data (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000).

In my study, alongside participant observation of the young people during their lessons, talking to them and looking at the work they created, I also carried out a method using written accounts to find out about the participants’ experiences of unemployment. These were based on themes and ideas which had emerged during the early stages of participant observation, in particular ideas about stereotypes and the way these young people constructed themselves in relation to the ‘other’. Ethnography can be viewed as a process of constant interaction, with the analysis of data feeding in to the research design and data collection (Walsh, 2012).

The activity I conducted included an element of photo elicitation which uses visual images as a stimulus to elicit responses and memories (Meo, 2010). This consisted of asking the participants to look at images used to illustrate news stories about NEET young people. These reflected Simmons et al’s (2014, p.1) description of popular images of those who are associated with the category which "evoke pejorative stereotypes of 'hoodies' and 'pramface girls' destined for a life on benefits". I did not tell the participants what the images were about and asked them to write down their first impressions of what they saw. They then chose one image and wrote a story about what they thought was happening in that picture (see appendix A6 for copies of the worksheets which were used, including the images that the students were given).
This activity was based on the idea that images do not have fixed meanings but are socially constructed. Meaning is negotiated, multi-layered and fluid, and is affected by the socio-cultural context of the viewer. Rose (2012) suggests that the meanings of images are generated in three sites; site of production, the image itself and audiences. By looking at visual images people create meanings and they are highly constructed by their creators who often have political, ideological or commercial reasons for making them. They also tell us something about society. As they are evocative they can serve as a stimuli (Gilbert, 2008). The use of the images was intended to trigger a response and unveil some of the participants’ attitudes, beliefs and meanings (Meo, 2010). The aim was to look at media representations of the NEET category of young people and stereotypes associated with them. For the second part of the activity the participants created their own newspaper articles which discussed their experiences of unemployment (for examples of these see appendix A7).

These activities offered a different way to capture the narratives of the participants. They were given the chance to have some control over the process of data generation and "express themselves in a medium with which many appear comfortable" (Heath et al., 2009, p.116). These textual sources added to the field notes, which were collected through participant observation, by providing a narrative written by the young people themselves; offering them a chance to tell their stories in their own words. While ethnography tends to be associated with accessing young people's every day activities and the social value and meanings connected to these, textual sources offer access to meanings, discourses and representations (Hopkins, 2010). These texts allowed me to generate a more detailed and in depth understanding of the young people, providing a fuller picture of their experiences. Using different ways of collecting data also hedged against any biases which may have resulted from pure observation (Angrosino, 2007). Using observation and other methods alerts the researcher to any disparities between accounts of behaviour, and actual observed behaviour (Heath et al., 2009).

Initially, a number of other activities were included in the research design. This included a mind map to detail what the participants thought of the term NEET;
the words they associate with the term and how it makes them feel. This was not pursued further as the participants did not know what the term meant and did not use it themselves (something which will be discussed further in the next chapter). There was also going to be a collage activity to document their present and future identities using half a sheet of paper to document how they would describe themselves now, and the other half to imagine how they would describe themselves ten years from now, and a life history timeline on which they could plot important events which have happened to them. As the young people were so busy during the days they attended the centre, I did not want to conduct too many activities with them or take up too much of their time. I was concerned that taking time away from their lessons on such a short course would be detrimental to their learning. In addition to this, as the centre was fairly new the staff were still finding their feet and I did not want to get in their way or disrupt their plans. Ethnography therefore was the most suitable method for this situation as it was less time intensive for the participants and allowed me to get to know the young people without disrupting too much of their lesson time. As a participant observer I had to be aware of those around me and be agreeable to the staff and students at the centre, I therefore could not control all elements of the research as my attendance at the centre was dependent on my relationships with the people within it (Angrosino, 2007). The researcher is always dependent on the continuing good will of the researched and access is about compromise (Collinson, 2002 cited in (Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008, p.1530)).

**Ethical considerations**

**Informed consent, dissent and participant voice**

Research ethics need to be considered throughout the research process, as researchers have responsibilities to subjects of research and the effects of research upon those subjects. Ethics is therefore an incomplete, iterative process which does not fit into a neat tick box approach. It relies on personal judgement, with ethical considerations depending on local contexts therefore needing to be
situational and responsive. While working with this group of young people, a
number of ethical issues had to be considered before, during and after the
research.

The participants all gave informed consent, signing a consent form after being
given information about the project through an information sheet and a
presentation, and being given the chance to ask questions (see appendix A8 for
a copy of the information sheet and consent form). At the beginning of their
course I discussed my research with the young people, offering them the
opportunity to talk about their experiences by participating in the study. I framed
it as a chance for them to have their voices heard. All the students agreed to take
part. I also signed these consent forms as I saw them as an agreement between
myself and the participants. The form included a number of questions to check
that the participants understood what they were consenting to. These questions
checked that they had read and understood the information sheet and had
chance to ask questions; that they understood that their participation is voluntary
and they are free to withdraw their consent at any time; and that they agree to
take part in the study. In legal terms "it is assumed that in the absence of any
specific incapacities, such as severe physical disability or a learning difficulty,
anyone aged 16 or over is competent to give consent on their own behalf under
UK law" (Heath et al., 2009, p.27). None of the young people I worked with were
under 16 therefore I deemed their consent sufficient and did not seek parental
consent. In some cases, parental consent can undermine young people's
autonomy and can be inappropriate in research into sensitive issues.

The extent to which young people are viewed as similar or different to adults is
related to perceptions of young people as vulnerable and incompetent. Some of
the participants were under 18 years old and therefore could have been
perceived as vulnerable due to legal notions of childhood as period of
powerlessness and irresponsibility (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Some of the
group could also have been seen as vulnerable due to the risks they were facing
in their lives. Research has highlighted that some NEET young people exhibit
risks such as being homeless or in care, engaging in offending behaviour, and
having emotional and/or behavioural problems (Yates and Payne, 2006).
This study takes the approach of ethical symmetry outlined by Christensen and Prout (2002), who argue that researchers do not have to work with different sets of ethical standards when working with children, and differences between research with children and adults should flow from a default position of symmetry. Within this approach ethics is viewed as a negotiated process, tied to the construction of relationships during the research, rather than being based on stereotypes about young people. Young people are viewed as social actors and participants in social life with their own voices and opinions, and it is therefore deemed important to obtain the views of these young people directly. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), children have the right to freedom of expression and to be heard in all matters which affect them. BERA (2004) suggests that the spirit of this principle should be applied to research contexts involving young people and vulnerable adults. As this research is looking at an issue which is having a large impact upon the lives of these young people, and as I am trying to understand their situation, I would argue that it is important to hear what they have to say.

However, the notion of participant voice is problematic. Cremin et al (2011 cited in Simmons et al., 2014, p.77)) highlight how adults may respond to and understand this voice differently depending upon how it is framed. What people say can therefore be interpreted differently by different people. I therefore need to think about how I am presenting the people I am studying and the consequences of this. It can be seen as an ethical duty to accurately represent young people and do justice to their input. Familiarity is important in doing research with young people (Morrow and Richards, 1996) and trust is seen as an essential element of the relationship between the researcher and the researched as young people need to feel that their voices will be heard, represented and fairly acted upon (Simmons and Thompson, 2013).

There is an issue over having the ‘right’ to speak for others. Respondents can be presented as a passive subordinated known, while the researcher is an agentic, superior knower, as the respondent voice is subordinated to the authority of the researcher (Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008). For example, through the selection of data by the researcher there is a potential for silencing the voice of some
participants. Researchers always select and organise what is described; it is interpretation rather than a mirror image (De Vaus, 2001). This act of interpretation leaves considerable power in the hands of the researcher; “however impartial the writer aspires to be, the person writing the text has a stronger voice than those contributing to it” (Simons, 2000 quoted in (Atkins, 2013, p.154)). Mirza (1997 cited in (Holgate, 2005, p.466)) argues that too often research subjects claim that their voices have been silenced or filtered through different cultural lenses which have reinterpreted and/or distorted original meanings. Young people are not left to speak for themselves with the interpretation of their lives left to someone else. Their thoughts and feelings are dissected and interpreted rather than reproduced (Morrow and Richards, 1996).

While I have worked with direct quotes and pieces of work written by the participants to try to outline their voice and stories, I have selected and organised the data and interpreted it. For example, as part of my data analysis I created individual stories about each young person, and while these are based in their narratives, they are not written in their words but in mine. They tell the stories of the individuals, but not in their own voices. Therefore while the focus of my research is on the identities and experiences of these young people, I am aware that my voice is also tied into the research and not just the voices of the participants. The move from young people’s voices to the voices of the researcher involves selection and interpretation, and the role of the researcher voice is not without values and feelings (Henderson et al., 2007). Researchers are not empty vessels, and bring their own cultural assumptions and political convictions to the research. This impacts on data and how it is analysed (Barbour, 2014). However, despite acknowledging my power, I do not view the participants within this research as passive and subordinated as their narratives and experiences are still evident in the data.

I not only needed to gain consent from the young people in the research; initial access and consent was controlled by gatekeepers; in this case the manager and tutors at the centre. The gatekeepers were charged with the responsibility for making decisions on behalf of the young people in their care which can impede on young people’s own individual rights to give or withhold consent. There was
no evidence that the young people were consulted while I was negotiating initial access to the organization. Decisions on allowing access to researchers can be influenced by other factors, such as the pressures of time or inconvenience, rather than in the genuine interests of the young people. There can also be problems with 'assumed consent', where a gatekeeper assumes the consent of the young people after allowing access to the research site (Heath et al., 2009).

I attempted to gain consent from the participants without the coercion of the staff members at the centre, although I acknowledge that it can be difficult for young people to say no within an institutional context, and at times it can be unclear to what extent the consent is informed and not coerced. I tried to give the young people enough information about the project to enable them to make up their own minds.

Dissent can be difficult for young people in the research process, even if they are assured that it is ok not to take part, which raises questions about gaining fully informed consent (Curtis et al., 2004). Young people may not feel completely comfortable dissenting given the inherent power inequalities between researcher and respondent (Heath et al., 2009). I tried to make space for dissent during my research by allowing participants to write 'nonsense' or giving them the choice not to take part in an activity. Letting young people take control over how much information is shared and therefore the extent of access and insight which is gained can give young people some power in the research process (Emond, 2003).

During the session where the participants conducted the newspaper article activity, one of the students did not engage at all and sat for the whole time not writing anything. Another told me that they objected to doing the activity; "this is shit and I am not doing it. I hate you and want you to die" (Field notes, 10/03/2014). I told the participant that they did not have to do the task if they did not want to; they did eventually decide to engage. The issue with this activity was that it was conducted as part of the young people’s class time. I was asked by the functional skills tutor at the centre to link the activities I asked the students to do with the creative writing sessions they had been participating in. I was also asked to differentiate the activities to suit the different levels that the young
people were working at (see Appendix A6 for copies of the ‘worksheets’ I used). The activity was therefore framed as a classroom assignment, yet I made it clear to the students that it was part of my research at the beginning of the lesson and that it was not an ordinary classroom activity. However, the way this activity was conducted may have made it difficult for young people to opt out or to express dissent other than through grudging participation (Heath et al., 2009). In addition to this, I was not in the classroom on my own with the young people, but was being ‘supported’ by the functional skills teacher. This may have impacted further upon the participants’ ability to choose whether to engage. During my research I was also advised to be careful who ‘supports’ me during the activities I conduct if I want the students own thoughts and voices - it was hinted that one of the staff has been known to tell the students what to write when doing exercises during lessons (Field notes, 5/3/2014). I therefore did the writing activities with a different tutor supporting me.

Informed consent in ethnography can be difficult as this method of research takes place over a longer period of time and relations between the researcher and the participants can change. It is also a relatively open-ended form of research, with an under-defined agenda. It can therefore be difficult to communicate to the young people what they are consenting to do. There can be difficulties in explaining the exact nature of the research process and its likely outcomes; researchers can rarely know the full extent of what participation may entail, or predict in advance all possible outcomes of participation (Heath et al., 2009). Gilbert (2008) suggests that ethnography has an inescapable element of deception, with even an overt approach containing some covertness as ethnographers cannot signal when they are or are not collecting data and are not able to anticipate the purposes to which the data will be put. Research participants can also forget that they are being studied. It therefore was necessary for the obtaining of consent not to be regarded “as a once and for all prior event but a process, subject to renegotiation over time” (British Sociological Association, 2002). Access is a process of continual negotiation, and such negotiation can make a key contribution to the development of trusting relationships (Lee, 1993 cited in (Emond, 2003, p.109)).
I tried to constantly remind the participants that I was attending the centre as a researcher as well as a volunteer, discussing my PhD and my work with them. This generally happened when I was having individual or small group conversations with them. This led to a discussion with a participant about whether I could write them out of my research if they did not want to take part. I told them that this would be easy; each student was numbered and I could search for their number in all relevant documents and take any discussions relating to them out of my data. However, I did acknowledge the issue of them still being observed by me, even though this observation would not be documented. They did continue to take part but wanted to check that it was possible for them to change their mind at a later date.

I therefore tried to make sure consent was negotiated on an ongoing basis, with the participants being able to withdraw from the research at any time. Process consent acknowledges that not only do “research participants have the right to express their agency by withdrawing at any time, but that consent should be negotiated on an ongoing basis” (Heath et al., 2009, p.25). Doing this enables participants to exercise some degree of control over their involvement in the research, although they may not feel comfortable exercising this right. For example, when I conducted the writing activity with the participants I clarified that it was for my research and let them decide whether or not they wanted to take part. I also asked them before I looked at the material they created in their lessons. They were therefore given chances to opt out of certain areas of the research. I found the notion of process consent harder in my everyday conversations with the participants. I did not constantly ask for consent to use the discussion we were having as data every time I spoke to someone but, as highlighted earlier, I did try to remind the young people that I was there researching them.
Relationships, roles and power

This discussion of informed consent links to wider issues about relationships and power developed while conducting ethnographic research. The quality of relations with the people under study is important as it affects the success of the observational work (Walsh, 2012). I was not sure how the young people I was working with would react to me or whether they would even talk to me. My characteristics and how I presented myself impacted upon my research. Researchers affect the settings they are in, and although they can control some aspects of their personal front, others will be non-negotiable. I had some control over the image of myself I wanted to project, with dress playing an important part in how I was perceived (Barbour, 2014). I initially turned up to my first day at the centre dressed smartly, however consciously changed this and wore more casual clothes as this allowed me to fit in more; the staff and students at the centre all dressed casually. Yet other differences such as age, class, gender, ethnicity and religion have an impact on the possibilities of interaction and cannot be controlled (Byrne, 2012).

I was close to the age of some of the young people at the centre and initially fit into the age group, as I was 24 when I started my research. This had an impact on the relationships I developed with the participants. Perhaps due to this some of the students attempted to flirt with me and saw no problem with it. Many of the students became quite friendly towards me and joked with me;

"During Maths they had to measure each other's height. This led to Tim calling me a smurf due to my size. Olivia pretended to be annoyed; 'oh have we got you this afternoon'. When I told her that I was in an extra day this week Charlotte joked that she was not coming in on that day." (Field notes, 26/03/2014)

Others associated me with where I am from; "are you the one from Leeds?" (Field notes, 03/02/2014). They therefore saw me as different to them; "Your accent is annoying...You should talk more like us" (Field notes, 03/03/2014). There was one student who remained quite hostile to me throughout. She called me a bitch
because she got an answer wrong on a spelling test I was doing with one of the groups, and made comments about my appearance. While I was aware that my appearance could be of significance to the participants, I was not aware that my accent would cause a reaction.

Some of the students did open up to me and treated me more as a member of staff, discussing their problems with me and asking for help; "she asked me if she could go home but I told her that I was not a proper teacher so I could not decide that; 'You are a teacher" (Field notes, 31/03/2014). There were some situations when I did feel more like a teacher and dealt with 'behavioural issues' in the classroom. I intervened when two of the students were making fun of one of their classmates due to her musical tastes and she felt like she was being 'personally attacked' (Field notes, 22/01/2014), and attempted to intervene when two students were throwing rulers and pens at each other. I also talked to a parent over the phone after paramedics were called as the staff were worried that one of the students had had an epileptic fit (Field notes, 24/02/2014). I was treated like a member of staff by the tutors at the centre. For example, on one occasion I was asked to keep an eye on two students who had been told that if they did not do any work they would get a verbal warning. I was asked to talk to them and tell them that I was watching (Field notes, 02/04/2014). I did not feel comfortable doing this. On another occasion one of the other volunteers was spoken to by a staff member for telling the students that he was 'just' a volunteer. The tutor stated that we are all viewed as members of staff and we need the students to show us the same respect as the teachers (Field notes, 02/04/2014).

In addition to this I helped during the students' exams, sitting in on their Speaking and Listening Assessments. I also watched over some of the students' while they sat an exam and lost control at one point. I went out to talk to some students who were being noisy in the corridor and when I came back the students sitting the exam were talking. I could not get things back under control and did not feel comfortable or confident dealing with these behavioural issues. One of the students stormed out and was given the chance to re-sit her paper later. Another of the students told me that I was not disciplining them right. I should raise my voice to them like one of the tutors does; "I would not mess with her". She then
pretended she was writing a letter to me in which she called me a 'hoe' and a
'bitch'. The students tried to bargain with me not to tell the tutor that they had
been talking. He told me that classroom discipline 'comes with time' (Field notes,
09/04/2014). During situations such as this I did feel uncomfortable, being
expected to 'discipline' the participants of my research highlights the tensions I
encountered from being both a researcher and a volunteer. Although the staff
knew I was there to do research, the pressures on them meant that they valued
me more as a volunteer. This therefore meant that they expected me to help out
when needed, and I was treated as a teaching resource, as they knew that I had
done mentoring and teaching roles before. Due to attempting to develop research
relationships, observers often feel obliged to help members in exchange for
access (Gilbert, 2008).

In particular one of my roles in the classroom became to work with a student who
struggled with English, including reading and writing, and Maths. She benefitted
from one to one help and got frustrated when she was not given direction and
therefore did not know what she was meant to be doing. I sat with her often and
even worked through her Entry Level 1 and Entry Level 2 Maths papers with her,
where I read through the questions so that her reading skills did not get in the
way of her Maths. Being asked to work with this student more than the other ones
may have had an impact upon my observations in the classroom, although, when
I could, I did try to have a chat to all the students while they were working.

With ethnographic research there are issues about how close a researcher
should get to the participants. The researcher is the research instrument and it is
the experience of being both an insider and an outsider that can generate insight
(Gilbert, 2008). A participant observer is involved, not detached, with
understanding derived from the experience of sharing in the participants’ world.
However, there is the problem of 'going native' when ethnographers lose their
sense of being a researcher and become wrapped up in the world view of the
people they are studying. Researchers must remain aware that a certain
detachment is needed when collecting and interpreting data. On the other hand
there is an issue in not getting close enough and adopting a superficial approach
with little understanding of the setting. Lofland and Lofland (1995 cited in (Gilbert,
2008, p.271)) suggest that ethnographers should choose a role somewhere between a 'Martian' and a 'convert'. Likewise, Delamont (2004 cited in (Barbour, 2014, p.165)) suggests that ‘participant observation’ does not involve the researcher doing the same things as those they are studying, merely interacting with them while they do those things.

Remaining ‘just an observer’ was a challenge. I found it difficult not to get involved due to my voluntary role at the centre and did come to care about what happened to these young people. I even went into the centre early one day to walk one of the students’ to an interview for an apprenticeship as she did not know where she was going. An incident happened when the lines were blurred the other way round with a student viewing me as a friend rather than as a researcher/staff member as it was discovered that a student had a picture of me and a picture of one of the other members of staff on her bedroom wall. When questioned about whether the student thought it was weird to have pictures of teachers on her bedroom wall she did not see a problem with it (Field notes, 14/04/2014). A different student also asked me whether teachers can be friends with students outside of college (Field notes, 16/04/2014). She told me that she did not need friends at the college as she had me. She wanted me to be her mentor to which one of the tutors joked "She cannot do that. She only pretends to like you" (Field notes, 30/04/2014).

Constructing a role as a participant observer was therefore not a one sided process; “in every case the fieldworker is fitted into a plausible role by the population he [sic] is studying and within a context meaningful to them” (Vidich, 1955, p.356 quoted in (Barbour, 2014, p.167)). As a researcher I played a number of roles in my relationships with the young people and staff at the centre, reflecting the findings of Raby (2007 cited in (Heath et al., 2009, p.48)) who outlined the number of alternative roles available to youth researchers including friend and fellow worker. These roles, she argued, can help to disrupt hierarchal divisions. While, I was viewed as a classroom assistant and a researcher, I was also viewed in different ways by some of the young people at the centre.
However, while close relationships can develop between researcher and participant, power imbalances remain which can influence fieldwork relations. The researcher is far freer to leave the relationship than the researched, and the research ‘product’ is ultimately that of the researcher (Heath et al., 2009). In addition to this, young people are active social agents who, despite being formally ‘controlled’ by adult practices and structures, generate strategies to create a sense of control over their own environments (Harden and Scott, 1998 cited in (Emond, 2003, p.107)). The job of the ethnographic researcher is to negotiate access into these social spaces. My relationships with some the young people could have been distant as I did not get access to these social spaces due to my position as a staff member and not an ‘insider’ in the group of young people. I also need to be aware of the impact of my relationships with students on how I viewed my data. Whether I got on with the student or not may influence how I perceived them and in turn impact on how I read and interpreted their data. In addition to this, it also influenced the data I was able to collect (something which will be discussed in more depth in the section on validity and limitations).

Within research situations, when working with vulnerable young people, sensitive issues can arise as they open up and talk about their personal lives, discussing relationship problems or issues at home. As participants become less guarded, ethnographers may become privy to information which may need to be passed on to official bodies due to issues of safeguarding (Russell, 2013). I have not used very personal revelations as research data. I acknowledged the need of the participants to talk about these issues and have treated them as private conversations. When situations of concern over a participant emerged, I told the young person that either they, or I, would have to discuss the issue with a member of staff. The staff and students at the centre had close relationships and so the staff tended to know about most issues and problems which the students had. However, this meant that there were limits to the confidentiality of the young people if they were in significant or immediate danger which meant I would have to deal with cases of disclosure of potential harm.

I undertook training on ethical issues in research with children and young people run by the Staff Development Partnership at the University of Leicester, and
obtained an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service check. The project received ethical approval from the University (attached in the appendix A9). While volunteering I undertook a Child Protection training session run by the manager of the centre, and there was also a safeguarding and child protection policy within the organisation which was outlined in the staff and volunteer code of conduct handbook. Ethical guidelines produced by the British Sociological Association and the British Educational Research Association were used to guide my decisions before, during and after the research.

The anonymity of the participants has been ensured by using pseudonyms. However, due to the close relationships between the staff and the students' at the centre, they will be able to identify each other in the research. To further protect their anonymity, the centre where the research has taken place, and the city it is based in, are not referred to by name. I have tried to give enough information about the site of ethnography to provide context, however tried not to offer details which may identify the location of the research. The data was stored securely on a password protected personal laptop, and the notes and other paper documents have been kept locked up in a home office. In addition to this no names were included in my field notes or data analysis files; each student and staff member is referred to by a number which I allocated to them when going through the informed consent forms. Ethical considerations were therefore taken into account throughout the research process.

Data processing and analysis

Miles (1979) described qualitative data as an ‘attractive nuisance’ with little order and lots of data. It is attractive for many reasons, for example in giving rich and full accounts, however collecting and analysing the data can be tricky and time consuming. Qualitative research can generate large volumes of data which needs to be written up, coded and analysed. More specifically the analysis of ethnographic data can be demanding, with a mass of data generated from which the most significant data needs to be selected. From my data collection I had
over 27,000 words of field notes, the stories and newspaper articles of twenty young people; and notes, photographs and photocopies of work undertaken by the participants from Group 1 during the sessions I observed. Most of these documents were hand written, in paper form, or had been photographed. The field notes and all the other text based documents were therefore typed up, with the original phrasing and spelling the young people used in their work being kept the same. They were grouped together depending on the subject area; all the field notes were typed up into one document, the newspaper articles and stories were typed up into another, and the notes from the students’ work on employability, and personal and social development were typed up in different documents. This allowed for easier analysis of the data.

The data was then coded and analysed thematically; I searched for patterns in the data and made it more manageable by compressing it to cohere around several manageable themes. Thematic analysis provides flexibility and freedom to give an exploratory account of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006 cited in (Rose et al., 2012, p.260)). Flick (2009) highlights the potential of thematic coding for comparative studies in which the groups under study are derived from the research question and ‘thus defined a priori’. In these cases the research issue is the distribution of perspectives on a phenomenon. In this research the group was defined in advance, focused around those with experiences of being NEET, and the emphasis is on the individual experiences of the participants. Thematic analysis helped to look at the perspectives of the participants, highlighting similar and differing views.

The codes were developed through ‘conventional analysis’; being derived from the data (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005 cited in (Barbour, 2014, p.261)). Open coding was used, which aims to develop codes that describe, name, or classify the object under study, or a certain aspect of it. Single words and short sequences of words were used to attach codes to the data line by line. Dozens of codes can result from open coding and therefore the next step was to categorise these codes, grouping them around phenomena discovered in the data which were particularly relevant to the research question (Flick, 2009). The initial codes were looked at for similarities and differences, which included an element of
‘summative analysis’, and grouped together under subheadings; these similar events or incidents were grouped together to generate themes. This can be linked to Charmaz’s (2003 cited in (Flick, 2009, p.412)) idea of ‘focused coding’ in which the line by line codes are explored more deeply. The codes themselves included both constructed codes, taken from the literature, and in vivo codes, taken from the expressions of the participants (Flick, 2009). The coding was all done in Excel, with the themes listed down one side and relevant material being placed alongside the headings. I created two different initial spreadsheets; one discussing the opinions of students, and the other outlining the opinions of staff. The two different groups of young people were colour coded so I could tell whether the material was from Group 1 or Group 2 (see appendix A10 for the list of themes and A11 for an example of the coding process).

In addition to this I also created a spreadsheet which listed each individual who participated. I then collected together the data relevant to each of them to gain an understanding of each student’s overall narrative during their time on the course. This helped me to think more about the theoretical perspective, using the narratives to explore the idea of the reflexive self; therefore developing a more ‘directed analysis’ (starting from theory which can be supported or extended though analysis) (Hseih and Shannon, 2005 cited in (Barbour, 2014, p.261)). This allowed me to look at the key themes which run through an individual narrative, as well as the themes which run across the entire set of narratives. Looking again at the data, it became apparent that one of the sections needed to be analysed in more detail. A separate spreadsheet was therefore made about the characteristics of the young people, listing the characteristics specified by each gender, grouping together similar characteristics, and looking at the differences between the way the participants viewed themselves, how they think they are viewed, and how they are viewed by their classmates.

The impact of the centre on the young people became one of the themes around which the data was coded. The role of the specific context the young people were in was therefore explicitly acknowledged. As this study is a case study, this had implications for the analysis of the data. When the data had been coded I went back to some of the documentation related to the centre and looked again at the
observations I had collected about the tutors, I then explored the themes and
ideas generated by the students to see if there were any links between what the
centre and tutors were saying and what the students were saying. I did this to try
to understand the role of the centre in the narratives the participants were
creating; to understand the contextual conditions pertinent to this specific case.

Validity and limitations

In any piece of research there are limitations. I had to be careful not to let my
own views influence my research as personal “values intrude in all phases of the
research process – from the choice of research area to the formulation of
conclusions…the social researcher is never conducting an investigation in a
moral vacuum” (Bryman, 2012, p.517). The personal-self becomes inseparable
from the researcher-self and the researcher selects and analyses the data
gathered through a personal lens (Creswell, 2013). Due to this, different
ethnographers will produce different images of what they have observed as we
all tend to perceive things through a filter; through the research method or the
artefacts of who we are (Angrosino, 2007). What we see and report depends on
our own perspective and social location (Gilbert, 2008). Weber suggests that our
biographies influence our choice of research topics and how we seek to excavate
them (Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008). Researchers also have the power to choose
a standpoint and to view young people in a certain way. I chose this topic due to
what I see as prevailing unfair representations of young people and the
unemployed. I wanted to find out from the young people themselves about their
experiences, rather than gaining my knowledge of this group from the media and
the government. My view is already biased, I therefore had to take this into
account when conducting my research and analysing my data. Under the
principle of ‘epistemological reflexivity’ scholars should fully appreciate and
document how their own interests drive the production of knowledge in certain
ways and not others as this has implications for the type of research conducted,
questions formulated and methods used (Tadajewski, 2011).
My methods of data collection and analysis did have an impact upon the data I was able to collect. Most of the data was in the form of text, but I did attempt to include one other visual element in addition to the use of photo elicitation. As part of the newspaper article activity I asked students to include an image on their text which summed up unemployment to them. To have added to this it would have been useful to ask the participants why they chose that image, however I do not have this data, therefore I only have my understanding of the images. This limits this section of the data and therefore I chose not to analyse the images they have used as I do not want to second guess what they were thinking. Pictures are ambiguous and can carry multiple meanings, therefore visual data does not speak for itself (Gilbert, 2008). When you analyse a visual image you are starting from your own point of view (Rose, 2012). To reduce possible meanings images must be accompanied by text.

Other issues with data collection also arose. Conducting my research over four months allowed me time to get to know the young people in my research. However, as the period of my research was limited by the length of the programme, I lost contact with the participants once they left the centre. I was therefore unable to track their progress or to go back to them with the themes which emerged from the ethnography and explore some of the issues further. My research only provides a snapshot of the lives of these young people during their time on the course. It looks at part of their development, therefore not fully determining how they see themselves. By focusing on particular areas of their life, or a particular moment, I could have represented them in ways they may not see themselves, or want to have themselves seen (Henderson et al., 2007). However, I did try to discuss different areas of their lives with them and tried to gather data on how they defined themselves, not just focusing on their NEET status and their experiences at the centre.

In addition to this, my method of data collection was affected by my role as a volunteer at the centre. The lessons for the two groups ran simultaneously. I tended to work with Group One as this was the larger group and therefore was the one which the tutors needed help with. Due to this I collected more data from Group One, including being able to access the work they created in lessons, and
got to know this group of participants better than the other. The attendance of the young people at the centre also impacted upon this. Generally three or four students from Group One did not turn up to the centre on a given day, however attendance was more of a concern among the staff in relation to Group Two which lead to them plan ‘exciting trips’ to try and boost attendance (Field notes, 12/05/2014). Therefore, although 27 young people did contribute to the research in some way, I did not manage to capture the narratives of all of them.

Ethnography undertaken using a participant observation approach makes much of the style and level of relationships built with the participants. However ethnographers will not build relationships of equal depth with all young people (Emond, 2003). I got to know and spend time with some participants more than others, these voices therefore come through stronger in my data. Barbour (2014) viewed this as natural, as in social situations individuals are more likely to warm to some people than others. It is also common that the ethnographer establishes close contact with one or a few key informants who guide the researcher and help them with crucial information (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). Getting to know different young people in the centre meant trying to talk to individuals from different friendship groups. If I spent more time with once specific group this would have implications for how I was seen by other potential respondents, and the access I was able to gain to them; by making alliances with certain young people I could have automatically distanced myself from others (Heath et al., 2009). In addition to this, power differentials within a community can mean that some people are more likely to be heard than others. Therefore a common experience or perspective cannot be presumed (Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008).

My choice of setting for the data collection impacted upon the participants I engaged with. I was working with young people who had generally chosen to engage. By taking part in a course they would not be classed in the NEET statistics, although they did have experiences of being NEET and, due to the course being part time, were still classed as ‘unemployed’. Using the NEET category and working with those who are in a form of education means that I have not taken into account those who occupy precarious labour market positions and who are churned between short term and insecure jobs, although this could
describe some of the experiences of the young people who participated in the research. I have also not managed to capture the full heterogeneity of the category, as generally these were young people who were aiming to get into education, employment or training. They had not become NEET by choice.

The generalisability, and the ability to summarise and develop general propositions and theories on the basis of case studies has been questioned (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Yet Yin (2014) argues that case studies are good for looking at how and why things do or do not work. Looking at the specific organisation and programme these young people are attending and exploring the impact of the interventions, and the centre as a whole, on them can help to inform ideas about policy and practice aimed at NEET young people. A case study approach has allowed a focus on how these young people are experiencing interventions aimed at NEET young people at a local level. An understanding of what works and what does not within this specific context can help to inform ideas about what support NEET young people need more widely. Therefore, while the findings of this study relate to the specific context within which the research was conducted, it does have wider implications.

The young people were influenced by the context of the centre, by the staff, and by my presence. The influence of the tutors at the centre on the students’ needs to be acknowledged as they were present throughout my research. These sources of influence cannot be controlled and are context dependent. The young people could therefore have been speaking in accordance with the norms of talk and interaction demanded by the social situation they were in (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). Yet due to the use of ethnographic methods and acknowledgement that this is case study research, the context the young people are in was taken into account and became an area of interest in relation to how they created their self-identities. The norms of talk and interaction in this particular setting formed part of the analysis.

As well as the context, both the researcher and the techniques used in research can have an impact upon the data collected. For example, the intended effect of an interview is to give a good impression, or to just make the situation work,
therefore Alvesson and Deetz (2000) suggest that there is often a positive bias in interviews. Yet the same problems are present in other research methods. Miles (1979, p.597) found in his research that there was much self-aggrandising and self-protection; "in all sites there was rewriting of history by individuals to present themselves more favourably". There are therefore problems with ‘social desirability’ on response validity (Gilbert, 2008). People may be more guarded in what they do and say in the presence of researchers. The effects of researcher presence on a setting is inevitable and hard to gauge. Within ethnography researchers affect the setting by being there, they are the principle research instrument as their social presence elicits responses, and informers can only inform to the extent of their own understandings.

My research is looking at how these young people describe themselves, however individuals are not objective, and may misrepresent themselves to others. In one case a student gave conflicting accounts about herself, telling different things to different people and even changing her narrative when talking to me, as this section from my field notes shows:

_Last Thursday Charlotte tried to throw herself off of the top of the stairs. She told me it was because her cat had died. A tutor questioned her about this as she had been laughing when she did it and did not seem upset. The staff seem to think that she does things for attention. One of the tutors heard her talking to another about her boyfriend but she had told the tutor that they had broken up because she had cheated on him. The tutor raised doubts over whether this boyfriend exists. Charlotte told me that she needed to go talk to the police that evening as she had witnessed her friend being beaten up. She told me that she was scared. Later on she said she was not going to see the police but was meant to be going to see her uncle. She said that she could not be bothered as he lived too far away_ (Field notes, 14/04/2014).

I have struggled to know what to do with the data from this young person but decided to analyse it and treat it the same as the rest of the data. This research is about representation and this is how this student is representing herself,
therefore I did not want to discount what she was saying or dismiss her account. Thomas’ theorem argues that when a person defines a situation as real, this situation is real in its consequences; linking to the fundamental methodological principle of interactionism which suggests that researchers see the world from the angle of the subjects they study (Stryker, 1976 cited in (Flick, 2009, p.58)). The data from this participant demonstrates how they attempted to construct their own identity and social reality, even if they struggled to keep up a coherent narrative.

Ethnography can be viewed as interpretive, with researchers attempting to understand the often conflicting perspective of participants (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). Inconsistency can be viewed as a resource or intriguing analytic puzzle rather than a problem of disconfirmation. The role of qualitative research is not to determine which account is accurate or truthful but to use them as a resource to understand how ‘situated accounts’ are told in a way that allow speakers to achieve a different purpose through emphasising some aspects of their stories and de-emphasising others. Views are not static and qualitative methods, by virtue of their immediacy and capacity to encourage respondents to question their ideas, may elicit contradictory remarks (Barbour, 2014).

Conclusion

This research is viewing identity as a reflexive project, however within the confines of culturally available ways of making sense of the self. Due to this, the research approach focused on reality as being socially constructed; with meaning created by people and influenced by social and cultural contexts. This focus on identity and meaning meant that a qualitative approach was taken. A centre was chosen within which the young people had experiences of being NEET, and which was not gender specific. The use of ethnography within this centre allowed me to concentrate on the young people and what they had to say. At the beginning I did not impose categories or ideas on them but listened to their discussions to find out what was important to them. This approach also allowed
me to spend time with the young people and get to know them. In addition to this, the textual element of the research enabled me to capture their narratives in a different way as they were not keen on the idea of interviews.

Working with this group of young people did mean I had to take a number of issues into account such as informed consent, dissent, gatekeepers, power relations and the disclosure of personal issues. My method of data collection also put me in a curious position and at times I struggled with my dual roles as researcher and volunteer, especially when expectations were placed on me by staff members at the centre in my role as a volunteer; for example in relation to my ability to 'handle' classroom discipline. However, this ethnographic approach did allow me to capture some interesting data, which will be discussed in the next two chapters.
Chapter Five: Current identities and constructions of youth

Introduction

The NEET category has come to be associated with negative connotations and treats those placed into it as a homogenous group. Being NEET is viewed as a ‘problem’ which has an impact upon the policy constructed and aimed at this group. NEET tends to be viewed in a negative light, however little is known about how these young people see themselves (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016). It is important to focus on who they are, rather than rendering them as invisible within a homogenous population of ‘uneducable and unemployable’ (Simmons and Thompson, 2013).

This research adds to critiques of the NEET category (Furlong, 2006; Hutchinson et al., 2016; Yates and Payne, 2006) which highlight how the policy concept does not fit with the lives and experiences of those it attempts to define. It outlines the diversity of the young people placed into this category by looking at their individual experiences, adding to a body of literature which has explored the identity and agency of young people who are classed as NEET (Phillips, 2010; Shannahan, 2012; Simmons et al., 2014). However, within this literature there is a lack of discussion about how young people who are placed into the category relate to the term and how they describe themselves. To explore these issues this chapter will look at how these young people describe themselves, and how they view their current situation. The next chapter will focus on their aspirations for the future. Both of these chapters are grounded in the literature on NEETs, as well as being understood within the theoretical framework being used for the study.

This research looks at how those who are associated with the label NEET see themselves, also exploring how they relate to the generalisations and assumptions associated with the category. The construction of NEET young people within policy shapes their experiences and future prospects, with stereotypes linked to this group having an impact on the support they receive. Simmons and Thompson (2011a) suggests that practitioners working with NEET
young people are not only bounded by structural and material factors but also the discourses surrounding the category. The meanings NEET young people construct therefore cannot be viewed in isolation from broader discourses and practices constructed by policymakers, researchers and the media (Simmons et al., 2014). This chapter focuses on how these participants were constructed while attending a course for NEET young people, looking at the issue of individualisation, how these young people were viewed as learners, and the tension of being viewed as both ‘in trouble’ and ‘as trouble’ (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). It also highlights how the participants were seen as ‘youths’ rather than ‘adults’, despite the wide age range of those who are associated with the NEET category. These discussions reflect the stereotypes related to NEET young people highlighted in previous literature (as discussed in Chapter Two).

This chapter also explores the responses of the participants to media stereotypes of NEET young people, and how they related to discourses about people ‘on benefits’. It then goes beyond these discourses to look at how these young people described themselves in terms of their interests and personalities, therefore outlining how they are ordinary young people who just happen to be unemployed. The chapter acknowledges that while these young people can define themselves, they are also defined by others. Their experiences and identities are shaped by the NEET category and wider discourses related to unemployment. Their agency and ability to create their own self-identities is bounded by the impact of socially and politically created discourses about what being NEET and unemployed means. Reflecting the ideas of Evans (2002; 2007), they have agency as they are able define themselves on an individual basis, however organisations at a national and local level, and the broader impact of society, work to structure and bound the identities they are able to create and choices which they are able to make.
Not NEET, but individualised youths

Similar to previous studies (Simmons et al., 2014; Smith and Wright, 2015) the participants did not recognise the category of NEET and did not associate with the term. It remains a policy designation only. When asked what the acronym stood for none of them knew. The young people all thought that the 'T' stood for something to do with teens or teenagers: "not employed... not even employable teens" (Field notes, 10/03/2014). Despite this, most of the young people would generally have been designated as NEET at some point before joining the course, and the course itself was aimed at young people who were not already in education, employment or training. Before joining the course the participants described how they had been kicked out of college, were ‘on the dole’, ‘in a rut’ and ‘feeling lost’. Ian (male, 19) had been out of work for two months before joining the course, Nina (female, 18) had been applying for jobs for over two years, Demi (female, 24) had been out of work for five years, Simon (male, unknown age) had been unemployed for the past four years and Neil (male, unknown age) since March 2012. Leanne (female, 16) was the only one who felt she had not experienced unemployment. She had finished school in June 2013 and then had started a course at the centre in September 2013 to improve her grades. In between she went on holiday.

Despite not associating with the category of NEET, assumptions and generalisations linked to policy aimed at this group had an impact on the provision the participants experienced. The concept of individualisation has had an influence on policy discourse, with being NEET related to the deficiencies of those who are unable to get into education, employment or training. Policies and programmes aimed at NEET young people focus on individuals and their ‘employability’ (Cieslik and Simpson, 2013). They are assumed to lack the appropriate skills or attitudes for the disciplines of waged work and are not viewed as ‘work ready’. The focus is on helping them to overcome individual barriers to participation and developing adequate skills to keep and find jobs, concentrating on the ways they needed to change and develop themselves to become employable.
The programme the students were on was based around these ideas. The staff and volunteer code of conduct handbook declared that “It is our responsibility to prepare our young people for work, college or apprenticeships’. The focus was on developing the skills and abilities of the participants, offering qualifications in Maths, English and ICT. A section of the course also focused on ‘employability’ which included getting the students to undertake a week long work experience placement which they had to organise themselves. Alongside this, the young people signed a code of conduct at the start of the course and through enforcing this the staff hoped to get the students into a routine so that they were prepared for work. In an attempt to get the participants to work on their time management, the staff offered incentives. If a student was on time for a whole week their name was put into a hat. At the end of the week one name was drawn out and that person won shopping vouchers. One of the tutors described how they wanted to make sure that the students are ready to go out into the world. Change was highlighted throughout the programme, especially in relation to growing in confidence, or getting the students to change their behaviour.

At one point, in a moment of exasperation, Leanne (female, 16) was told that she would never get anywhere if she did not change her behaviour (Field notes, 24/03/2014). She felt that she had been accepted at the centre for who she was but the staff suggested that there is no guarantee that this will happen elsewhere. When visitors came into the centre the other students and staff would apologise for Leanne’s behaviour; “if she says anything offensive she doesn’t meant it” (Field notes, 30/04/2014). The tutors think that some of the other students are scared of her. They do not like telling students to change who they are, and like that Leanne has a personality, but felt that to succeed in college or further education students have to adapt.

The focus on individual shortcomings was reflected in the narratives of the participants. Some of them spoke about the importance of ‘fitting in’ to try and get a job; this included speaking formally, having good body language (no slouching), dressing appropriately, having good hygiene (not smoking before an interview or wearing strong perfume), not swearing, taking out piercings and covering up tattoos. There was a notion among the students that tattoos on your hand or face
did not give a good impression. However, for some of the young people tattoos were part of the way they expressed themselves. John (male, 18) took his inspiration from tattoos and wanted to get a tattoo sleeve starting with a batman tattoo. While Bella (female, 20) had a tattoo on her wrist of the birth date of her daughter, however she did describe it as a mistake as most places of work make you cover up your tattoos. While the students were told by their tutor to not be afraid to be themselves during interviews, there was a feeling that you had to hide some of who you are.

Individualisation has been emphasised through policy and has been found to have impacted on the lives of young people who have subscribed to notions of individual choice and having control over their own lives (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005; Evans, 2007). This is part of wider changes associated with late modernity, where young people are forced to reflexively negotiate a complex set of routes into the labour market, and in doing so develop a sense that they alone are responsible for their labour market outcomes. These ideas were highlighted in this research. The idea that people are responsible for who and what they become was reflected in the narratives of the participants. When students saw themselves in similar circumstances they compared their experiences, suggesting that they had got through things so other people could too. For example, Sarah (female, unknown age) was homeless while attending the centre and was living at the YMCA. She was thrown off the course due to her behaviour. Bella (female, 20) sympathised as she had been homeless too but suggested that you could work your way out of your difficulties.

Due to the impact of individualisation, studies have indicated that NEET young people often attribute their status to individualised factors such as low ability, lack of work experience and low confidence or self-esteem (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). This was the case for participants in this research. Unemployment felt like a personal failure for some of them and there was a focus on their individual shortcomings, with the most common reasons for being unemployed viewed as a lack of work experience and a lack of qualifications;
“A young boy now aged 18 has been out of education for the past year...he now has no education or training to get a job so that he feels he has let his self down and he has failed his family.” (John, male, 18)

Low confidence and self-esteem were also common. When asked to describe herself Bella (female, 20) wrote the word ‘self-conscious’. This lack of self-confidence was not just focused around their attempts to get into work or education, it also had an impact on how they viewed other aspects of their lives; one student felt that her desire for a family was not achievable as she did not think that she was ‘attractive enough’.

Feelings of low confidence and self-esteem appeared to be exacerbated by failure to find employment; “Having to go out, look for work, going to interviews and not getting a job puts your confidence down, making you lose motivation of looking for work, makes you feel like you want to give up” (Tim, male, 19).

Participants spoke about being unmotivated, feeling down, and feeling dreadful when you keep getting rejection letters. Fear and lack of motivation were discussed as barriers by a number of the participants.

Demi (female, 24) felt like she had a negative attitude; “I’m barely nice to my friends and family…the fact I cannot find a job…it’s making me feel down”. She felt like she had lost motivation to go out and search for work, and when she did find the motivation to ask for jobs she was turned down; “I have almost given up trying completely”. She described it as ‘degrading’. Demi felt like being unemployed had changed her from being her “happy, bouncy self” to a “really depressed ass”.

The focus on individual deficiencies and the idea that they alone are responsible for their lives impacted upon how these young people viewed themselves and their situation. The participants sought to change and develop themselves as individuals to gain employment, education or training; by improving their confidence, changing their attitudes or behaviour, adjusting their appearance, and gaining work experience and qualifications. This highlights the concern with
individual deficiencies among programmes and policies aimed at NEET young people, with courses focusing on employability and making young people ‘work ready’. Feeling like a failure, low confidence and self-esteem, and a focus on individual shortcomings can be viewed as the impact of discourses of individualisation which see people as responsible for their unemployment rather than taking into account the impact of wider structures on their lives. While the aim of courses based around ‘employability’ are to increase the confidence of those they work with, focusing on individual reasons for unemployment can contradict this aim as young people concentrate on what is wrong with them, rather than on their strengths and abilities.

While confidence may be boosted in the short term, if the students struggle once they leave the programme they will continue to blame themselves, negating this impact on self-esteem. This became apparent among some of the young people in this research. For example, Charlotte (female, 23) clearly grew in confidence during her time at the centre. She claimed that before she attended she did not talk to anybody and did not ask for help, but now she talked a bit more. The tutors were seen as central sources of support for her and she wrote a letter to one of them describing them as “the greatest teacher at the centre” (Field notes, 16/04/2014). The tutors noticed that she had become a lot more vocal and had more confidence. However this newly found confidence was linked to how comfortable she felt around the other staff and students; she had built trust with those around her which helped to encourage self-belief (Miller et al., 2015). Soft skills and self-esteem cannot be taught directly but need to be developed through positive learning experiences and relationship building (Beck, 2015). When Charlotte attended a different course she reverted to being disengaged and quiet; one of the tutors received an email from another provider working with Charlotte which stated that she was disengaged in lessons. Confidence for some of the young people was tied to their experiences at the centre, this progress was therefore lost once the programme ended.
'Non-academic’, disengaged learners?

Another stereotype which shaped the participants experiences on the course, and of wider provision, was the notion of NEET young people as 'non-academic’. Provision for NEET young people makes assumptions about the forms of learning which are appropriate for those who fall into the category. It is assumed that these are lower attaining young people who are ‘practical’ rather than ‘academic’. In their study of Entry to Employment programmes Russell et al (2011) found that the discourse being used described learners as non-academic and unable to cope with extended periods of classroom activity. They were constructed as a homogenous group of learners who would benefit from basic skills and work related learning as an alternative to the academic curriculum which has failed them at school. Practitioners regarded these learners as fundamentally different to other young people (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b).

The tutors in this research did not view many of the students as ‘self-motivated’ learners, they were seen as disengaged and disadvantaged, with some of the young people displaying apathy and being very behind on their work. One of the tutors was interested in the identity and psychology of the young people at the centre as he wanted to understand why they were disengaged. He suggested that the current education system did not suit all learners meaning that some young people ‘get lost’ leading to them becoming NEET.

Yet while the engagement of some of the students was sporadic, others at the centre suggested that they were there to work and learn. Some of the students got annoyed if it seemed like they were having their time ‘wasted’ in lessons; they wanted to be productive. A few of the participants complained that some in the centre were there for the wrong reasons or messed around too much. Some of the students in Group Two did not want to work in a group with one of the female participants as they thought that she was there “just so that she had something to do during the day” (Field note, 05/03/2014). Similarly, during the morning session a couple of the students from Group One were talking about those who were absent; “If they cannot be bothered to come in, they should not be on the
To an extent the young people attending the course were therefore seen in a certain way by the tutors; as disengaged learners. However, there was an acknowledgement that the participants were not all working at the same level and the tutors used differentiation in their lessons; offering similar work at different levels. They suggested that there were three students at the centre who struggled to read and write. On the other hand, a few of the young people already had qualifications in Maths and English and were attending the centre for help with more personal matters, such as building their confidence. Due to this difference between the learning levels of those at the centre some of the participants claimed that the language used by some of the other students, for example them saying something is easy, made them feel stupid.

While many of the participants had negative experiences of previous education, this did not mean that they were non-academic young people. Disengagement had not always been a choice. Alice (female, unknown age) and Cameron (male, unknown age) suggested that they were attending the centre to get help with Maths and English “because of not being able to do this at school”. They did not give reasons why they were not able to do these qualifications, but other participants did outline the causes related to them being unable to engage with education. Some told stories of struggle and disrupted learning due to health or behavioural issues, or changes in living arrangements or circumstances. One student had been in a serious car accident which affected his final year of school, while another had been kicked out due to anger issues. Bella (female, 20) was not allowed to finish her college course when she got pregnant, even though she had been willing to take the work home.

**Leanne (female, 16)** was in foster care and had moved around a lot. She had been to “seven different schools and four behavioural schools” (Field notes, 24/3/2014). However she did better than expected at school as she had been predicted all E’s due to her attendance. Before attending the centre she had a two week trial at a college but said that she was told she could not attend because she was “too loud” (Field notes, 22/1/2014).
Other students did not enjoy school, or felt that they had not been supported, reflecting the feelings of some of the participants in the work of Miller et al (2015) who felt that they did not ‘fit in’ to the school system, and also replicating the concerns of one of the tutors at the centre discussed previously regarding young people getting lost in education. Charlotte (female, 23) said that she was not nice to any of the teachers at her school. She did not like them and did not enjoy any subjects apart from English (Field notes, 9/4/2014). She struggled at school due to her learning difficulties. Gabby (female, unknown age), who has ADHD, tried to make friends with the teachers but they got annoyed with her because she was slow with her work and they did not really help her (Field notes, 30/4/2014).

For some students, their dislike of school meant that they chose not to attend;

Katy: “I didn’t really go to school in Year 11. I told my mum I was on study leave and she believed me, even when she got messages through”

Bella: “You could have got your mum arrested. My foster carers were summoned to court as I was not attending school” (Field notes, 29/04/2014)

Olivia (female, unknown age) had been thrown out of college twice due to attendance issues. Yet while Bella, Katy and Olivia had problems with attendance at school, they did have wider concerns in their lives which could have impacted upon this. Olivia had issues around confidence and self-harm after being bullied, Katy developed depression and anxiety after her dad went to prison, while Bella has a history of depression and self-harm due to incidents in her childhood. There were therefore things going on outside of school which impacted upon their engagement. Others did have more positive experiences. For example, Cameron (male, unknown age) suggested that he does not have confidence issues as he did performing arts at college.

Similar to the findings from previous studies (Simmons et al., 2014; Pemberton, 2008; Miller et al., 2015; Smith and Wright, 2015), while some of the participants had successful learning careers before becoming NEET, most had found compulsory education an unrewarding experience, with disrupted schooling and
few qualifications. Yet while some of the young people were disengaged, the reasons for this should be taken into account. Among the young people who struggled in education, it was not a simple story of them being non-academic and choosing to be disengaged. There were wider issues in their lives which impacted on and affected their ability to engage. This research highlights the bounded nature of their agency (Evans, 2007), which impacted on the choices they were able to make regarding their education. They faced barriers and some young people had been forced into certain directions by the institutions they attended; their actions were constrained (Wyn and White, 1998).

In addition to this, disengagement for some young people was only related to specific subjects which they struggled with and therefore lacked confidence in. During their time at the centre Maths was particularly problematic for some of the participants; “I hate Maths. I want to throttle Maths” (Olivia, female, unknown age, Field notes 28/04/2014). During a different Maths lesson Olivia called herself a ‘thick cow’ and said that she was ‘shit at Maths’ (Field notes, 12/03/2014). Other students also lacked confidence in this area. Bonnie (female, unknown age) did not really engage in these lessons and during one session tried to ‘escape’ but was caught by one of the tutors (Field notes, 05/03/2014). While during a Maths mock paper some of the students gave up as they felt that the exam was too hard; “there is no way that this is a level one” (Field notes, 14/04/2014). This does not make these young people different to other learners. Previous research has demonstrated that students experience Maths as difficult, abstract, boring and irrelevant (Osborne et al., 1997 cited in (Hodgen et al., 2010, p.155)). Stereotyping those who are NEET as non-academic and disengaged therefore does not help to understand the experiences of these young people. The rejection of conventional academic educational approaches in programmes for NEET young people is based on the assumption that all NEET youths have negative experiences of education, this is not the case (Beck, 2015).

Some of the young people in the study did see themselves as academic, describing themselves as ‘smart’ or ‘nerdy’. Bonnie (female, unknown age) suggested that she was ‘literate’, John (male, 18) liked Maths, while Matt (male, unknown age) was good at coding as he enjoyed doing puzzles and Sudoku.
Leanne (female, 16) commented on Bella’s (female, 20) enjoyment of English; “She likes writing. She is a freak” (Field notes, 09/04/2014). The young people in this research were not a similar group of learners; they were working at different levels, and had different attitudes towards engagement. This made it difficult for the tutors at the centre to work with the students as a group; they benefitted from individual support both in their learning, but also in other areas. Similar to the young people in the work of Simmons and Thompson (2011a) they were a varied and diverse group with a broad range of experience and abilities. Viewing them as a homogenous group of non-academic, disengaged young people who will benefit from basic skills and work based education does not take into account the diversity of those who become NEET. More diverse courses beyond those focused on employability and life skills may therefore benefit these young people.

Construction as ‘youths’

Policies and programmes aimed at NEET young people have a preventative and supportive focus, but are also linked to conditionality, surveillance and monitoring. Simmons and Thompson (2011b) suggest that there is a ‘dual narrative’ in NEET policy where these young people are simultaneously regarded as in trouble and as trouble. They are a source of trouble in need of control, or victims of trouble in need of protection. Both Simmons and Thompson (2014) and Beck (2015) found this tension apparent among the practitioners in their research who were struggling to reconcile their role of supporting young people with the responsibility to monitor and discipline on behalf of the state. This dual narrative was apparent at the centre the students were attending and impacted upon their experiences while there.

The students had an understanding that they were seen as ‘difficult’; “I am surprised that we haven’t scared you off yet” (Field notes, 24/02/2014) and there were a number of behavioural issues at the centre. Sometimes participants disappeared and did not participate in lessons. At the end of one session some of the young people were asked to leave as they were not working and were
being disruptive, listening loudly to music. In other lessons they sat watching
television shows on their phones. Leanne (female, 16) suggested that “I don't get
distracted. I just don't tend to do work” (Field notes, 22/01/2014). During one
session she decided to run around the centre with some other students. She was
given a formal written warning. The participants gave different reasons for not
engaging; not wanting to work as they ‘did not feel like it’, being bored, or that
they could not be bothered. The police were called to the centre on more than
one occasion. They came to talk to one student who had been involved in money
laundering and on a separate occasion because a participant owed someone
money for drugs. In an incident which happened outside the centre, one of the
young people was charged with handling stolen goods and missed a day of the
course after spending a night in a police cell.

Ian (male, 19) had been hit in town over the weekend as he owed people
money. He had been in trouble with the police numerous times. On one
occasion he had accidentally broken the window of a takeaway and on
another had been offered payment to key a car. He had also once burnt the
whole of his back after setting himself on fire while attempting to throw a
Molotov cocktail. He had been inspired to do so by Grand Theft Auto [the
video game].

The participants were therefore treated as youths who needed some kind of adult
control and supervision. The Staff and Volunteer Code of Conduct Handbook for
the centre outlined that the students need to be taught responsible behaviour and
limits. As highlighted earlier, when they started their programme the students
were asked to sign a code of conduct which included rules over issues such as
drugs and alcohol, timekeeping, attendance, tidiness, student free areas, noise
levels and behaviour. They were reminded to not hang around on the steps
outside of the centre as it made the place look ‘untidy’ and were told that it was
not "just a youth centre where you can screw around" (Field notes, 03/02/2014
and 09/06/2014). The staff even had the ability to track the students’ internet
activity at the centre to see what they had been viewing.
Attending the centre was viewed as better than the young people staying at home all day, or hanging around on the streets, even if they did not engage. This reflects the concern, highlighted in previous literature, that young people’s unstructured free time is a breeding ground for social problems (Griffin, 2013). Giving these young people something to occupy their time is deemed to discourage youth delinquency and deviance, such as the examples of behaviour discussed above. Yet this engagement with criminal activities should be viewed within the wider contexts of the participants’ lives, rather than treated as evidence of the potential problems of unstructured free time. For example, the student who became involved in money laundering was in debt. As he had been unable to find work he had therefore looked for alternative ways to earn a living.

Alongside being associated with delinquency and deviance, the participants were also viewed as young people who had experienced difficulties in their lives and the staff were there to help them. Experiences of depression and anxiety were common. Students had been bullied, lost parents or close family members, had witnessed parental relationships break down, had been in violent or difficult relationships, had witnessed domestic violence, had experienced parents going to jail, had been fostered, had experienced being homeless, had problems with alcohol, and had experienced self-harm. Olivia (female, unknown age) described how she had “been through a lot in life”.

During the course one of the young people went missing. Another young person did not attend classes at the centre at all but came in for breakfast and was bought food and clothing after they had been thrown out of their house by their mum. During volunteer training, this idea of these young people needing help and support was emphasised. It was suggested that lots of the students can be quite defensive and they need to feel comfortable to learn. This was linked to the notion that neglected children are often more prescriptive and learn to pick up on people’s moods. Volunteers were therefore told to be positive, proactive and friendly. The role of staff and need for individual support will be outlined in more detail in the next chapter.
While on the course the participants were being constructed as ‘youths’ in need of both surveillance and control, and help and support. This view of the participants as ‘youths’, which appeared to be held by the practitioners working with them, suggests that there is a lack of understanding of the much wider and older age group that have come to be associated with the NEET category (Maguire, 2015a). The ages of the participants ranged from 16 to 24 years old. One of the things identified by the participants themselves as a difference between them in relation to their behaviour and engagement at the centre was age. At the end of one day the tutors were dealing with two separate issues where conflict had arisen between students. Katy (female, 19) suggested that “this is what happens when you let younger ones on the course” (Field notes, 22/01/2014).

The participants had different understandings of themselves in relation to the notion of being a ‘youth’ or an adult. Gabby (female, unknown age) was struggling with these two identities as she tried to be a ‘normal’ teenager, however her mum did not let her go out at night and still talked for her as she used to be shy when she was little. Leanne (female, 16) who was the youngest on the course got offended by people calling her a kid;

Ian: "You are 16. You are not an adult!"

Leanne: "I can still go swimming for free but I have to pay full fare on the bus" (Field notes, 03/02/2014)
Some of those over 18 years old saw themselves as adults. When asked to describe themselves some of the most common personality traits listed were mature and responsible, however one of the students listed immaturity as a barrier to gaining employment. Ian (male, 19) argued that at 20 you are an adult. While Bella (female, 20) suggested "when you are 20 you are not a teenager but not quite an adult" (Field notes, 30/04/2014). This feeling of being somewhere in between is perhaps due to her age but also due to her current circumstances where she felt dependent on others; something which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Walther (2009) has suggested that due to changing transitions, young people increasingly find it difficult to associate themselves exclusively with youth or adulthood. They see themselves as somewhere in between.

Constructions of the participants as both in trouble and as trouble were therefore evident in the young people’s experiences of the course. However, the focus on surveillance and monitoring demonstrated in programmes aimed at NEET young people treats them as ‘youths’ not taking into account the wider age range of people attending these courses. More research could be done with those aged 20 to 24, where there tends to be the highest levels of NEETs, to better understand their experiences and the support they need. As has previously been highlighted in the NEET literature, progression targets can vary according to the age of a young person; what is deemed as a positive outcome for a young person at the age of 16 may be regarded in a different way later on. In addition to this, beyond the age of 18 educational opportunities are more restricted, and getting a job often takes precedence over other ambitions as people engage with the welfare regime (Simmons et al., 2014). Discourses around youth and adulthood, and their impact upon the participants, will be explored further in the next chapter.

**NEET stereotypes and the labelling of others**

The participants were viewed in a certain way while on the course; as disengaged and in need of both support and control. They were deemed to need developing
to become work ready and employable. The assumptions and generalisations associated with being NEET were therefore having an impact upon the provision available to them, and their experiences of this provision. Previous research has demonstrated how these stereotypes do not fit with the lives and experiences of those who are placed into the NEET category (Simmons and Thompson, 2011a), and this research adds to this critique, outlining the problems with seeing these young people as non-academic, disengaged youths. The construction of these young people as ‘youths’ also needs to be taken into account as NEET now covers such a wide age range.

Despite this wider age range, media representations of NEET young people tend to portray images of hooded young people on housing estates, and play to stereotypes of white working class youth. Simmons et al (2014, p.1) suggest that they "evoke pejorative stereotypes of hoodies and pramface girls destined for a life on benefits". Due to how NEET young people are portrayed, the participants within this research were struggling with competing discourses; the demonisation of the young, poor and unemployed, and their own experiences of dealing with being young, unemployed and poor (Russell, 2016). This research explored how these stereotypes associated with NEET young people and ‘youths’ influenced the opinions of the participants. Studies have outlined the impact of stereotypes on the lived experiences of NEET young people (Miller et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2014), however there has been a lack of exploration of how they respond and relate to these stereotypes.

The media and society were acknowledged to have an impact on how the unemployed, and how unemployed young people were viewed; "The media puts pressure on everyone to get a job and if they don't the media expects you to hate yourself" (Ian, male, 19). Simon (male, unknown age) argued that young people in general are stereotyped even though there are lots of positive things which young people do such as community work. He described how he went on a scheme where they went camping for two weeks before carrying out community projects (Field notes, 7/4/2014). However, despite some of the participants acknowledging that negative stereotypes about unemployment and ‘youths’ have
been perpetuated in the media, many of the young people seemed willing to apply these stereotypes to others.

When they were asked to respond to a selection of images taken from news stories about NEET young people (see Appendix A6), the reactions were quite negative. Most of the participants identified the people in the pictures as ‘youths’, teenagers or ‘kids’. Some of them suggested that the images were of ‘rough’ young people who lived on council estates or were from a ‘rough’ part of town. They used terms including ‘hoodies’, ‘chavs’, ‘badmans’, ‘wastemans’, ‘gangsters’ and ‘hood rats’. Rachel (female, unknown age) suggested they were ‘wannabees’ and people who ‘think they’re hard but they’re not’. To her they ‘look like someone who goes on Jezza [Jeremy] Kyle’; “they probably just smoke weed all day, don’t go to college and fight for no reason”.

From the reactions of the participants, the images taken from newspaper articles about NEET young people appeared to portray them as ‘chavs’ and ‘hoodies’. The majority of the participants saw the young people in the images as trouble because of how they looked, linking the images with violence and criminal behaviour. Responding to one of the images which showed a group of young people, Gabby (female, unknown age) suggested that she would be scared to walk past them. The participants perpetuated the stereotype of how these groups of ‘youths’ are seen; as deviant and delinquent. Their discussions seemed to express the concerns highlighted around young people’s unstructured free time (Griffin, 2013). For example, it was suggested that one of the images showed young people who had been kicked out of college. The responses of some of the participants to these images appear to support the assertion of Henderson et al (2007) that images of young people as yobs, thugs and vandals and a group to be feared continue to be widely and regularly reflected in the media. The youths in the images were viewed as waiting for trouble, looking suspicious and up to no good.

This was not how some of the participants in the research saw themselves and they attempted to distance themselves from those in the images. They did not identify as a ‘chav’ or ‘hoody’;
"I couldn't see myself there because I'd probably get beaten up cause I'm different and they are inconsiderate bastards. Chavs make up 60% of the world's population and I have a fixed opinion about them. They are just complete wankers. They offend me because I saw chavs beat up someone that was different to them and because he looked over at them even though he was minding his own business but they just want to fuck up others people's lives because they think they rule the estate where they live." (John, male, 18)

Yet some of the participants looked at the images and saw people who were depressed and upset, outlining issues of self-harm and suicide. Only one of the students linked this feeling of depression to unemployment in her description; "the images conjure up ideas of urban life, decay, youth and lower class life. Unemployment, lack of ambition and hope" (Bonnie, female, unknown age). These ideas were more reflective of the participants own experiences of unemployment. The reactions of the participants to the newspaper article images demonstrates the impact of dominant discourses on how they view themselves and others.

The stigma of being unemployed and on benefits

The young people in this research were not just being shaped by discourses around the NEET category, but also wider discourses around being unemployed and on benefits. The Coalition government, in power when this research was taking place, set about reducing benefits in the UK by reforming the system arguing that they were aiming to 'make work pay'. Their stance was that they were on the side of hardworking people; the taxpayers and the strivers. While those on 'benefits' were stigmatised, being viewed as shirkers or skivers. These arguments were developed further in the media and through television portrayals of people on benefits. There have been a number of television programmes which have focused on those living on 'benefits' in the UK; these include We Pay Your Benefits (BBC One, 2013), On Benefits and Proud (Five, 2013), and
Benefits Street (Channel 4, 2014). These depictions of working class life have come to be known as 'poverty porn'. Jensen (2014) argues that they animate new forms of neoliberal 'common-sense' about welfare and worklessness linked to the stereotype of the 'skiver'.

The way poverty and ‘worklessness’ are represented in politics or the media influences the way it is understood in society more broadly. Contemporary media images of ‘the poor’ can be seen as particularly lurid, leading Jones (2012) to suggest that it has become legitimate to publicly denigrate poor people. Skeggs (2005, p.968 cited in (Simmons et al., 2014, p.20)) suggests that these representations are part of a process which values and devalues people in relation to their worth in neo-liberal economies, creating binary oppositions based on notions of respectability and worth. These discourses have had an impact on public opinion. There has been a shift away from sympathy with the plight of the impoverished to responsibility placed on young people and their families. A report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2013) found that the public has become increasingly likely to say that individual characteristics cause poverty, rather than societal issues. For example 23% believed that people lived in need because of laziness or lack of willpower. Young people and their families are therefore often blamed by society for their own disadvantage.

The participants in this research were negotiating structures that positioned them as unemployed, lazy and welfare-dependent (Russell, 2016). Rose et al (2012) found in their research that young people appeared to internalise some of the societal definitions of inclusion and then respond to them. A similar process seemed to be happening with the participants in this study related to discourses around worklessness. They did acknowledge their association with these discourses. For example, during an activity a group of the young people described themselves as ‘dole dossers’ and ‘dole heads’. In addition to this, one of the student’s jokingly mocked another “you are unemployed and you take drugs so you must be a druggie” (Field notes, 29/01/2014).

Those who claimed benefits in the form of Jobseekers Allowance or Disability Living Allowance felt an added stigma. Being on benefits was linked with feelings
of shame and embarrassment; "sometimes I feel embarrassed to tell people I don't work because I don't like relying on others" (Nina, female, 18). Some of the participants suggested that they were claiming money they did not deserve, with one of the young people describing how she felt like she was 'stealing' from the "people who go out all day and work for this money" (Katy, female, 19). This idea of claiming money from others who work reflects the discourses around benefit claimants discussed earlier which pits people in society against each other, suggesting that you are either a striver who works hard for your money, or a skiver who claims ‘other peoples’ money. There was therefore an awareness among the participants that they were being constructed and labelled in certain ways; “some people may see me as an imperfect human being that only sits at home doing nothing and spend all my time alone” (John, male, 18).

The responses of many of the young people to these stereotypes and assumptions was to distance themselves from them, similar to the way some of the participants reacted to the images of NEET young people. For example, some of them tried to show that they did not have the characteristics associated with those who were unemployed and on benefits; “I wasn’t normally lazy it’s just that I thought what’s the point of getting up if there’s no reason to?” (Katy, female, 19).

Liam (male, unknown age) did not want to be like his friends; “some of my friends have been unemployed for years and are doing nothing with their lives. They were the people I didn’t want to be like. I didn’t want to be bumming around all day doing nothing”. He described how he had “made a promise to myself that no matter what I do to make sure I’m not unemployed until I find something I really enjoy to have as a job”. This meant doing courses or anything he could so that he was not just sat around doing nothing. He suggested that by the end of the course he would have something lined up, just like he did at the end of his previous course.

These young people felt they needed to show that they did want to work and they had been looking for work; “I tried almost every way of getting at least some
money with no success, I tried applying/getting a job...it is bothering me massively as to where I was starting to hate myself and everyone around me" (Neil, male, unknown age). Participants demonstrated that they were trying to get a job and their current situation was not down to laziness or lack of effort. They had been applying for jobs but had not had much success which is why they were attending the centre for help. Some of the students focused on how many job applications they had put in to highlight how hard they were working; "I have Job Centre today I've applied for 15 jobs but still no reply" (Katy, female, 19). Similarly, Olivia (female, unknown age) had handed out over 30 CVs but had not heard anything back yet. Nina (female, 18) described how she had never been in work but “I have been looking and applying for over 2 years now, I have looked so many different places, so many different types of jobs. None of the managers got back to me”. Simmons et al (2014) argue that in some cases these ‘unsolicited applications’ of dropping CVs off at employer’s premises serve a partly symbolic function to demonstrate that the young person is doing something to find work. However these strategies are generally ineffective.

To further distance themselves from stereotypes around unemployment, while they were on the course the participants constructed their identities around being 'students'; “I go to a charity based education centre, thus pushing me out of the NEET bracket”⁷. The staff at the centre referred to them as students and the young people would even update their social network to let people know that they were 'at college' (Field notes, 5/3/2014). The course they were attending was linked to a local college and they were given student cards. Their association with the notion of being a student allowed them to ‘become somebody’ (Beck, 2015). This is similar to the work of Higgins (2013), who found that the young people in her study in Australia voiced an almost universal rejection of what might be called a ‘NEET identity’ and spoke of themselves in terms of developing learner identities. They were keen to distance themselves from the NEET status and spoke about not wanting to be a bum. Being in a learning situation constituted being ‘somewhere’ rather than ‘nowhere’. Rejection of NEET status was

⁷ The use of the term NEET by this young person came after I had introduced the term to them.
therefore usually accompanied by comments about ‘getting on in education’. In the work of Higgins, the identity of student appears to be quite securely held, however in this research the young people appeared to move between different statuses; they were still in a bit of an ambiguous state. When filling out forms to enter the participants for their exams one of the tutors questioned whether he should put ‘unemployed’ or ‘students’. He ended up writing unemployed as he did not want to cause problems for students who claimed ‘benefits’. The participants in this research therefore engaged with and responded to discourses around unemployment by distancing themselves from stereotypes linked to people who are out of work or on benefits.

Creating ‘socially acceptable’ narratives

Through rejecting their association with stereotypical ideas around people who are unemployed or on benefits, these young people were attempting to construct a coherent and ‘socially acceptable’ narrative (Giddens, 1991). The task of producing, projecting and maintaining a credible social identity is an important facet of the relationship to the social world, people undertake ‘identity work’ and find ways to achieve personal and social affirmation (Tomlinson, 2013). In the case of the participants in this research, they may have been trying to achieve affirmation from the tutors and other staff at the centre (and to some extent from me). Worth is socially constructed through discourses around what is normal, accepted or expected. Within society it is expected that people take control of their own lives, they are therefore blamed from their own unemployment. Duckworth and Cochrane (2012) suggest that blame and guilt are a consequence of neo-liberal society as myths about everyone having equal choice and options permeate through institutions and public life. The feeling of not having met societal expectations has an effect on an individuals perceived worth in the eyes of others, meaning people can feel looked down on and insignificant (Rose et al., 2012).
This was reflected in the narratives of the participants who felt that they would be judged by others for being unemployed; "Telling someone that you sign on and them judging you saying that you're a dole dossers...the feeling is horrid" (Tim, male, 19). Some of the young people felt that their age made the situation worse, with society seen to be 'looking down' on them; "When I’d get off the bus I’d walk the 10 minute walk to the Job Centre where I’d hand in my booklet and get told by the women on the desk to sit down and wait for my name to be called. I can see the disgust in her eyes 'that girls only 18 and has no job'" (Katy, female, 19). These feelings of personal insufficiency could be seen as linked to anxiety over the adequacy of their narrative. Giddens (1991) suggest that shame depends of feelings of personal insufficiency and can be seen as anxiety about the social acceptability of the narrative by means of which an individual sustains a coherent biography.

These concerns over meeting societal expectations highlight how the narratives which people construct are socially and culturally located. However, it was not just wider society which had an impact upon the narratives of the participants, the context of the centre also had an influence upon them. Giddens (1991) acknowledges that individuals adjust their appearance and demeanour somewhat according to the perceived demands of a particular setting; narratives are ‘occasioned’, being closely tied to the circumstances in which they are told.

The discussions of people ‘on benefits’ appeared to be influenced by one of the tutors at the centre who had quite strong opinions, her views could therefore have had an impact on how the young people constructed their narratives in relation to their unemployment. She discussed the portrayal of people on benefits on television, outlining how the programme ‘Benefits Street’ paints these people as the “lowest of the low”. She suggested that students did not want to be labelled down the line as ‘dole dossers’ (Field notes, 22/01/2014). Russell (2016) found similar notions about welfare present among the professionals working with NEET young people in her study, and from the young people themselves. Much of the discourse around unemployment seemed to be impacted by the context of the centre. The participants were asked to do specific activities, such as outlining
the negative consequences of being unemployed. They were being taught that this was not an acceptable status.

Being unemployed was therefore constructed as a negative situation by some of the young people, being described as crap, shit and bad. Nathan (male, unknown age) suggested that “unemployed young people feel they have nothing to live for”. Being unemployed was related to having no social life, not meeting new people, being lonely, being homeless and having no life, reflecting the findings of Thompson et al (2014) who found that physical and social isolation was a recurrent theme. Feelings of boredom were common;

“Unemployment for me wasn’t good at all. Although I tried doing stuff around the house and friends’ houses, I got so bored. I tried keeping up with hobbies like football, and painting, but there’s only so much you can do. I always used to try and do something to keep me occupied.” (Liam, male, unknown age)

Other negative consequences of being unemployed were listed as having no money, having no experience, losing motivation, having no routine, getting fat, getting high too much, and lacking independence. Being unemployed was seen in a negative way, which links to the assumptions apparent in policy and programmes that view being NEET as a problem category; as a situation which young people want to get out of and need help in doing so.

However, there was some resistance to these dominant discourses. One of the young people rejected this ‘acceptable’ narrative, suggesting that being unemployed and on benefits was not a problem;

“I am not bothered about having a job or not, as you don’t need a job to be happy... You don’t need money to (make a living) have a healthy lifestyle. The way you live your life and the people around you is what makes you happy. When someone else is providing for you, you don’t need to provide.” (Ian, male, 19)
Other participants were conflicted and struggled to reconcile their own feelings about being unemployed with the negative portrayal of people on ‘benefits’. They attempted to include more ‘socially acceptable’ narratives alongside their discussions of the positives of unemployment. Nathan (male, unknown age) struggled with the idea of whether being unemployed and on benefits was a good or bad thing; “this country does not make it easy to choose”. He described how he would like to be in full time employment someday and he knows that he cannot live on benefits for the rest of his life. However, he felt like he could do so much more with his time while he was unemployed and being on benefits meant he could get everything like medicine for free. While Simon (male, unknown age) was trying to look on the bright side. He described how he had been unemployed for the last four years and was losing motivation to go out and search for a job; "when I finally do I get turned down anyway". He stated that he no longer cared, was trying not to worry and would just "enjoy the last couple of years that I can live off my mum". However, he claimed that when the course finished he would 'seriously attempt' to find a job.

Rachel (female, unknown age) discussed how unemployment was okay at times as she could chill at her house with her mates. However she did suggest that having money would be good as it can be boring when you cannot go out with mates, and it is good to have money for clothes and shoes. She emphasised how she did not "want to turn out like some people and have no job and no qualifications or anything and live on benefits"; but thought that it was nice to "have the whole day to do whatever you want and stay in bed till whenever".

Previous research with NEET young people has highlighted their agency by demonstrating their resistance to dominant discourses through attempting to create an alternative narrative (Shannahan, 2012). Yet the young people in this research struggled to create alternative discourses, feeling the pressure to create socially acceptable narratives. They were influenced by wider discourses around worklessness and benefits which bounded their agency, with unemployment being cast as an unacceptable choice. They seemed to find it difficult to express
alternative ideas while on the course, as the context they were in shaped their narratives. Most of the young people in this research perpetuated dominant stereotypes, and attempted to distance themselves from them rather than trying to create an alternative discourse. They constructed their identities in dialogue with the other, by relating to what they are not (Bagnoli, 2003). Ideas of ‘self’ and ‘other’ were outlined in their discussions of people who claim benefits, youth unemployment, and ‘youths’ more generally.

Similar to previous studies these young people denied their association with specific labels and ideas, but were willing to apply these labels to others. For example, MacDonald and March (2005 cited in (Simmons et al., 2014, p.25)) found that although benefit claimants normally deny being lazy or feckless themselves, they are often willing to apply such labels to others in the same situation. While Russell (2016) found that the young unemployed people in her study attempted to disassociate from the ‘dole dosser’ label, instead labelling others with such negative brands. The participants in this research were doing the same thing.

They demonstrated an awareness of popular discourses around benefits and unemployment, and were willing to accept some of these ideas and apply them to others. Katy (female, 19) suggested that you associate being on benefits with people drinking alcohol and shouting at their kids (Field notes, 29/01/2014). Writing about her own experiences of unemployment Rachel (female, unknown age) stated that "I think that some people just stay unemployed to claim benefits then get pregnant or something so they get a house...and basically get the money for doing nothing." Another group of participants discussed people who had children just to get a council house; one of them claimed that they knew someone who had done this. This is part of the welfare rhetoric, where young women from poor areas are seen as having children as a means of accessing housing and benefits and avoiding work (France, 2016). These opinions were voiced despite the majority of the participants being on benefits themselves, or having parents or carers on benefits. For example, Bella’s (female, 20) mum could not work and was on Disability Living Allowance. Such beliefs tend to be largely based on myth and hearsay, with reality being something quite different (Shildrick et al., 2012).
**Who are you?**

The previous sections have demonstrated that the experiences and self-identities of the young people in this research were shaped by others, with discourses and the context they were in playing an important role in relation to the narratives they were able to construct. Assumptions about NEET young people influenced the programmes available to them and their experiences of them, and stereotypes shaped their narratives about being ‘unemployed’, reflecting the structures they are embedded in. Their self-identities were also affected by the reactions of others. They feared judgement and therefore built their narratives around being a student and attempted to distance themselves from the stereotypes of people who are unemployed. However, these young people were able to define themselves and the discourses around unemployment only demonstrate an aspect of their lives.

Presenting the participants solely as NEET young people does not help to understand them or their lives. For most NEET is only a temporary status. Looking at how they describe themselves outlines what matters to the participants and what resources they draw upon to develop their self-identities. It enables a focus on what these young people have, rather than viewing them as a homogenous group of deficient youths. Phillips (2010) focused on the positive attributes of the NEET young people in her study, their hopes and concerns, and the aspects of their lives which are important to them. Her work highlights how the role of belonging and the things which are most important to young people’s lives define their identity. This was reflected among the participants in this study.

Responding to the question “who are you?” the most common response from students was to write their names. One described himself as “a person”, while another suggested that they were a “unique individual”. When asked specifically to describe themselves they outlined a collection of personality traits, offering up certain attributes or qualities to outline who they are. These included being quiet, loud, energetic, bubbly, lazy, laidback, confident, emotional, friendly, bitchy, open-minded and creative. A few of the students also focused on their appearance describing themselves as well dressed or pretty. Tim (male, 19) was
the only one who described himself by referring to his dream career by using the
word army. His desired future self was part of his present identity. Other students
defined themselves through their beliefs. Bonnie (female, unknown age)
described herself as a non-dualist, and an equalist. While for other participants
their sexuality was an important part of who they were. Ellie (female, unknown
age) described herself as bisexual, while Cameron (male, unknown age) saw
himself as pansexual.

Alongside an acknowledgement of their personal characteristics, relationships
with friends and family were important to the participants’ sense of self, similar to
the findings of Phillips (2010) who suggested that these relationships were able
to make lives meaningful and contributed to feelings of self-esteem. The
characteristics the participants listed included qualities of ‘good friendship’
(Phillips, 2010), such as being friendly or funny, highlighting the importance of
relationships. For example, Duncan (male, unknown age) described himself as
hilarious and funny. During his speaking and listening exam he suggested that
he liked comedy films as he likes to make people laugh and he gets some of his
material from films. Being funny was a central element to how he saw himself.

The identities of the participants were embedded in sets of relationships and their
narratives were built through them. They were mothers, fathers, sons, daughters,
siblings, aunts, uncles, boyfriends, girlfriends and friends. Bella’s (female, 20)
narrative highlighted the centrality of family and being a mum in her life. While
some of the participants spoke about themselves in comparison to their siblings.
Although she was seen as ‘loud’ Leanne (female, 16) suggested that “all my
sisters’ are loud. I am the quiet one. I am an angel at home”. Two of the students
on the course were non-identical twins and were keen to show that they were
different; “people expect me to be the same as him”. Others constructed
themselves in relation their course mates and their friends.
The importance of belonging and friendship was also discussed in relation to the interests and hobbies of the participants. Research suggests that the leisure landscape can provide an alternative resource for constructing identity, a sense of competence, status and belonging (Henderson et al., 2007). For the young people in this study their leisure time highlighted the importance of friendship in their lives. Drinking seemed to be an important part of this, as they spent the weekends socialising. One of the students joked about only having a drink problem at weekends, while another told a story about their weekend where they threw up for four hours straight after drinking too much. A different participant suggested that they used to ‘drink like a chimney’. Nelson and Taberrer (2015) suggest that weekends may have remained the time for partying for the NEET young people in their study to maintain the routines of school and work-life; reflecting a recognition of an ‘expected norm’. The young people in this study were living that ‘norm’ as they attended the centre Monday to Thursday.

Phillips (2010) found that the young people in her research had talents and interests which informed their identity, rendered their lives meaningful and were a source of self-esteem. This was reflected in the young people in this study who defined themselves through their interests. Matt (male, unknown age) enjoyed doing puzzles and Sudoku and was a member of the UK poetry society, while Tim (male, 19) taught himself card tricks. Gabby (female, unknown age) enjoyed cooking and listed this as part of who she was, and Neil (male, unknown age) was interested in drawing. A number of the participants had similar interests, based around video games, music, films, and sport, most of which had some impact upon their sense of self. For example, a couple of the young people

For Gabby (female, unknown age) friendship helped her to be who she was. She described how both her and her friend lacked self-confidence, however when they are together they can act weird and be themselves. Gabby saw herself as different from others in the group due to her interests; “not many people like Hello Kitty”. She also liked One Direction and The Vamps and during one of the lessons two of the students started to make fun of Gabby’s musical tastes. She was fed up as she felt like people had been making fun of her ‘all her life’.
described themselves as gamers and were part of online communities based around this.

For other students music was an important part of who they were. John (male, 18) liked music (reflected in his chosen photography project on drumming) and defined himself through his musical taste. He talked about how much he is inspired by his favourite band, however he rejected the stereotypes related to the music he listens to; “people think that everyone who listens to screamo music self-harms”. He suggested that “you hear the screaming, I hear the meaning” (Field notes, 22/01/2014). While Gabby (female, unknown age) felt very connected to certain fandoms, and listed herself as being part of both the Vampette fandom (associated with The Vamps) and Directioner fandom (associated with One Direction). She had created a picture of herself with one of The Vamps and tested out how her name would fit with their last names. Other students also belonged to musical communities, with one attending Music School and another associating themselves with a group of local ‘Punks’. Neil (male, unknown age) described himself as into music, while Bonnie (female, unknown age) described herself as musical and creative.

Sport tended to be listed as more of a hobby than an aspect of who they were. Charlotte (female, 23) enjoyed watching football and rugby, Matt (male, unknown age) enjoyed playing darts, Gabby (female, unknown age) did skating, while Tim (male, 19) and Liam (male, unknown age) listed football as one of their hobbies and interests. One of the young people did describe themselves as sporty, and communities within sport did offer more of a sense of identity. One of the students identified football as one of the communities they were part of, while others drew a sense of self from being a supporter of a particular club; two of the participants supported Manchester United. Sport could also be a family activity. Charlotte (female, 23) spent time at her uncle’s tennis court, while Bella (female, 20) took her daughter for swimming lessons. Similarly, television and films were not as central to the identities of these young people. However Ian (male, 19) watched a lot of documentaries and liked to relay what he had learnt to people. Television was generally related to conversations about filling the boredom. Charlotte (female, 23) asked for extra work as the students had a half day and she said
she had nothing to do at home. She could not wait until the evening as it was the final episode of Waterloo Road. She enjoyed watching soaps such as EastEnders, Hollyoaks and Coronation Street.

Participants therefore described themselves through their characteristics and interests. While some young people did see themselves as ‘different’ this was not related to them being unemployed or disadvantaged, it was based on them viewing their interests as being at odds with, or outside of, what is seen as ‘popular’ or ‘mainstream’. It was not seen as a negative thing, but was linked to the idea of being ‘unique’. Family and friends were significant to lives of the young people, with the importance of sociality and belonging reflected in their interests. These young people should therefore not just be viewed as unemployed or NEET, they have personalities and interests and other aspects that they view as important in their lives. Their employment or educational status is not a central aspect of their identities. It is important to focus on who they are, rather than rendering them as invisible in a homogenous population of ‘uneducable and unemployable’ (Simmons and Thompson, 2013). These are young people who just happen to have experienced a period of being NEET.

**Conclusion**

The young people in this research did not associate with the term NEET, however stereotypes and generalisations linked to the category did have an impact upon them; in particular ideas around individualisation, being viewed as non-academic and disengaged, and being constructed as youths. Ideas about individualisation shaped their discourses. In particular a lack of qualifications, work experience and low confidence were seen by most as reasons for them being unemployed. This focus on individualisation on employability programmes can be seen as counterproductive as they attempt to build confidence and self-esteem while focusing on individual deficiencies. Within this research this meant that for some people their increase in confidence was short term and tied to their attendance at the centre, with the progress they had made being lost once they left.
Unlike the stereotype of NEET young people being non-academic, there was an acknowledgement among the tutors on this programme that they were working with a diverse group of young people. The assumptions made about these young people being disengaged does not take into account the impact of structure on their lives. Disengagement appears to be represented as a choice rather than something which is forced onto young people. The experiences of education of some of the young people in this study highlights the bounded nature of their agency and ability to make choices. Furthermore the construction of this group as ‘youths’ who are in need of both support and control does not take into account the wider age group of young people associated with the category of NEET.

The participants did not attempt to challenge stereotypes around being NEET or ‘on benefits’, and in some cases perpetuated these ideas by having negative views of people claiming benefits and when responding to images of NEET young people. Instead they tried to show that they were different to other people who were unemployed as they did actually want to work and had been applying for jobs. By taking part in a course they were doing something with their lives. While on the course they tended to view themselves as students and talked about attending the centre as going to 'college'. Through attempting to distance themselves from stereotypes they were trying to create a ‘socially acceptable’ narrative (Giddens, 1991). They were also creating their narratives within the centre, which impacted upon the stories they were able to tell; their narratives were ‘occasioned’ (Giddens, 1991). The impact of the label NEET and wider discourses around unemployment highlight that while they attempted to define themselves, they were also defined by others. These discourses shaped their narratives and their experiences, demonstrating the bounded nature of their agency and ability to create their own self-identities.

This chapter also highlights the problems with the stereotypes and assumptions associated with NEET young people. Due to this placing together of many diverse people into one status, there is a contradiction within the literature, with NEET being viewed as a problem group of young people from poor backgrounds, or as a normal phase which a lot of young people experience. While one of the young people identified herself and the others on the course as ‘disadvantaged’, the
research highlights how they are ‘ordinary’ young people with interests similar to others their age. Presenting them in negative terms and through negative stereotypes does not help to understand these young people or their lives (Russell et al., 2011). Within this research, when asked to describe themselves the participants used personal characteristics and outlined their interests. Relationships with family and friends were also important to their sense of self. These were the elements of their lives that were significant to them. Focusing on what they have, rather than what they are seen to ‘lack’ challenges this notion of them being seen as deficient in some way (Phillips, 2010).

For most, NEET is a temporary status and therefore not a fundamental part of who they are. The young people tended to be in a process of ‘churn’ between a series of insecure and poorly paid jobs, unemployment, and various education and training spheres. This aspect of their lives will be explored in more detail in the next chapter which looks at their future identities and perceived barriers to their aspirations.
Chapter Six: Future identities and constructions of adulthood

Introduction

Unlike the descriptions the young people gave about themselves in the previous chapter, Giddens (1991) does not believe that self-identity is a collection of traits possessed by the individual, but views it as a reflexive project, with people forging coherent, yet continually revised, biographical narratives. To do this they bring the past into line with their new identity, and experiment with narratives to find out who they are or could be. This chapter will look at how the participants attempted to create a reflexive self by exploring their aspirations for the future. Yet it also focuses on barriers to these aspirations and how they have been shaped by dominant discourses and institutions, highlighting the ways in which the agency of these young people is bounded (Evans, 2007). This includes a discussion of the role of normative discourses of adulthood which impacted on the participants’ aspirations; the importance attached to education which led to the participants churning between education, employment and training; their engagement with the job centre; and the structural issues outlined by the participants themselves. These discussions, along with an acknowledgement of the role of mental and physical health on the participants, demonstrate that there is a need to look beyond qualifications and work experience in helping these young people. Finally, the role of relationships in young people’s decision making is acknowledged. As the previous chapter highlighted, family and friends were an important aspect of the lives of the participants, however they did not just have a role in the current identities of the young people, they also impacted on their future aspirations. This discussion will further demonstrate how these young people are not developing their self-identities alone.

Looking at the future selves the participants are attempting to create builds on the discussions in the previous chapter and continues to highlight that while these young people have agency, this is bounded by societal and institutional expectations, with both resources and discourses having an impact on the self-identities they are able to create and the choices they are able to make. Discourses around youth, adulthood and individualisation are again
acknowledged, alongside the role of training providers in shaping the future selves of these young people. The course they were on was not only impacting upon their current experiences, but also on the choices available to them in shaping their future selves.

*The reflexive self*

As highlighted in the previous chapter the aim of the post-16 programme the participants attended was on developing them as individuals, to overcome their ‘deficiencies’ and gain employment. The focus was not only on basic skills but on developing the self; similar to the Entry to Employment programmes researched by Russell *et al* (2011). Within an increasingly individualised society, young people are expected to engage in reflexive navigation of opportunities to construct a marketable self (Thompson, 2011). The course reflected this as it had an overall aim of getting the young people to achieve a ‘vision’ of themselves; who they are and who they want to be. The goal was to be ‘future focused’; capture the students in the moment and move forward. There was therefore a suggestion to start with a clean sheet; consciously setting aside issues and problems youths may have experienced (Beck, 2015). They were being asked to actively engage with and manage their life trajectories, displaying these for the scrutiny of others (Harris, 2004 cited in (Heath *et al.*, 2009, p.15)). They were given time for reflection and were supported in discovering their interests and realising their ambitions. Sessions were dedicated to personal and social development and employability, alongside those focused on gaining qualifications in Mathematics, English, and Media. The centre offered a safe space for them to develop their identity and agency (Warrington and Younger, 2011 cited in (Beck, 2015, p.487)), aspects seen as necessary for decision making processes relating to future careers and lifestyle choices.

Within this setting, some of the young people did attempt to create a reflexive self; which is viewed by Giddens (1991) as a self which consists of coherent, yet continually revised, biographical narratives. People bring narratives about the
past into line with their new identity, experimenting with narratives to find out who
they are or could be.

_Bella (female, 20) told a story of progress from homelessness to becoming a
mum with a two bed house. She suggested that “you have to work your way
up”. She wanted to be a counsellor as "I didn't get any help from my
counsellor. I want to give people what I never had" (Field notes, 05/02/2014).
She also wanted to give her child a good life; something she had not had as
her childhood had been ‘taken away from her’. Her daughter was an important
part of her life and she pushed herself to do things because of her._

For a few of the participants, their past experiences had an impact on what they
wanted to do in the future; they discussed careers in which they felt they had
something to offer. They therefore brought together their past, present and
potential future selves to outline how they came to a decision about a potential
career. Olivia (female, unknown age) had aspirations to be a social worker as
she had "been through a lot in life". Sarah (female, unknown age) wanted to help
young and homeless people as "I think my personal experiences could change
people's lives". While Cameron (male, unknown age) wanted to become a youth
counsellor specialising in LBGT issues as he would like to help people with their
transition. This is based on wanting to help people like him (Field notes,
09/04/2014). For these young people, their previous experiences had an
influence on their desired future selves. For others, their choice of career
reflected elements of their selves and interests in other ways. Simon (male,
unknown age) wanted a career in the police as “I would love to have a job that is
exciting and has a positive impact on the community”. Leanne (female, 16)
wanted to be a teacher as “I like working with children”, while Danny (male,
unknown age) wanted to work in construction because “I prefer hands on work”.
These young people were attempting to align their interests with potential
careers. Through their narratives they were trying to bring together their present
and past selves to experiment with possible future selves.
According to the literature on individualisation, the nature and structure of life in the twentieth and twenty first centuries has rendered traditional theorisations of transition largely redundant (Beck, 1992) and the linear model of young people’s life patterns is misleading (Wyn and White, 1998). Access to traditional ‘signifiers’ of adulthood have become disordered or suspended. Transitions have become increasingly diverse and viewed as more individualistic. The reflexive self therefore has to be accomplished amid a diversity of options and possibilities, with lifestyle choices being a fundamental part in the construction of self-identity. The young people in this research were trying to make lifestyle choices, and filled a whole whiteboard full of post-it notes which described things they hoped for in the future. Some of the young people had very individual aspirations for example to get a tattoo sleeve, to play for the local top flight rugby union club, to learn to fly a plane, or to appear in a special guest episode of Jeremy Kyle. Other aspirations were related to hobbies focused around music, art, gaming and literature. Matt (male, unknown age) wanted "to complete a poetry book and get it published" (Field notes, 22/01/2014), while John (male, 18) hoped to be a good drummer and start a heavy metal band. Bonnie (female, unknown age) wanted to learn to play more instruments, listen to thousands of songs and start another band.

A number of the aspirations of the participants were focused on developing their skills to help them into certain careers. Bonnie (female, unknown age) aimed to start her concept art portfolio which would help with her chosen career as a concept artist. Gabby hoped to learn new ice cream recipes, reflecting her interest in cooking and a career in catering, while Neil (male, unknown age) aimed to start drawing lessons as he was interested in making it as an artist. Other aspirations reflected the young people’s desire for independence. Learning to drive, buying a car and travelling the world or going abroad were common aspirations. For one young person travel was related to inspiration, and learning and embracing different cultures. The participants were therefore trying to make lifestyle choices which linked to their self-identities. Many of the aspirations discussed above reflected the interests of the young people outlined in the previous chapter.
Not many of the young people in this research were tied to ideas about certain careers. One participant mentioned their dream job as a central element of their sense of self; Tim (male, 19) was inspired by the army. Other ‘dream jobs’ included poet, musician, childcare worker, marine biologist, photographer, concept artist (for video games), game designer, caterer, chef, mechanic and shop worker. One student wanted to become self-employed, John (male, 18) wanted to own his own restaurant, while Gabby (female, unknown age) wanted to do catering for celebrities. The participants outlined their dream jobs near the beginning of the course and their ideas did change over the four months they were at the centre. This is not seen as unusual under conditions of uncertainty where identity questions need to be constantly posed anew. People experiment with their developing lifestyle and receive feedback from others. They keep options open as a response to the individualisation and flexibility of transitions (Walther, 2009), continually reflecting on and calculating the risk of their choices.

Leanne (female, 16) wanted to be a teacher but was unsure about the subject area; at one point she suggested that she wanted to be a Drama teacher, at another she said that she would like to teach Maths. She also spoke about wanting to go to college to do a Level 2 in Childcare. After her work experience at Pets at Home Gabby (female, unknown age) decided that she wanted to work with animals rather than work in catering and applied for a voluntary position at the PDSA. While John (male, 18) switched between wanting to be a musician, to being interested in catering, to wanting to be a game designer. The students generally experimented with different ideas about jobs and education, shaped by what they thought was possible based on their qualifications or things that they had heard about while on the course. They were exploring their agency and self-esteem within the group by finding out about different types of jobs and trying out new aspects of their personality (Beck, 2015). Many of the young people remained undecided about what they wanted to do at the end of the course, having two or three options which they were thinking about. They applied for and looked at a range of potential options including short term courses, college courses, and apprenticeships, highlighting the range of choices available to them.
Some of the young people were also aware of the jobs they did not want to do, highlighting their ability to make choices regarding their futures. Olivia (female, unknown age) was reluctant to do work experience at a charity shop; "I know I will go for one day and then if I don't like it I won't go back" (Field notes, 10/03/2014). While some of the participants did not want to do just 'any' job; "I was looking for jobs and courses to go on, but I couldn't find anything I'd enjoy or want to be part of, so I kept looking" (Liam, male, unknown age).

Yet, while these young people did hold different and individual aspirations and developed these throughout their time at the centre, many of the participants held quite traditional ideas about their future selves, broadly similar to those of other young people, for a job, a home and a family, reflecting the findings of Simmons and Thompson (2011b) and broader ideas about notions of adulthood. Research argues that a substantial number of NEET young people experience insecure and chaotic transitions (MacDonald, 2011). They are viewed as ‘different’ as they are not following the ‘normal’ pathway of development. Yet the visions of the future outlined by the young people in this research were based around mainstream societal ideas.

**The impact of traditional discourses of adulthood**

The labour market has become more uncertain, young people remain financially dependent upon their parents until a much later date, and the current generation have been labelled ‘Generation Rent’ (Ellen, 2014). However, economic transition points such as entry to the job market, marriage and independence from the family of origin are still seen to mark the end point of youth (Springhall, 1986). As the previous chapter highlighted, due to the continued focus on these aspects in relation to becoming an adult, some of the young people in this research struggled to associate themselves with either youth or adulthood.

Henderson *et al* (2007) argue that despite changes and the supposed expansion of choice, young people struggle to find new stories to tell about becoming adults.
They are constrained by a resilient model of adulthood anchored in notions of ‘settling down’ meaning that it is difficult for young people to imagine a future outside a normative model of the ‘proper thing to do’ (Nilsen and Brannen, 2002). The concept of adolescence as a ‘transition to adulthood’ is socially constructed, with the social idea of what it means to be an adult varying across cultures and over time (Rose et al., 2012). Societal expectations therefore shape what is viewed as ‘normal’ in youth transitions.

The choices and self-identities of the young people within this study were bounded and shaped by the culture and society which they are living in, reflecting the work of Evans (2007) who views agency as ‘socially situated’. This was highlighted in the narrative of Charlotte (female, 23). Charlotte was caught in a struggle between what she wanted to do, and what she felt was expected of her. She stated that she thought being unemployed was good, but had been told not to say that by the staff at the centre. This led her to state that "I want to get a job and move out of my parents’ house because people expect me to". Her aspirations did not reflect what she wanted, but what she felt was expected of her as an ‘adult’ and also what was expected of her by the staff at the centre. The narratives of the young people were therefore influenced by what they viewed as ‘acceptable’ notions of adulthood.

For the young people in this study, work was an integral part of their lives and their understandings of adulthood, reflecting the feelings of the young people in the research of Henderson et al (2007) who saw work as a means of developing personal confidence, of reducing dependence on parents, as a key milestone on the path to being an adult, or as a means of making new friendships. Nine of the participants listed getting a job as one of their short term goals for the year. Individual students specified that they wanted a ‘long term and full time job’, a ‘decent job’, a ‘well paid job’ and ‘a job that pays enough so I can live and not worry’. Nina (female, 18) suggested that; “I want to be able to plan my future and support myself”. Having a job was linked with routine, structure, independence, money, experience, healthy living and being sociable. Nina (female, 18) described how "I need a job after the course so I do not go back to my old routine of staying in bed until the afternoon" (Field notes, 24/03/2014). It was also linked
to increased confidence and happiness; “If I found myself in work I would feel happiness again” (Demi, female, 24). A job, and the money which came with it, were seen as essential to achieving other aspirations, such as having a family and a home. It was viewed as a key factor which enabled them to plan their futures and support themselves. For Bella (female, 20) finding a job would mean she could provide “a better life for my family”.

The importance of getting a job can be linked to discourses of individualisation which advocate people being responsible for themselves, for managing their own lives and being responsible for their own success. Having a job was viewed as an acceptable part of adulthood, while living a life on benefits was viewed as unacceptable, reflecting the discussions in the previous chapter around the notion of building a socially acceptable narrative. The young people in this research were therefore keen to show that they wanted to ‘do something with their lives’. For example, Tim (male, 19) did not want to go to college and said that he lacked motivation to look for work, however he claimed that "I don’t want to be dole dossing" (Field notes, 30/04/2014). The participants were exploring possible selves which can act as incentives and role models, representing our goals and what we would like to be, or else can stand as threats and remind us of what we are afraid of becoming (Bagnoli, 2003). The notion of living a life on benefits could be seen as a feared future self.

Alongside getting a job, traditionally passage from the family of origin to family of destination is understood as a central thread in young people’s transitions (Henderson et al., 2007). Having a home was linked with independence, with students aspiring to have a ‘big’ or a ‘nice’ house. Rowlands and Gurney (2000) found that 16 and 17 year olds saw housing as part of a ‘package’ of goods that they aimed to collect in their desire for social mobility. Owner occupation is strongly associated with success while council housing is connected with failure. Home could therefore be linked with ideas of social and cultural status, as well as being a centre for family life and a space connected with freedom (Henderson et al., 2007). Yet owner occupation is becoming an increasingly challenging status to achieve. Ten years ago 59% of 25 to 34 year olds owned their own home in England, now it is 36% (BBC News, 2015). While some of the young
people did specify that they wanted to buy a house others talked less clearly about it suggesting that they wanted their 'own home' but not stating what they meant by this. Nina (female, 18) suggested that she would like her "own house because I like my own space". While others spoke about applying for council houses, not viewing them as the ‘failure’ which Rowlands and Gurney (2000) suggested. Alice (female, unknown age) was living in a hostel and stated how once she was 18 she wanted a council house or a rented place in a ‘nice area’ (Field notes, 26/03/2014). She knew that people with children and those in hostels are a priority for council housing. Due to the difficulty of owner occupation, these young people were trying to develop realistic expectations about the options available to them. Giddens (1991) himself acknowledges that not all choices are open to everyone and the selection or creation of lifestyles is influenced by socio-economic circumstances, an argument that will be acknowledged and expanded upon later in the chapter.

The ideas about adulthood outlined by the participants demonstrate how tradition continued to play a role in the choices they made. Alongside this gender also influenced their aspirations, reflecting the findings of Russell et al (2011). Theories of individualisation, such as the notion of the reflexive self, tend to ignore the resilience of tradition and continuity in people’s lives (Jamieson, 1999). Although gender is losing its determining influence, in practice the pull of tradition still operates, and is most acutely felt by young women, who are more willing to accommodate their careers to family demands (Henderson et al., 2007). Many of the females highlighted the importance of becoming a mum and having a family, while their aspirations for jobs tended to be more in caring roles such as being a social worker, a counsellor, or working in childcare. They discussed wanting to help people and change people’s lives. They also had more aspirations related to education; only one male suggested that they wanted to go to college. The males used different language, talking about 'careers', and wanted to work in sports, construction, the police, or as a chef. In the first activity about their individual aspirations only one spoke about marriage and family, joking that they wanted to marry a rich woman. Later in the research some of them did suggest that they wanted to become a dad and get married. More males also aspired to travel and to learn to drive. Cultural norms and expectations can be seen to
channel young people into traditional occupational and social roles (Simmons et al., 2014).

Normative ideas about adulthood and the continuing impact of tradition shaped the aspirations of the participants. While they attempted to create a reflexive self, their agency was ‘socially situated’ (Evans, 2007) and bounded by the society and culture in which they are living. While there is more choice available to young people due to the impact of individualisation and transitions to adulthood have altered, this has not been accompanied by a change in the definition of what being an adult entails. Despite the literature on late modernity suggesting that the condition of uncertainty has been expanded to everyone and is no longer a condition of youth, these young people were aiming for a stable adulthood. There appeared to be a general feeling that the instability they were currently experiencing was only a phase and through gaining more skills and qualifications they would find themselves stable employment.

**Churning between education, employment and training**

As the previous chapter highlighted, NEET for most is only a temporary status, as young people churn between education, employment or training. This process made it difficult for the participants to develop consistent and coherent narratives. A person with a reasonably stable sense of self-identity has a feeling of biographical continuity that they are able to grasp reflexively and communicate to other people. They are able to shape and alter this narrative in relation to the changing circumstances of their lives. However, similar to the young people in Devadason’s study (2007) not all the young adults in this research were able to create coherence from the disparate events of their life histories, with their narratives taking on a disjointed quality.
Churning between training providers: the perceived importance of qualifications

A process of churn between different training providers was apparent among the participants. This has been previously highlighted in the research of Thompson et al. (2014) who found the young people in their study became trapped in a cycle of ‘inadequate provision’. The young people took part in a plethora of alternative provisions, usually aimed at enhancing employability, however these often made little to no difference in moving them towards meaningful employment (Miller et al., 2015). Altogether the student’s mentioned five other providers which one or more of them had engagement with, and they could list a couple of others which they knew about but had not attended. Most of these courses were based around functional skills, work experience and confidence building, offering something similar to the current programme the participants were on.

Frustration was evident among some of the young people that they were just being moved from one course to the next; “I have had some help from school and connections [sic] but so far all I have been able to do is college courses” (Gabby, female, unknown age). Demi (female, 24) described how she has been at ‘college’ (by this she meant engaged in education with different providers) for six years and was hoping that this current course could guarantee her a job (Field notes, 12/2/2014). Due to the frustration of being unable to find a job, participants questioned the education and training they had done; “for me, I’ve gone through school, college and training, all for what? I’ve had no job, come out of the training I’ve had and sometimes I think ‘What is the point?’” (Nathan, male, unknown age). Similar to the young people in Simmons et al. (2014) some of the young people were becoming dispirited due to repeated participation in alternative provision. Being in education or training can be disaffecting if people get disillusioned with the programme they are on, or if they find that it does not lead to anything (Russell, 2016). This continued participation also highlights concerns about young people being “warehoused” in education (Thompson, 2011).

However, others did find that their experiences of the courses they attended were quite positive;
“After a short while, I found a 12 week course…I applied for that and the first day I went ‘I don’t think I’m going to enjoy this’. I was a bit dubious, but I loved it! And I really enjoyed going every day!” (Liam, male, unknown age)

Gabby (female, unknown age) enjoyed her previous course and acknowledged that it had increased her confidence. Yet, there had been some problems on this course for Gabby as she ended up getting in a fight with another student. Her experience at a different provider had also not gone well and she quit without telling them. Olivia (female, unknown age) also had a negative experience on a course and she ended up having an argument with one of the teachers; “she threatened to throw a chair at me, so I threw a board rubber at her” (Field notes, 30/4/2014). She was thrown off the course. Experiences of different training providers was therefore mixed.

As the transition to adulthood has become more individualised, educational attainment has come to be viewed as increasingly important in shaping young people’s life chances. Due to this, educational success and decision making have become a central focus of young people’s biographies (Thompson, 2006) with education linked to aspirations and other possible choices in life. This was evident in the narratives of many of the participants. The churn between different providers for most was due to the focus of the young people on getting a Level 2 (GCSE Grade C or equivalent) in Maths and English which was seen as essential to getting a job, or going to college or university, reflecting the discussion about the need for qualifications in the previous chapter. Similar to the arguments of Goldman-Mellor et al (2016) some of the students felt hampered by their low skill level. This perceived need for qualifications links to wider discourses within policy and society. A report by the Fabian Society (2014, p.32) argued that a GCSE Grade C in English and Maths is what many employers consider to be the baseline level and is also the gateway to higher ‘Level 3’ courses such as A Levels; “no young person should be left in any doubt about the consequences of not securing these core skills”. In addition to this, policy introduced by the Coalition government stated that from 2013 all young people who miss out on GCSE C grades in English or Maths will need to study these subjects from 16-18
in order to secure public funding for the rest of their course, highlighting the importance of these grades.

Transition regimes are built on cultural values which emphasise different meanings of success (Walther, 2009). Within policy, transitions tend to be reduced exclusively to the achievement of qualifications and labour market entry, with success or failure related to individuals’ responsibility and rationality in making decisions regarding education, training and employment (Walther, 2009). Literature claims that education is used as a way to ‘minimise risk’ in the life planning of young people. It is used as a strategy for helping them in their career paths and improving their future position in the labour market. Education is framed as a personal investment and ‘personal responsibility’ (Wyn, 2012 cited in (France, 2016, p.96)). Yet the continued participation in education or training by some of the young people in this research can be seen as the result of having no or few alternatives (Thompson, 2011). For the young people who were striving to get a Level 2 qualification in English and Maths their choices were limited as they continued to participate in training courses until they achieved this, hoping it would help them get a job.

Investment in education for the participants was linked to the hope for a career and financial security (Henderson et al., 2007). Education therefore became a focus of the future goals of the young people. Katy (female, 19) wanted to “finally live up to my expectations and go to college”, while four of the students mentioned wanting to go to university. Olivia (female, unknown age) wanted to do a Level 3 in Health and Social Care at a local college. Rachel (female, unknown age) wanted to do a childcare course so she could work in a nursery. While Alice (female, unknown age) wanted to do Marine Biology at university and was planning to go to college to do her Maths, English and Double Science GCSEs. After the course two students did end up going to college, while another started an Open University course.

For most, education had become central to their life plans and was viewed as something which would help them to achieve their aspirations. They had an agentic belief about education and work which enabled them to construct
possible future selves despite encountering frustrations due to their bounded agency. This is similar to the young people in the work of Russell et al (2011) who felt that by engaging in an education programme they were taking positive action to achieve longer term goals. However, a focus on education for some young people had not led to a narrative of progress, leading them to question the value of the education they had done.

The narratives of the young people demonstrate the impact of policy discourses on them. Through policy, education and training have been constructed as a means of alleviating social exclusion and unemployment. Due to this, the focus of training aimed at NEET young people is on developing their skills and qualifications to overcome individual barriers to employment as highlighted in the previous chapter. There was a feeling among the participants that once the barrier of having low or no qualifications was lifted they would find it easier to get work. One young person did change his aspirations in an attempt to bypass this need for education. Ian (male, 19) moved from wanting to be a PE teacher to a personal trainer as he felt there would be less need for English and Maths (Field notes, 28/04/2014). He broadened this out suggesting that he would like to have a career in sports.

Experiences of insecure employment

The churn between different training providers and courses has led to concerns about young people being “warehoused” in education (Thompson, 2011), with courses operating as substitution programmes attempting to compensate for a shrinking youth labour market. Early experiences of work are, for many, precarious and uncertain, with the youth labour market (especially for those with low educational qualifications) increasingly characterised by a high turnover of temporary work, interspersed with spells of unemployment and inactivity. There have been structural changes to the youth labour market with job opportunities which traditionally existed for school leavers no longer existing. Young people hold more temporary and part time jobs than other age groups (European
Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2012). Within the city where this research took place there was concern over young employed workers finding themselves trapped in low-wage jobs (Economic Development Transport and Tourism Scrutiny Commission, 2015).

These concerns about the youth labour market were reflected in the experiences of some of the participants who had generally experienced insecure, low paid work and therefore moved between periods of employment, unemployment and education. Nathan (male, unknown age) worked in the kitchens at a local university, where he found the working conditions difficult, and Duncan (male, unknown age) had a job at a bar. Ellie (female, unknown age) had a job before and during her time at the centre, however she was only called in when she was needed and therefore did not class herself as ‘employed’; “I qualify as NEET because I do not go to work every day and do a minimum of 12 hours once a month if I’m lucky”. While, Demi (female, 24) found a job when she was 20, however it did not last; “I went to the job centre in [city] and found a job at New Look. I was so happy that I worked there but sadly I couldn’t keep my job as it was only temporary”.

Before attending the centre Ian (male, 19) had worked in catering, construction and retail. For one of these jobs he worked in a running shop and would watch people running to work out the type of trainers they needed. Before joining the course he was working at a place he did not like. Ian’s plans were mainly short term and he had worked out what has was going to do until Christmas; a 12 week sports course followed by a job packing boxes. This job was not favoured by some of his course mates;

“Anyone want a job in June packing for [company]…People leave so there are always jobs”

Katy: “If people leave it is shit”

Insecure jobs led to some of the participants being exploited. Simmons et al (2014) found that paid and unpaid employment, often characterised by insecurity
and exploitation was the norm for their participants. There were similar experiences for some of the young people in this study. One of the students had worked selling phones, however they did not keep him on after a three week trial and tried not to pay him. Katy (female, 19) had worked as a nursery apprentice where she was left alone with a class of 15 children. Three of the students had worked for a local firm which sold windows. Bella (female, 20) was given a commission only contract and worked for three and a half months without pay. When she made a sale she was told it had fallen through at a later stage. She wanted to sue the company but was told by her solicitor that there was nothing he could do as she had signed a commission only contract. At the same company Tim (male, 19) was told he would get £10 an hour and was given £20 for the week, while John (male, 18) was given £90 for two months work after a family member spoke to the company (Field notes, 9/4/2014).

Alongside these insecure, temporary and sometimes exploitative experiences of work, students had also undertaken unpaid work. Some of the young people had done work experience placements through the programmes they had attended previously, or had done some voluntary work. Increasingly young people are expected to perform various forms of unpaid labour, with internships, work experience and voluntary work viewed as ladders of opportunity to entry to the labour market (Simmons et al., 2014). Charlotte (female, 23) had done a voluntary placement at Poundland, while Gabby (female, unknown age) had done a two week placement at a local hotel. However, some of the young people struggled to find work experience while on the course, highlighting the limitations of the local labour market. For example, Ian (male, 19) was looking for sports related work experience, but he did not have much luck phoning local sports centres. He was told that some placements had been booked over a year in advance. Both limitations in the youth labour market and in the local labour market had an impact upon the choices the participants were able to make. Their

8 It is not clear whether this was part of the Mandatory Work Activity workfare programme where individuals had to do a work placement of 30 hours a week over 4 weeks or risk getting their benefits stopped or cut. The Work Programme was the government’s main scheme which aimed to find jobs for people who had been unemployed for more than six months. These were often contracted to private firms who were paid for placing people into work.
experiences of work tended to be insecure and temporary, meaning they churned between periods of employment and unemployment.

The role of training providers in shaping choices

Students’ experiences of the labour market had therefore generally been insecure, while their hope of getting ‘better’ jobs meant that they churned between different ‘employability’ courses. This was further reflected in their short term plans for after the course, and their aspirations in relation to education. Quite a few of the young people were thinking about going on to similar courses with different providers, and a couple were even thinking of going back to providers who they had already done a course with before; this issue of returning again and again to the same training providers was outlined in the work of Simmons et al (2014).

The choices of the participants were to some extent, shaped by opportunity structures (Simmons et al., 2014). The present can be seen to provide resources for which imaginings of the future are made possible. Young people not only imagine different futures, how they do so is shaped by their experiences and social locations, with their aspirations reflecting their values and investments (Henderson et al., 2007). The aspirations of the participants within this research were shaped by an understanding of what opportunities were available to them. This was influenced by their experiences while on the course, as well as their experience of previous courses.

The churn between different training providers was in part associated with the links between different organisations within the region who worked with NEET young people. The centre where this research took place recruited from other organisations in the area. This was mainly due to a reduction in services which were historically relied upon to bring young people to the centre which meant that staff had to track down and draw in young people themselves. To do this they tended to rely on their own networks, which generally included other learning
providers. Towards the end of the programme the tutors invited a number of people in to come and talk to the students about what they could do next. Most of the speakers were from organisations which offered short term programmes for unemployed young people, similar to the course the young people were already on, or short term apprenticeships. In addition to this, a large number of the second group who attended the centre had come from a Princes Trust course as one of the tutors from the centre had been to speak to them towards the end of that programme. Getting students into the centre was important due to how the organisation was funded. They had to get at least 15 students to complete the course so as not to lose money. This cycle between different organisations may financially benefit providers but never really addresses the needs of students (Smith and Wright, 2015).

The role of training providers in the churn the participants experienced highlights that while these organisations aimed to help these young people explore their interests and potential future selves, they also constrained their choices by the options they presented to the young people. Similar to the work of Beck (2015), while these providers facilitated the development of individual agency and offered space for exploration of future selves, they also added additional barriers and challenges, shaping the potential choices available to participants.

The previous chapter highlighted how the young people had faced barriers and been forced into certain directions during their earlier educational experiences of school and college. Educational institutions in the form of training programmes continued to have an impact on the decisions the young people were able to make about their futures. If the students were hoping to attend college, they had to take into account that there was a gap between the end of the course they were attending and the start of the academic year. This is one of the problems with provision of a roll-on, roll-off nature which can lead to a temporal dislocation with mainstream forms of post-16 learning meaning that young people face a wait before progression opportunities become available (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b). A couple of the participants therefore discussed wanting to do short courses. Bonnie (female, unknown age) was worried that if she did not find a short course (she was looking at some taking place at a local independent art
centre) she would have to go back to Intraining, and would not be able to attend college. While on the course she was still having meetings at Intraining and was told to stop the course to do one in business administration – she had already told them that she does not want to do this. Similarly, Katy’s (female, 19) friend was thinking about joining the course but they were told that they have to go to Intraining. The courses and providers these young people engaged with therefore impacted on the choices they were able to make.

Engagement with the Job Centre

Giddens (1991) argues that individuals are increasingly free to construct identities that in the past were defined by tradition and social institution. However, within this research tradition continued to define the participants hopes for the future both in terms of gendered aspirations, but also due to the ongoing impact of dominant discourses around the transition to adulthood and what this should entail. This meant that the participants were not free to construct different ideas about imagined future selves, their narratives were constrained. These young people were not only being shaped by wider society, but also by the institutions they engaged with, which meant that the participants in this study were pushed into certain places or down certain avenues, while other potential routes through education or work were closed off to them. As the previous section highlighted, a continued focus on gaining a ‘Level 2’ in Maths and English constrained the choices these young people felt that they were able to make. Similar to the findings of Simmons et al (2014), the participants were affected by a variety of state-led programmes and initiatives which attempted to encourage, facilitate or force them into the labour market, including training programmes, support services and benefit agencies. The role of current and previous training programmes on the choices and lives of these young people has already been highlighted, however these were not the only organisations which the participants came into contact with.
Outside of their engagement with educational institutions, the Job Centre had an impact on the choices these young people were able to make. Russell (2016) found that among the young people in her study bureaucratic inconveniences and complications in gaining benefits were rife, with many of the young people experiencing inconsistencies in their benefits. Obtaining the benefits which they were entitled to was often problematic and time consuming. The young people expressed frustration with the bureaucratic, incompetent nature of their experience with Jobcentre Plus. They disliked these places and loathed the mandatory rules they had to abide by to receive their entitlements.

Similarly for the participants in this study, those on benefits felt constrained by what was expected of them by the Job Centre, where threats of sanctions were held over them and they were persuaded to do certain training courses. Under the heading “things that blow about being a dole ‘ed” a group of students wrote about using Universal Job Match and going to the Job Centre. Universal Job Match was introduced in 2012 and designed to monitor jobseekers’ job search activity, to ensure they are complying with the requirement to search for jobs. To comply, individuals have to do three job searches a week. If they fail to do this they are automatically sanctioned and lose benefits. There has been a greater use of sanctions in the UK, with those under 25 hit hardest by sanctions imposed through conditionality (Watts et al, 2014 cited in (France, 2016, p.158)). The increased conditionality aims to ensure people keep active in searching for work, and take work regardless of its quality. One of the young people did have their benefits sanctioned while on the course. Katy (female, 19) missed a meeting, however she said that she had not received a letter about it.

Tania (female, unknown age) was worried that her benefits would stop and she would be “skint for a couple of [months] or even more”. She is on Job Seekers Allowance and Disability Living Allowance and had an assessment to see if she was deemed fit for work. She suggested that “everyone is deemed fit for work now as long as they can walk in a straight line and use their hands” (Field notes, 26/03/2014). Her benefits were not stopped.
Generally engagement with the Job Centre was not seen as a positive experience and some of the students described ‘losing faith in the system’; “the job centre doesn’t really help you get into a job” (Tim, male, 19). Organisations aiming to help young people find work were therefore in some circumstances a barrier to what they wanted to do. To gain benefits these young people were being told to carry out certain activities or lose their payments. The young people therefore had little choice or ability to resist, unless they wanted to lose their money. Their engagement with these services highlighted the relatively powerless position which young people experience in certain contexts (Rose et al., 2012) and emphasises the importance of resources in relation to the choices available to the participants.

**Acknowledgement of the role of structure in participants’ narratives**

Giddens (1991) acknowledges that not all choices are open to everyone. Lifestyle options are very often bounded by factors out of the hands of the individual. Experiences of young people therefore cannot be accounted for purely in terms of individuals and the choices they make. While reflexive identity work was an important part of the identities of the participants, this took different forms depending on the discourses and resources they had available to them. Differential access to economic, social and cultural resources influence what young people are able to contemplate and achieve (Lawy and Wheeler, 2013). The participants were therefore not completely free and autonomous actors. Yet, while structure still continues to have an impact on people’s lives, research has suggested that people have become blind to the existence of structural constraints (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997) or that they do not talk about it, basing their narratives around discourses of autonomy and independence (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005). Brannen and Nilsen (2005) refer to structure as ‘the silent discourse’.

Within this research the role of structure was outlined by the participants, they did not remain silent about it. They acknowledged structural issues, despite the
fact that many of the barriers they felt they faced were individual ones (as highlighted in the previous chapter). While the ethos of individualism may be integral to the biographies of young adults, they should not be caricatured as naively individualistic and blind to the role of social structures in shaping their lives (Devadason, 2007). When talking about unemployment, Ellie (female, unknown age) seemed to acknowledge the role of structure and limitations of agency suggesting that “in most cases it [unemployment] is unavoidable”. The participants outlined specific structural factors which they felt impacted upon their ability to find employment or engage in education.

In particular the issue of age had an impact on how these young people saw themselves, and was viewed as a barrier to employment and educational opportunities. Previous studies have highlighted evidence of age discrimination by employers (Pemberton, 2008) and age being felt to be a cause for prejudice among young people (Miller et al., 2015). This study found that some of the participants felt that this was happening to them. Ellie (female, unknown age) suggested that she was seen as “unemployable” due to her age;

“Many teens in local areas where there are lots of jobs going are ready for work, some qualified and some not. Just because of how old they are and the price of insurance cost to companies means they are exempt from employability and therefore bracketed as an ‘unemployable’ age range”.

There was a feeling amongst some of the group that employers were not giving young people an opportunity. This has been backed up by a local report which suggested that employers were not creative in encouraging the employment of young people through a failure to provide apprenticeships and support the progression of young people (Economic Development Transport and Tourism Scrutiny Commission, 2015). Yet on the other hand, their age also allowed them to be exploited (as previously highlighted in the section on churn);

“The treatment of young people in the workplace is also very disrespectful. It can be very off-putting to be patronized in an interview or a job. In my experience...I was underpaid from the amount of work and responsibility I
was taking on [my manager would criticise all that I did] and overworked with no breaks because the employer knew how desperate I was to stay in employment. He specifically hired 17 year olds so he could pay out less and take advantage of our lack of experience." (Bonnie, female, unknown age)

In addition to this, some of the young people were ‘too old’ for some of the courses available for those who were young and unemployed. Beyond the age of 18 educational opportunities are more restricted, and engagement with welfare changes priorities from engaging in learning to getting a job (Simmons et al., 2014). The participants were encouraged by the staff at the centre to take advantage of things while they were still young as the government focus is on 16-24 year olds, after this there is little support and you generally have to pay for qualifications. Others felt there was a lack of opportunities out there and there should be more training and apprenticeships available. Olivia (female, unknown age) found that her age even impacted upon the work experience placements available to her. She was interested in a job in counselling, but could not currently get a placement related to this as she was under 19. She was therefore thinking of ‘settling’ and working at Asda with her grandma. The agency of the participants was therefore restricted as they could only choose from a range of limited options due to their age (Evans, 2007), yet their educational options would become even more limited as they got older.

The government, prejudice, and gender were also highlighted as barriers by the participants. The government were seen to have got themselves into a mess through the recession and then the cutbacks, and were not trying to fix it. The idea that there was a lack of jobs was a common complaint, highlighting that the participants recognised the reality of the labour market and the limits of their agency (Russell et al., 2011); "there is not enough availability of jobs because quite a lot of people try applying for the one job" (Gabby, female, age unknown). One of the students linked this to the impact of immigration; “Some people do want a job and do look for a job but most jobs are taken by the people that come to our country so it’s harder for us British people to get a job in our own country”
(Rachel, female, unknown age). This view did not appear to be widely held among the group.

Beyond issues of age, gender and the blame being placed on the government, there was an acknowledgement of the economic pressures the young people faced in their lives, with students outlining lack of money, issues with transport and instability as barriers to education and employment. Students felt that a lot of the barriers they faced linked back to money reflecting the young people in Russell’s (2016) study who expressed frustration regarding their financial situation, with several attributing this to their lack of ability to participate in education and employment. For two of the participants a lack of money meant that they were struggling to follow the career paths they wanted to. The barriers they faced were due to their body weight; they were not 'big enough' to join the army or the police force. Tim (male, 19) felt that he was struggling as he did not get enough money to live on through his benefits; "I am on benefit money. I can't get food" (Field notes, 22/01/2014). Other participants did not have the money to pay for the courses they wanted to do at college or were worried that they did not have the funds to go to university. Charlotte (female, 23) talked about wanting to do Art and Design at college; however she does not have the money for the fees.

A majority of the young people were having problems with money. Olivia (female, unknown age) ended up closing her bank account as she was overdrawn while Tim (male, 19) was in debt due to “contracts”. Cameron (male, unknown age) was struggling to pay his gran rent and at one point Gabby (female, unknown age) showed me that she only had £4 in change left; “I am skint. I have never been skint before. I actually have no money in my bank account” (Field notes, 22/01/2014). Some of the young people ended up missing days of college as they did not have money to pay for the bus fare. These young people needed money to get a job, but needed a job to get money. Financial considerations therefore influenced decisions about undertaking certain forms of work or training (Simmons et al., 2014). For example, Nina (female, 18) described how she would rather do extra shifts at the local cafe where she has a Saturday job than attend the centre as she would "prefer to have money...as I need some new clothes"
(Field notes, 14/04/2014). However, while this meant that she missed days at the centre, she did try to catch up on class work she missed.

It was viewed by the participants as easier to find work if you have a car, which you need money for, and it was acknowledged that it is difficult to be independent and move out of the family home without having money. Living arrangements are important in relation to NEET status (Pemberton, 2008) and some of the participants felt that they were held back by the lack of a ‘secure home’, while others struggled to search for jobs as they did not have internet access at home.

_Bella (female, 20) was being threatened with eviction from her council house while on the course (after previously being on the waiting list for a year and a half). She had not been staying at home due to an event which negatively impacted upon her mental health. She was trying to prove that she was still living there as she wanted to ‘keep things together’ for her child._

A number of the participants lived in hostels or had no fixed address, while other participants still lived with their parents, carers, siblings and pets. Olivia (female, unknown age) lived with her nan, while Charlotte (female, 23) shared a house with her mum, step dad, two sisters, one brother and four cats. Setting up an independent household and a family was seen as difficult without having a job; "I want to leave home one day and find a place for myself but how the hell can I get a place when I cannot find a job. It's impossible and I feel upset that I still live under the same roof as my parents" (Demi, female, 24). The participants were reluctant to move out of home until they could afford to, showing a negative reaction to claiming ‘housing benefit’;

Student A: "I am trapped at home, I physically cannot get out…I don't have any money"

Student B: "Or you could just claim housing benefit"

Teacher: "Who wants to live on benefits all their life?"
Student C: "Fuck that"

Student D: “...scam artists“

Student E: "People get JSA and don't even look for a job“

Teacher: “You will be labelled as a dole dossers“ (Field notes, 22/01/2014)

This discussion reflects the participants feelings towards people who claim benefits highlighted in the previous chapter, and again demonstrates the impact of the tutors and context of the centre on this discourse.

The choices the participants could make were therefore restricted by structures, and they were aware of the impact of age and lack of money on their ability to achieve their aspirations. Barriers associated with a lack of financial resources, lack of access to transport, high rates of unemployment, low levels of demand for labour and public sector spending cuts have been highlighted by researchers in previous studies of NEET young people (Rose et al., 2012; Simmons et al., 2014; Russell, 2016), however in this research these factors were acknowledged by the participants themselves. Yet although the participants showed an awareness of structural inequalities, some of their responses to situations they encountered tended to be individual rather than collective (Furlong, 2009 cited in (Thompson, 2011, p.790)). As the previous chapter demonstrated, on the course there was a focus on changing them as individuals to make them ‘work ready’ through qualifications and work experience, and this individual focus was reflected in the narratives of the participants.

The impact of mental and physical health

As highlighted in the previous section, these young people felt they were facing a number of barriers to getting into work or education. Outside of the structural issues and perceived individual deficiencies already discussed, these young people also had problems with physical and mental health. Issues with mental
health were shared by a number of the participants. Seven of the young people outlined that they had depression or anxiety, while one had ADHD. Previous research has highlighted this link between NEET youths and mental health (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016). Yet there has been a more general decline in the mental and emotional well-being of young people as they come under rising pressure in competitive education and work environments. The perceived rise in psychological disorders among young people has been linked to late modern uncertainty and anxiety arising from an expansion in possibilities, choice and decision-making (Rutter and Smith, 1995), the extension of education and the financial pressures on students (Rutter and Smith, 1995; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Rana et al, 1999), and extended unemployment (West and Sweeting, 1996 all cited in (Henderson et al., 2007, p.86)). Mental health is therefore not just a problem among those who are NEET, but it is something which is increasingly impacting upon young people more widely within society.

When filling out forms during their first week at the centre the students of Group Two outlined that they had a number of issues including depression, schizophrenia, anger management, dyslexia, cerebral palsy, obsessive compulsive disorder, and body dysmorphia. Cameron (male, unknown age) had OCD but in some areas of life it did not affect him; for example, he suggested that his bedroom was a mess. These young people felt that their mental health was a barrier to their aspirations, with Katy (female, 19) suggesting that her anxiety and depression were impacting on what she wanted to do; “I want to become a social worker so until I’m at one with myself I cannot help others”. While Bonnie (female, unknown age) linked her depression to the fact that she feels she cannot achieve her goals. During the course she felt like her head was everywhere. She would forget things like appointments, meetings with her mentor, and the job centre. At times students struggled to turn up to the centre due to their depression, others would turn up tired or late. Rachel (female, unknown age) missed a day at the centre as she could not stop crying. She has depression and is on medication, but it does not always work. Mental health impacted on the ability of the participants to gain employment and sustain their engagement with education. Some of the aspirations the young people held were therefore based around wanting to improve their mental health.
Health is a significant resource and its lack poses significant challenges to well-being (Henderson et al., 2007). Russell (2016) found that poor health was common amongst many of the NEET young people in her study. This sometimes acted as a barrier to re-engagement, and other times acted as a motive to re-engage. While mental health is more acknowledged in the literature on NEET young people, physical health is not dealt with in as much depth. Improving personal health was seen as important to the participants and they aspired to lose weight, quit smoking, or to exercise more.

A number of the young people attending the course had epilepsy which impacted on the jobs they were able to do, their ability to drive, and their chances of living independently. Previous studies have observed stigmatisation, depression, anxiety, increased underschooling, single status, and higher unemployment rates among people with epilepsy (Silanpaa et al, 1998 cited in (Marinas et al., 2011, p.223)). Employment, independence, and worries about driving are some of the issues that most concern people with moderate to severe epilepsy in the Western world (Gilliam et al, 1997 cited in (Marinas et al., 2011, p.223)), reflecting the feelings of the students in this study. The students with epilepsy struggled both on the course and with finding work. Mel (female, unknown age) did not end up finishing the programme and told one of the tutors she was too ill to come into the centre again.

For Gabby (female, unknown age), her epilepsy was part of who she was. She developed epilepsy when she was six and reacted to sunlight so liked to wear sunglasses and a hat. Her illness therefore had an impact upon how she dressed. She normally had around one seizure a year and was hoping to grow out of it. Due to her condition she cannot drive and is on medication which often has an impact on her mood. She was anxious of having a seizure in front of the other students and so would miss lessons or whole days if she felt dizzy.

Gabby felt that people did not understand her and so she wanted to raise awareness of epilepsy among the students and staff. This led her to asking everyone to wear purple on epilepsy awareness day, however only three people at the centre did. She was also a member of a Facebook group where people shared their stories about their experiences of epilepsy.
The learning difficulties and disabilities of some of the young people had an impact on the choices they were able to make. Charlotte (female, 23) was constrained in her ability to have her own home as she has to continue to live with her mum until she can keep her epilepsy under control. While Gabby (female, unknown age) felt that her learning difficulties and disabilities impacted upon her choices as she had to find a job that ‘would be good for her’. The participants’ choices and self-identities were therefore also shaped by their physical and mental health.

**Looking beyond education and training: the problem with short courses**

The findings of this study add to previous research into NEET young people which has demonstrated that while they have agency, these young people are shaped and influenced by cultural and structural factors; choices are not made in an economic and social vacuum. The attitudes and behaviours of NEET young people are shaped in the same way as other people’s, by the conditions in which they live and work, by the challenges they face, and by the resources available to them (Simmons *et al.*, 2014). The construction of the narratives of the participants was dependent on access to both discourse and resources. The young people themselves acknowledged the structural issues they faced which acted as perceived barriers to their aspirations.

In youth policy there is a tendency to interpret youth problems in terms of alleged deficits of young people, rather than recognising the political and economic causes of youth unemployment (MacDonald, 2011). They are viewed as lacking the qualities and skills required to be employable, rather than as a group whose lives have been constrained by class, gender or location (Lawy and Wheeler, 2013). The aim of policy and programmes is to improve them as individuals rather than focusing on the structural and economic factors which impact upon their lives. Young people are viewed less as products of social and economic environments that the government have the power to improve, and are instead constructed as individualised authors of their own futures in given environments...
(Fergusson, 2013). This focus on ideas around rational choice and action neglect the interaction between structure and agency. The research in this study demonstrates that it is important to understand the wider lives of these young people, and the way their agency is bounded by social structures.

The data from this research has therefore demonstrated that many of the participants were facing other issues alongside being unemployed. The uncertainty and insecurity of some of their lives was highlighted by their aspirations which included wanting to “get to a stable place in my life where I’m happy” and to “be able to live without any stress or worries”. As research by Yates and Payne (2006) suggests, a young person’s NEET status may not be the most useful thing to know as they may have more immediate risks in their lives, therefore focusing on gaining qualifications and work experience may not be immediate concerns. Smith and Wright (2015) found a consensus among their participants that the main goal of courses was to find work, however the idea that learners could expect to complete a course and then go directly to a related job or course was viewed with scepticism, not least because of the learners own personal circumstances. This was something acknowledged by the Chief Executive of the charity who ran the centre where this research took place. He suggested that the young people they worked with would benefit from consistency and therefore needed longer programmes.

The short-term nature of the training course the young people were attending led to tensions between staff and students over what they could achieve during their time there. This was particularly prominent in discussions of the perceived need for Level 2 qualifications in Maths and English among the participants which led to clashes with the staff at times. During one afternoon the students were doing an English writing test. A group of them were given Entry Level 3 papers as the tutor did not want to keep registering fails. The students were not happy about this, especially those who already had a Level 1 in English (Field notes, 9/4/2014). Their experiences on the course were influenced by their tutors who made decisions about the level of education the students were at. The clash with staff members highlights the limits of the participants’ agency. They could aspire to achieve a Level 2 but this may be a challenge for some of them and was not
seen as immediately achievable during their time on the current course. Time is needed, sometimes a considerable period, for young people to reach a stage where they are ready to take on a level 2 qualification (Higgins, 2013).

The unemployed status of the participants was mixed in with other issues such as depression and anxiety, financial problems or unstable living arrangements. Many of the young people were therefore viewed by the tutors as needing high levels of pastoral care and at times it was necessary for these issues to be addressed before learning could take place. There was a need to build trust, respect and confidence (Smith and Wright, 2015). The provision included high levels of emotional and social support. The centre offered support through the tutors and the manager, yet in addition to this the young people were assigned mentors if they wanted them, and there was also a counsellor who visited the site a couple of times a week. The concept of individualisation suggests that these young people are making choices and developing their self-identities alone. However, the importance of support for these young people demonstrates how relationships played an important part in their lives. Important relationships were not just formed with the staff at the centre, but also with other students. Family and friends outside the centre also had an influence on their lives and identities. While they were trying to improve themselves as individuals through gaining qualifications, skills and experience, they were not doing this alone.

**The role of relationships**

Mason (2004) suggests that the personal narratives which people create should be viewed as relational, rather than as an individual creation. She queries the conflation of agency with individualism in the work of Giddens, and the connection of the personal narrative with the idea of an individualised self or narrator. The gaze of individualisation creates the sense of individualised actors and selves, and loses sight of the connectivity of social relations, identity and agency (Mason, 2004). Mason argues that, in her research into personal narratives about residential histories in the North of England, the sense of agency
and identity that was created in the narratives of the participants was relational more than individualistic; she questioned the dominance of the individual as the core reflexive agent in shaping their project of the self. Mason's (2004) work suggests that choices are not just made by individuals, but in participation with, in the interests of, or in conflict with key others in a person’s life. People's identities and practices are embedded in sets of relationships, and people’s narratives are built through the relationships they have and the connections they make with other people. Mason therefore views the personal narrative as part of a relational, more than an individualistic, discourse. The narratives of the young people in this research reflect this, as their identities and choices were shaped by their relationships with others. While individualisation may have thrown people upon their own resources, which impacts upon the choices they are able to make, these resources include support from their family and peer networks.

Relationships and family were an important part of the future aspirations of the participants. In the short term, the focus was on their current families. One of the students wanted to get along with their mum, while another hoped to make their mum proud. Leanne (female, 16) also hoped to stop arguing with her sister and help her mum out more. While, Olivia's decisions were influenced by the fact her grandma was moving away and she did not want to go with her. She therefore added her name to the list for council housing.

In the long term, the focus was on starting their own families. For some of the young people relationships and marriage were the lynch pin of their imagined futures. The focus was on settling down and making a home with someone rather than on more individual aspirations (Henderson et al., 2007). Demi (female, 24) discussed how she just wanted a job as she was planning marriage and children with her partner. Her relationship was important to her as she had had issues at home and developed problems with alcohol. She described how her relationship had 'saved' her. While, Charlotte (female, 23) suggested that she would get married if she found the right person. A couple of the females in the group emphasised the importance of the wedding day; “I want to become a wife. I want the big day”. Some of the young people joked about finding a rich husband or wife, or suggested that that they wanted to marry Harry Styles, while others just
wanted a boyfriend or a girlfriend. One of Leanne's (female, 16) goals was to have a "happy, long lasting relationship with lots of sex".

Both genders discussed the importance of starting a family, with many either wanting to 'be a mum' or 'be a dad'; "I would like to become a mum because I would like my own family" (Nina, female, 18). Olivia (female, unknown age) wanted “to be a wonderful mum”, while Matt (male, unknown age) wanted “to find love and have a family”. When Group 1 placed their aspirations on the white board, five of the female participants suggested that they wanted to be a mum, with two male respondents wanting to be a dad. Having a ‘happy’ family was also important, at times contrasting with what the young people had experienced in their own childhood.

While the young people hoped for future families, current family and friends had an influence on the choices they made. They were not making decisions alone, being solely responsible for their project of the self (Mason, 2004). Family members and friends from both outside and inside the centre were viewed as sources of support; students acknowledged how they got help from their boyfriend, mum, dad, parents and sister. Family and friends can provide young people with support and opportunities when they are not receiving it from more formalised structures. In the research of Miller et al (2015), positive relationships with family were mentioned on a few occasions, while supportive relationships with friends featured prominently. Within this study both were viewed as important.

For some of the participants, the centre had enabled them to make a group of new friends who became sources of support. There were examples of students helping each other with their class work, their CVs, and council housing applications, providing ‘pep talks’, and encouraging each other to complete the course. The friendship and subsequent relationship between Cameron (male, unknown age) and Ellie (female, unknown age) helped Ellie to grow in confidence;
Teacher to Ellie: “You were scared of coming to the centre and now you are dancing around”

Cameron: “Yeah. Thanks to me” (Field notes, 19/02/2014)

Simon (male, unknown age) wanted to be a police officer and was mocked by some of the other students who called him a ‘pig’ and played the song ‘Fuck the Police’ to him. On the front of his dream job book Bonnie (female, unknown age) drew a fat policeman with a doughnut. As his relationship with Bonnie developed, Simon’s aspirations did not completely change but he did not seem as certain about his future career. He still discussed going into the police, but was also thinking about something to do with photography. He planned to go onto the same short course as Bonnie once the current programme at the centre had finished.

Generally, the aspirations of the participants were viewed as something which they could not achieve alone. Similar to the findings of Henderson et al (2007), family was viewed as a major source of support for young people, offering emotional, financial and social support and resources. Demi (female, 24) described how “with my mum I am job hunting…Sometimes my dad does his best to help his daughter find work. He’s a bus driver for Arriva and he’s only trying to help”. Olivia (female, unknown age) was given financial incentives by her nan for turning up to college, while Gabby (female, unknown age) got help with her English work from her dad. Family can provide encouragement, information and active involvement when it comes to NEET young people finding their way (Russell et al., 2011). For example, John (male, 18) managed to get a job working on the market on Fridays and Saturdays thanks to his uncle.

In the work of Pemberton (2008), NEET interviewees highlighted the positive and negative influences of parents and immediate family. Similarly, the research of Mason (2004) found that the relational narratives of the participants took different forms, offering supportive connections but also telling of constraint and conflict. The same was apparent in this study. While some young people felt supported by family members, others felt that their parents were losing interest in helping
them or did not provide support to them. Parents could therefore be part of the problem for some young people (Wilson et al, 2008 cited in (Beck, 2015, p.485)).

Differential access to resources can impact on whether people might find themselves constrained by the practices and relationships of others (Mason, 2004), again highlighting the impact of resources on people's choices. This was evident in the narratives of some of the participants who were concerned about the finances of their parents/carers. Ian (male, 19) was worried that now he and his brother have turned 19 their mum had lost child benefit for them. He was therefore concerned about going on to further education schemes, instead focusing on getting work so he could earn money. He was told by one of the tutors to stop putting his life on hold for other people (Field notes, 28/04/2014). For other participants, having their own children provided challenges and shaped the choices they were able to make.

**Bella (female, 20) found that a lot of courses did not offer childcare. She currently gets support through the Care to Learn scheme; a government run scheme which offers help for under 20 year olds with childcare costs while they study. She will not get this on the next course due to her age. Bella had found a job before attending the centre but it fell through as she could not find a nursery for her daughter who had a health problem.**

In addition to the role of family, relationships could also be seen as a distraction and were not always positive sources of support. Some relationships had an impact on the home life of certain participants. Bonnie's (female, unknown age) boyfriend carried on living with her for a while after they had broken up and was not accepting things were over. This was having a negative impact on her. The most common impact of relationships was on the attendance of the young people at the centre. This was particularly the case when relationships formed between students on the course. When Ellie (female, unknown age) and Cameron (male, unknown age) started a relationship the staff were worried as previous experience had demonstrated that when students form relationships it can mean that if one of the students does not turn up, the other one will not. While at the
centre they were together for a month, and during that time spent only two days apart. Similarly, Nina (female, 18) and John (male, 18) were in the same class and were told that they were holding each other back. When the relationship between them broke down towards the end of the course it had a further impact on their studies. Nina was reluctant to attend, while John struggled to do work. Whether they were sources of support, or a distraction, the participants felt that they were reliant on others, especially as many of them still lived with their parents or carers (as discussed previously).

Beyond family and friends, relationships with professionals formed a key part of the young people’s lives, similar to the participants in the study of Thompson et al (2014). The staff at the centre were viewed as reliable sources of support and advice, helping with things like housing arrangements, financial problems, and body image issues. Pastoral issues took up a lot of the staff members time; on one day, one of the tutors had been at the centre since 8.00am and had not eaten breakfast or lunch as they had spent a lot of time dealing with pastoral issues alongside teaching. Even after finishing their course, some of the young people still continued to receive help. Charlotte (female, 23) was attending a course with a different provider but would come into the centre on her breaks.

This support received by the young people did help them, and was appreciated by the participants. A number of the students felt that they had grown in confidence. Reflecting on their time at the centre on the last day Olivia (female, unknown age) stated “they have helped me loads with my confidence and stuff” (Field notes, 01/05/2014). The students brought thank you cards in for the staff and in most of them the participants had written about how their confidence had been built up. Ian (male, 19) suggested that attending the centre had made him

The staff at the centre had helped Cameron (male, unknown age) find a place to stay and advised him on how to manage his money. Before attending the centre he had been ‘sofa surfing’ and while on the course ended up living with his gran. Cameron therefore felt well supported by the staff at the centre; “I always know that someone is there when I need them”.

This support received by the young people did help them, and was appreciated by the participants. A number of the students felt that they had grown in confidence. Reflecting on their time at the centre on the last day Olivia (female, unknown age) stated “they have helped me loads with my confidence and stuff” (Field notes, 01/05/2014). The students brought thank you cards in for the staff and in most of them the participants had written about how their confidence had been built up. Ian (male, 19) suggested that attending the centre had made him
happier; “I feel more like myself” (Field notes, 31/01/2014). While Gabby (female, unknown age) had managed to get over her fear and anxiety issues and went into town by herself. The participants also became more confident in their studies. For example, some of the participants became more engaged in Maths. During one lesson towards the end of their course Olivia (female, unknown age) described herself as clever, while Gabby (female unknown age) told me that she was proud of herself; “I did Maths again” (Field notes, 02/04/2014). However, as highlighted in the previous chapter, the confidence for some of the participants was tied to the context of the centre, and this sense of self-esteem diminished once they left the course.

The staff at the centre also had an impact on the aspirations of some of the participants. One of the tutors on the course influenced a few of the young people to think about careers in photography due to his passion for the subject; Nina (female, 18) discussed wanting to go to college to do photography because she really liked it. Having come on the course with different careers in mind they found that they enjoyed their media lessons. The tutor was seen as enthusiastic, outgoing and energetic, and managed to get the student to feel the same. The staff at the centre can therefore be seen to have helped the students in many ways, influencing the way they saw themselves, and impacting upon their lives. The construction of self-identity should not be seen as a solitary project, but something negotiated and accomplished with others. The findings of this research highlight the importance of relationships in the lives of these young people in relation to both their current and future identities, and as both sources of support and distraction.

Conclusion

Overall, the young people did attempt to reflexively create their self-identities, trying to bring together their present and past selves to experiment with possible future selves. However, they did not make decisions about the future alone. Friends, partners, family, and tutors all influenced their decision making, being
viewed as both sources of support, but also as barriers. Individualisation may be seen to throw people onto their own resources, yet these resources include support from family and peer networks.

Their narratives were bounded and shaped by their economic and social context. The participants therefore found their choices constrained. Education and training programmes and benefit agencies shaped their decisions, and there was an awareness among the young people of the structural barriers they faced, in particular due to their age and financial resources. The role of discourses in shaping the narratives of the participants was also evident. The continuing impact of normative ideas about adulthood was highlighted in the aspirations most of the young people held. They wanted a job, a place of their own, and a family. Despite the apparent impact of individualisation which has broadened choices and changed transitions, these young people struggled to tell alternative narratives about their futures. Their ideas about adulthood highlight the continuing impact of tradition and the role of society and culture on people’s identities and discourses.

Work formed a central part of their future plans, as it allowed them to support themselves. Being on benefits was a ‘feared future self’, reflecting the unacceptable nature of this status highlighted in the previous chapter. The focus on qualifications and work experience as the causes of unemployment, as well as the rise of flexibility and casualisation in the youth labour market, led to churn between education, training, employment and unemployment. This made it difficult for the young people to develop consistent and coherent narratives. This was particularly the case for those participants who attended a number of similar employability programmes without progressing into other education or employment.

The focus on individualisation in policy overestimates the agency and resources which are available to these young people. While the concept of the reflexive self is relevant to understanding how these young people construct their identities, and individualisation has had an impact on their lives and discourses, this research highlights the continued role of structure in their lives. Policy needs to
take into account the bounded nature of the agency of these young people, acknowledging the numerous barriers which people can face beyond a lack of qualifications, work experience and low levels of confidence.
Chapter Seven: Conclusion

During a period when young people were feeling the effects of the 2008/2009 recession and the subsequent government cuts and policy changes which impacted upon the lives of those aged 16-24, capturing the voices of some of those affected felt important. This research focused specifically on young people attending a course for those who are NEET in an area of the Midlands. Being NEET can have adverse consequences for the individual, society and the economy, yet a concern with this has arguably led to these young people being stereotyped and demonised with blame being placed on the individual rather than on wider social problems. Despite a host of government initiatives to tackle the ‘problem’ the NEET rate in the UK was rising even before the 2008 recession, with policies and provision aimed at this group constantly changing. Policy and practice tends to draw on similar ideas about the value of education and training, alongside issues of control, monitoring and conditionality. Due to this, existing research has critiqued the term NEET and its use as a service intervention label (Furlong, 2006; Hutchinson *et al.*, 2016; Yates and Payne, 2006), challenging the negative connotations and the homogeneity associated with it.

Attempts have also been made to try and understand young people who are placed into the category, and to focus on their experiences. In some cases this has been done to try and categorise certain groups of young people who become NEET to develop ‘risk indicators’. NEET young people tend to be presented as ‘other’, being labelled as ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘on the margins’. Few studies have asked those who are placed into the ‘NEET’ category how they define themselves and their situation. There has also been a lack of engagement with the impact of the NEET category, and ideas associated with it, on the self-identities of young people who are associated with the term. Identities play a significant role in grounding people’s social experiences and their relationship to the social and economic world, and individuals’ self-perceptions are strongly informed by the perceptions of others. Popular discourses around young people who are NEET may be active in excluding young people, and may have longer term implications for their identity and well-being (Rose *et al.*, 2012). The category of NEET is adding to the barriers these young people face, by stereotyping and making
negative assumptions about them. Previous research has demonstrated that NEET young people being represented as ‘other’ is reflected in how provision is conceived, with programmes potentially further stigmatising and excluding those who are already disadvantaged (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b; Thompson et al., 2014).

This research therefore sought to explore the self-identities of young people on a course for those who are not in education, employment or training. It is important to focus on who they are, rather than rendering them as invisible within a homogenous population (Simmons and Thompson, 2013). Information about the identities of these young people allow the category of NEET to be better understood, giving insight into the support these young people need. Current NEET policy is influenced by individualised discourses which highlight the deficiencies of the young people themselves. The role of structure is not taken into account. The aim is to improve people as individuals, rather than focusing on structural and economic factors which have impacted upon their lives. By looking at the notion of the reflexive self, this research has explored the impact of individualisation on NEET young people, demonstrating how demands for people to ‘take control of their lives’ ignores these wider structural issues that shape people’s experiences. The voices of these young people helped to highlight the social constraints and institutional structures which bounded their agency (Wyn and White, 1998; Evans, 2002). The research demonstrates how the choices the participants were able to make were not only shaped by the resources they had, but also by the discourses which were available to them.

How do these young people describe themselves and how do they view their current situation?

Whilst these young people were able to define themselves, they were also defined by others. Their experiences and identities were shaped by the NEET category and wider discourses related to unemployment. Their agency and ability
to create their own self-identities was bounded by the impact of socially and politically created discourses about what being NEET and unemployed means.

The participants did not know what the term NEET meant and did not use it themselves, instead using the term ‘unemployed’. While on the course they tended to distance themselves from these labels and called themselves ‘students’. The research highlights how they are just ‘ordinary’ young people with interests similar to others of their age; including gaming, music, films and sport. However, they have been labelled in policy as different and set apart due to the course they are attending. This demonstrates one of the contradictions of the NEET category; it is viewed as both a problem group of young people from poor backgrounds and as a normal phase which a lot of young people experience. For most, NEET is a temporary status, and therefore is not a fundamental part of their self-identity. When asked specifically to describe themselves the participants outlined a collection of personality traits, or offered their name. This was what they felt made them who they were. Positive attributes listed by the students highlight what they have, rather than what they are seen to lack, challenging the idea that they are ‘deficient’ (Phillips, 2010). Relationships with family and friends formed an important part of their sense of self, as did labels related to beliefs or sexuality.

Similar to previous research with NEET young people (Russell et al., 2011), this study found that, through the course they were on, these young people were being constructed in certain ways; being viewed as deficient with a need to overcome individual barriers to become employable. They were seen as certain types of learners and constructed as youths who needed both help and control. Stereotypes and generalisations linked to being NEET therefore did appear to have an impact in relation to the provision available to them, and their experience of attending such courses. Exploring these ideas also demonstrated that the category does not fit with the lives and experiences of those it attempts to define, adding to critiques of the concept outlined in previous literature (Furlong, 2006; Yates and Payne, 2006).
Discourses around individualisation impacted upon their self-identities. There was a focus by the young people on their individual shortcomings, with the most common reasons for being unemployed viewed as a lack of work experience and a lack of qualifications. This focus on perceived individual failure had an impact on confidence and self-esteem. For some of the young people, the progress they made in growing their self-confidence was tied to their experiences at the centre, and was lost once the programme ended. Focusing on individual reasons for employment can contradict the aim of courses to build self-esteem and confidence, as young people become concerned with what is wrong with them and how they need to change themselves to get into education, employment or training, rather than on their strengths and abilities.

The discourse used on programmes aimed at NEET young people tends to construct those associated with this category as ‘youths’, not taking into account the expansion of the age range. The tutors viewed the participants as disengaged, however they were generally not constructed as a homogenous group of learners as has been suggested in previous research with NEET young people (Russell et al., 2011). It was acknowledged that the young people were working at different levels; from those who struggled to read and write, to those who already had qualifications and were attending the centre for different reasons. Disengagement from education had not always been a choice for the participants. Wider issues in their lives impacted upon and affected their ability to engage, highlighting the bounded nature of their agency.

Wider political and media discourses around benefits and unemployment also shaped their experiences, leading them to construct their identities in dialogue with the ‘other’ (Bagnoli, 2003). They distanced themselves from ‘youths’ and ‘people on benefits’ and were keen to show that they were ‘doing something with their lives’. They were attempting to create a ‘socially acceptable’ narrative (Giddens, 1991). However some of the young people were conflicted, trying to balance their accounts of their positive feelings about unemployment, with an acknowledgement of the negatives. They struggled to create alternative narratives about being unemployed, instead attempting to distance themselves from dominant stereotypes. Previous research has outlined that people attempt
to distance themselves from labels such as lazy or ‘dole dossers’, yet they are willing to label others in this way (Russell, 2016). The findings from this study reflected this, and also demonstrated how stereotypes about young people, in particular young unemployed people, were perpetuated by the participants.

**What are their aspirations for the future (and what are the barriers to achieving these)?**

The participants attempted to construct a reflexive self, as they were given time on the course to think about who they are and who they want to be. This included them linking their past and present experiences to what they hoped to achieve in the future. In addition to this, their wider aspirations generally reflected their interests, demonstrating the centrality of lifestyle choices to self-identity. They were encouraged to think about their ‘dream jobs’, but their ideas changed over their time on the course, linking to issues around the uncertain conditions of late modernity, which means that identity questions constantly need to be posed anew. Their discussions outlined the range of potential choices which were available to them.

However, despite the apparent expansion of choice, the participants in this research struggled to find new stories to tell about becoming adults. Their aspirations were linked to fairly traditional ideas which included wanting a job, a home and a family. Similar to the young people in Devadason’s study (2007), they struggled to tell a story of progress towards these. The narratives the young people created were not always consistent or coherent. Without a job, it was viewed as difficult to achieve their other aspirations. Lack of qualifications, along with the insecure and exploitative experiences of some of the participants in the labour market, led to a process of churn between education, employment and training. There was also evidence of the participants moving between different training providers as they strived for a Level 2 in Maths and English which they believed would get them into further education or help them to get ‘better’ employment. The most common outcome at the end of the course was to stay in
education. The impact of discourses around being ‘on benefits’ did not just impact on their current identities, it was also viewed as a feared future self. The participants were clear that they did not want to live their life on benefits, reflecting the stigma associated with this situation.

While the participants attempted to have some control over their lives, their choices were shaped by social and economic structures and tradition still played a role, with gender influencing their aspirations. Theories of individualisation tend to ignore the resilience of tradition and continuity in people’s lives (Jamieson, 1999). Their agency was bounded, as they were pushed into certain places or down certain avenues, or found potential routes to education or work closed off. Barriers related to the institutions the young people engaged with, such as conditionality linked to welfare payments.

The course they were on not only shaped their current experiences, but also their future aspirations as links between different providers meant that some of the options presented to the participants were to attend similar courses based around employability. While the course offered space for the participants to explore their future identities, it also shaped and impacted upon the choices available to them. Despite the apparent individualisation of transitions, the participants did not make decisions about the future alone, their friends, tutors, and families all influenced their decision making, being viewed as both sources of support, but also as barriers.

Research has suggested that people have become blind to the existence of structural constraints (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997), however these young people seemed to be aware of the wider conditions in which they were living, viewing age, prejudice and gender as barriers. A major barrier identified by the participants was money; it linked to a lot of the other issues they felt they faced. Mental health was also a significant factor in relation to both how these young people saw themselves, and the barriers they felt they faced. Previous research has highlighted the link between NEET status and mental health problems (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016), however physical health has not really been acknowledged. In this study a number of the young people had epilepsy and this
formed a part of who they were, as well as impacting upon their lives. The numerous barriers these young people faced highlight the need to look beyond the focus on qualifications and work experience to help them. The short term nature of the course the young people were attending also meant that it was difficult to deal with all the issues the young people had, as well as trying to help them achieve qualifications.

**Recommendations**

Focusing on individual deficiencies limits the impact of policy and initiatives aimed at NEET young people, as wider political and economic causes of youth unemployment are not taken into account. The concern is with supply side initiatives being developed without accompanying employment regulation or job creation to stimulate demand for labour. There is a need to look more widely at young people’s lives to acknowledge the barriers they are facing, taking into account the structural as well as the individual. While wider structural changes are needed, the findings from this research also outline more small scale changes which could have a positive impact and help those who become NEET.

There has not been a clear strategy in policy, either nationally or locally, about providing careers advice and guidance to young people in the UK. While the young people in this study were pushed down certain avenues, with their choices constrained by structural factors, they were also not fully aware of the options available to them. This highlights the importance of informed and impartial advice and guidance. Independent careers advice and collaboration between schools, colleges and employers could help with the transitions of young people (as recommended by the Lord’s Select Committee on Social Mobility see (Sellgren, 2016)). Research has found that individualised information and guidance, and close ties to FE colleges and other support agencies (such as Connexions) are important to successful schemes as they allow the sharing of information and the creations of coherent links to help young people make transitions from training to work (David, 2014). The young people in this research had been involved with a
number of different providers and organisations. Not only had they attended
courses with five different providers between them, they were also engaged with
other organisations such as A4E, InTraining, the Job Centre, and Connexions.
Coordinated services would therefore be an asset in helping these young people.

Churning between education, employment and training was apparent among the
participants in this research, with repeated participation in alternative provision
leaving some of the young people feeling disillusioned and frustrated. The quality
of training on offer therefore matters. As studies, such as Simmons (2008), have
already highlighted questions about what is learnt and the quality of provision for
NEET young people are not raised, with the focus of policy on issues of access
and participation. Young people take part in courses which offer few clear
progression opportunities. This reflects part of a wider gulf between academic
and vocational study. Attention needs to be drawn to the type of work or training
which young people are entering (Pemberton, 2008) and courses should have
clear destinations that are meaningful to participants (Smith and Wright, 2015).

In addition to this, initiatives aimed at NEET young people tend to view them as
a homogenous group of non-academic, disengaged young people who will
benefit from basic skills and work based education. This does not take into
account the diversity of the category. A more individualised focus would help this
heterogeneous group of young people. The tutors of the course in the research
found it difficult to work with the students as a group as they were working at
different levels and had different attitudes towards engagement. They therefore
benefitted from individual support. Offering more diverse courses beyond those
which focus on employability and life skills may also help these young people.

Focusing on educational or work based progression can be too narrow for certain
young people, who are experiencing a range of problems. For example, for the
young people in this study, alongside unemployment they were also facing issues
such as depression, anxiety, and unstable living arrangements. Young people
can make progress in different ways. There needs to be a wider focus on tackling
different issues which young people face, rather than just a focus on education
and ‘employability’. While the programme in this study attempted to build up the
confidence and self-esteem of participants, the concentration on individual deficits such as lack of qualifications and work experience is arguably counterproductive to this, as young people feel that their unemployment is directly attributable to them as individuals. There is a case for setting ‘softer’ targets, rather than prioritising education or employment (Pemberton, 2008). Offering longer term, more specific and specialist support may help with this; for example, developing individually focused programmes that value the contribution of young people to society, and aim to build up their confidence and self-esteem (David, 2014). Concentrating on getting people into short term courses, offers only short term solutions; the focus is on a change in status not on sustaining such a change. Longer programmes would offer more consistency and longer term social and emotional support. A holistic approach should be taken which is concerned with meeting the needs of young people in an open, purposeful and long term manner and not principally concerned with reducing jobless figures for short term political reasons.

In this research seven of the young people discussed having depression or anxiety, and the centre had a dedicated counsellor and team of mentors. One aspect of this more holistic approach could therefore be a focus on mental health. Reports have argued that some NEET individuals may have complex needs requiring targeted psychological approach including counselling and mentoring (Oliver et al., 2014). Goldman-Mellor et al (2016) suggest that providing mental health services, and incorporating them into youth career support initiatives, could help young people to more effectively cope with challenges, develop confidence in their abilities, and take advantage of training opportunities. It would be helpful to deal with issues of mental health more widely within the youth population, as this is not just a problem related to NEET young people. However, the current level of investment in child and adolescent mental health services is low and the coordination of transition to adult services is poor. More generally this individualised, ‘softer’ approach would require more funding, and more flexible funding. Within this approach it would also be good to take into account those with health problems, such as epilepsy, and think about the ways these young people can be supported. Within policy it is important to think about the other barriers which young people face to employment, not just focusing on their
qualification levels or work experience. Focusing just on supposed individual deficiencies limits the impact of initiatives aimed at NEET young people.

**Further research**

There are some findings in this research which could be explored further, and some gaps which it was not able to cover that offer potential for further research. As this research was done in an educational setting with young people who would not be classed as NEET (but had experienced being NEET), it would be interesting to undertake an in-depth study to see how young people outside of an educational setting talk about themselves and their experiences; something which was captured to an extent in the research of Simmons et al (2014). The young people in an educational setting were able to build their identity around the category of student and the associated idea that they were ‘doing something with their lives’. It would be interesting to see what central aspects of identity young people who are not in education, employment or training focus on, and how they relate to wider discourses about unemployment and people on benefits. The young people in this research were constructed in a certain way due to the course they were attending, which viewed them as non-academic and troubled. It would therefore be helpful to look at the impact of NEET stereotypes outside of this setting.

By looking beyond courses aimed at NEET young people there may also be a chance to capture some of those who are documented as ‘unknown’. There is little research evidence about these young people as they are hard to find due to their lack of contact with local agencies. Furthermore it may also enable a focus on those who are NEET by choice as much of the research on this category has been done with those who are marginalised, despite the fact that it would be misleading to assume that the most vulnerable or marginalised groups compromise the majority of the NEET group (Maguire, 2015a). It is unclear how being NEET is viewed by those who are not trying to get into education, employment or training.
This research offers a snapshot of these young people’s narratives over four months. To gain a better understanding of their self-identities it would help to do a longer term study which took into account the churn some of these young people experienced of different educational providers interspersed with periods of employment. Capturing their narratives at different times during these periods would give an indication of how ‘stable’ and ‘coherent’ their self-identity is, and what aspects of their identity were deemed important at different points. It would also enable further exploration of the ideas of Giddens (1991) who acknowledges that the narratives that people create are constantly changing and there are fateful moments which can play a role in the ordering and re-ordering of narratives. This aspect of Giddens work could not be explored in a short term study.

In addition to this, it is important to look at how different the experiences of the participants are to young people in education, employment and training. A comparative study which looks at the lives of people living in similar areas would give an idea of how ‘different’ NEET young people are. This may help to understand how useful the ‘NEET’ category is, or whether a wider focus on precarity and insecurity in the labour market would be a more sensible approach. Avis (2014) argues for a focus on the broader context of marginalised working class youth; looking at people who are located on the periphery of the labour market. He views NEET as part of a more generalised context of precariousness, where insecurity is a feature of working life. If you view NEET young people as different, and only focus on this category, you are ignoring the wider experiences of people in ‘risk society’ who are dealing with the growth of insecure part-time work, issues of churn, and not just unemployment, but underemployment. The decline of youth labour market has led to the problem of warehousing of young people in education. By focusing on both those within and outside the NEET category it would help to more fully critique the term and its use in policy and intervention. By looking at the interests of young people and how they describe themselves, this research suggests that the participants are just ordinary young people who happen to have experienced periods of unemployment. Research of this kind would help to explore this idea further.
A study of wider populations should also entail issues of ethnicity. It is acknowledged that NEET young people form a heterogeneous group, however the experiences of different ethnicities falling into this category has not really been explored. In this study, which took place in a city where over 40% of people describe themselves as being from ethnic minority communities (Office for National Statistics, 2012), and in research on NEET young people more widely, there is a lack of understanding of the experiences of being NEET among these groups. It has been suggested that there is a lack of engagement with services among families from ethnic groups (Simmons et al., 2014) and it would be informative to find out why, and look at how young people are supported within these communities.

Furthermore, there is a lack of understanding of the much wider and older group that have come to be associated with the NEET category (Maguire, 2015a). The research in this thesis outlines the importance of age to the participants in terms of their experiences on the course, but also in relation to the choices which are available to them. This is an issue which could be explored further. More research could be done with those aged 20 to 24, where there tends to be the highest levels of NEETs, to better understand their experiences and the support they need.

Finally, innovative methods have been used with this group, for example in the work of Thompson et al (2014). This research attempted to use different methods to capture the narratives of young people, and sought to make the voices of the participants central. However, the research was designed and carried out by me, and I analysed, organised and interpreted the data. There was therefore considerable power in my hands as the researcher. Capturing the views and opinions of young people who are placed into the NEET category could be taken further by involving them in the research; in both the design, the data collection and analysis, to help their voices come through more clearly. Farrugia (2013) argues that more participatory methods can ensure the perspective of research participants can be fully articulated, and space is made available for alternative discourses. There are therefore a number of possible routes down which future research in this area can be developed.
**Self-identities of young people on a course for those who are not in education, employment or training**

This research explored the identities of 27 young people on a course for those who are not in education, employment or training in an area of the Midlands. It looked at the role of structure and agency in their lives, through the concepts of the reflexive self and bounded agency. This was done in an attempt to question the policy discourses associated with the NEET category which focus on individuals taking control of their own lives and highlight the individual deficiencies of young people who are not in education, employment or training. NEET young people are seen not to be following a ‘normal’ pathway of development. Importance is placed on ‘successful’ transitions influenced by perceptions about what young people can and should be doing at a particular age. The aim was to challenge underlying assumptions and to explore the impact of this individualising discourse. Previous research has critiqued the policy category and looked at the individual experiences of those who are NEET (Furlong, 2006; Hutchinson et al., 2016; Simmons et al., 2014; Yates and Payne, 2006), this research built upon this literature to explore the identities of the participants, looking at how they see themselves rather than how they are viewed by others.

The research has demonstrated that discourses associated with the concept of NEET are influencing the types of programmes made available to those who fall into this category, and the experiences of the young people who attend them. The way these young people are viewed dictates the nature of intervention aimed at them. The priority on changing the young people as individuals, means the focus remains on their individual failings, which counters attempts to build confidence and self-esteem. Wider discourses around unemployment and benefits also led to perceived judgement and stigmatisation. This meant that the participants tended to think negatively about their situation, and so they attempted to distance themselves from these stereotypes. While on the course they built their identities around being ‘students’.
Creating more positive alternative discourses based around wider notions of progress and success beyond education and employment may help to change the choices available to NEET young people and impact upon how they are viewed (and upon how they view themselves). NEET can be seen as an inclusive category which takes into account the diverse ways in which young people can be vulnerable, yet it is often reduced to the issue of unemployment with policy and interventions focused around this. Interventions should be designed taking into account this wider, more inclusive definition. The things which matter to young people themselves, such as their interests and relationships, should be acknowledged. NEET is not a central element of their self-identities and therefore focusing on these other aspects of their lives will help to demonstrate what they have, rather than what they are seen to lack (Phillips, 2010). Within policy the concept of transition needs to be viewed more broadly to acknowledge aspects of young people’s lives which are important to them and to challenge the discourse of deficiency.

Research has acknowledged the role of individualisation on NEET young people’s lives (MacDonald, 2011; Yates et al., 2011; Simmons et al., 2014), however little of this has explored the relevance of the concept of the reflexive self to this group of young people. Giddens’ (1991) ideas around creating socially acceptable narratives highlighted the importance of context in the narratives the young people were creating; they were ‘occasioned’. This demonstrated the impact of the institutions the participants were engaging with upon the identities they were able to form. Yet the use of the idea of the reflexive self also enabled an agentive approach, allowing a focus on the version of the self the individuals themselves were forming on a course where self-authoring was perceived as taking a central place. While on the course, the self these young people were being requested to build was a kind of ‘entrepreneurial self’ highlighted in the work of Kelly (2006). This is viewed as a form of personhood which sees individuals as responsible for conducting themselves as an enterprise, a project, a work in progress. Individuals are viewed as highly rational and calculating, with human thought and action being reduced to the realm of economic choices. Adams (2003) argues that reflexivity tells us more about the culture and traditions of Western late modern society than a liberation from them. Reflexivity is seen
as a product of Western modernity which is culturally embedded as a concept and a practice. The reflexive project of the self can be seen as a culturally located, politically normative discourse. In carrying out this project, young people are expected to invest in and develop themselves as individuals.

Using the concept of the reflexive self enabled an exploration of the impact of individualisation on the participants, demonstrating how demands on them to ‘take control of their lives’ ignores wider structural issues that shape their experiences. While the participants attempted to reflexively create their identities, not all choices about future lifestyles were available to them. Their agency was bounded and they were constrained by their economic and social circumstances. They acknowledged the impact of structure themselves, it was not a ‘silent discourse’ (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005) within their narratives. The work of Giddens suggests a self detached from structure. There is a lack of recognition of who can structure social relations and who is structured by them. Arguably, few people are in a position to ‘possess’ themselves (Skeggs, 2004). Individuals are embedded in society, they are not autonomous, and their identities reflect these structures. The concept of bounded agency (Evans, 2002; 2007) offered an explanation for the way the participants’ choices were shaped by barriers and the contexts in which they found themselves.

The participants were not only bounded by the resources they had available to them, as highlighted in previous studies (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Brannen and Nilsen, 2005), but also by discourses. Ideas around youth, adulthood, unemployment and individualisation shaped the narratives they were able to create. The agency of the young people and their ability to create their own identities were bounded by socially and politically created discourses about what being NEET and unemployed means. They struggled to create alternative discourses about their lives and experiences. This research therefore highlights that narratives are socially and culturally located. However responsible an individual is for making sense of their experience, they still rely on common cultural forms; the discourses used to maintain self-identity are bound by cultural situatedness (Adams, 2003).
Relational aspects of identity construction, including the idea of being constructed by others and the role of friends and family in decision making, were also important. Family and friends were sources of support for the young people in this study, but also sources of constraint and conflict. The reflexive project of the self should therefore not be viewed as something which is achieved individually, it is developed relationally with others (Mason, 2004). It is important to acknowledge both the personal and social dimensions of identity. Agency does not equate with individualism.

This research therefore acknowledges the usefulness of the concept of the reflexive self in understanding how young people can feel in control of their lives and how they navigate their choices. There was evidence of participants trying to create coherent and socially acceptable narratives. However, it demonstrates how critiques of the ideas of Giddens also apply. Mason’s (2004) work on the ‘relational self’ and Adams’ (2003) ideas about reflexivity as a culturally embedded concept help to understand the ways in which the young people in this study were constructing their self-identities. The participants created their future identities around traditional notions of adulthood, and while they highlighted individual aspirations, many constructed a future which took into account important people in their lives. Their choices were influenced by others and bounded by cultural and structural factors. This reflexive identity work therefore took on different forms depending on the resources and discourses which the young people had available to them.

The barriers the participants faced in achieving their aspirations highlight the need to look beyond individual deficiencies to acknowledge the wider issues which impact upon their ability to participate in education, employment or training. Focusing on individual deficiencies, including demands for young people to take control of their lives, limits the impact of policy and initiatives aimed at NEET young people, ignoring the wider structural issues and discourses which shape their experiences. Short courses and programmes aimed at NEET young people do little to deal with the structural issues they are facing, instead focusing on developing them as individuals. Within policy there is a need to take into account the bounded nature of agency, understanding the resources available to young
people. Individualised behaviours, achievements and failures should be understood from a structural perspective.

A focus on 'employability' and the importance attached to qualifications of 'Level 2 and above' has led to a process of churn among young people between education and employment, and at times between different training providers. The quality of training courses and their ability to deliver meaningful progression for young people is not questioned. This research highlights the importance of the centre the participants were attending, and the tutors within it, in supporting the young people and shaping their choices. The options being presented to young people need to be taken into account as these can shape their ideas about what they are able to do. Careers advice and guidance; coordinated services; diverse, quality courses; and individualised support are all needed to help young people. However, labour market intervention is also necessary. The ability of programmes to deliver employment, rather than employability, is constrained by the scarcity of work, competitive labour markets and broader social inequalities (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b).
Appendices


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<th>NEET Quarterly LFS series</th>
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Source: Labour Force Survey

Q1 relates to the months January-March, Q2 April-June, Q3 July-September and Q4 October-November

The Labour Force Survey has not been reweighted to reflect the Census 2011 population.
Hi All,

One of our colleagues at Leicester University is undertaking a detailed study into the identities of young people, how they perceive themselves and the effects of being classified as NEET. The University have one PHD student who is able to spend some time with young people in [the city], Bethany Suttill. Bethany is proposing to work with around 15 young people for one day a week as a volunteer to get to know the group before she delivers three sessions herself later in the year. Bethany has a broad and varied experience of working with young people and challenging learners so would prove a great asset to any organisation able to offer her a group to work with for around 6 months.

Should any of you be in a position to work alongside of this project could you please contact Bethany via email for an informal discussion?

BS110@le.ac.uk

Regards

[Name of contact]
A3: Examples of student work

[Image of a hand with notes and diagrams]

[Image of a page with text]

Rekap on Self Awareness: Session 1

1. What is Self Awareness?
   Being aware of how you feel and how you could affect others

2. What are the consequences of a lack of Self Awareness?
   - Insecurity
   - Hurting others
   - Making everyone around you

3. What are the benefits of having a healthy Self Awareness?
   One benefit of having a healthy self awareness is knowing your strengths and weaknesses

4. What are words you use to sum up yourself?
   - Creative
   - Reliable
   - Organised

5. How could self awareness help you when considering your future?
   Educational or Vocational options?
   - It will give you more confidence and will give you more pros options.
   - Also knowing your strengths and weaknesses will help you succeed in future jobs and problems.
Self Awareness: A PSD Lesson

Write as many words as you can. How would you describe yourself? What makes you you?

thought
conditioning
awareness
impact
spirituality
open-minded
non-judgmental
equality
sensitive

Choose 3 people - write down honest first impressions - justify.

How do you think other people see you? Brainstorm your answers in the face.

Self-confident
cool
unique
different
random

Does it matter the way people see us?

In my opinion, it does matter because some people see us as random. Others see us as unique.
The Year 2014

As the blank canvas of a new year stands before you, what do you want to mark the year with? What are some of your goals for 2014?

Please write them below.

1) Get on a apprenticeship in Catering
   Support: mentors / connections

2) Get a new computer!
   Support: Mum/dad

3) Finish this course.
   Support: Myself

4) Learn new ice cream recipes.
   Support: Myself

5) Support:

6) Support:

What are your barriers to achieve your Aspirations?

Qualifications

Money problems

Being reliant on people

Self-confidence

Lack of scared

Anxiety plus depression

Still live with parents
A4: Field diary sample

15 January 2014

My first day at the centre. As an introduction one of the tutors highlighted where each of the students sat and defined them by their groups/social networks. The four tables were described as quiet and need help, quiet and smart, loud and smart, loud and aggressive. 15 students were in attendance; 8 female and 7 male.

Students had a session on employability in the morning. They were given tasks on teamwork. First they had to work together to make shapes in a game of musical statues. They then had to plan and build a tower out of spaghetti and marshmallows and had to document the 'roles' they played in their groups. The group who built the tallest tower received a prize.

In the first week the students completed exercises on the self including hand prints with personality traits listed alongside and cardboard cut outs of people with their aspirations and goals written on them. This was conducted as part of their personal development sessions.

Within the lesson students were asked to fill out a form so that the staff at the centre could collect some information about them. They had to document their previous school, when they finished school, whether they had any alcohol/drug problems, whether they have ever been in trouble with the police, were they excluded etc... When filling out this form one of the students joked that "I only have a drink problem at weekends".

Started getting to know the students who talk openly about drink and drugs. (15) told me a story about her weekend "I threw up for 4 hours straight" (from drinking too much). A discussion about rude terms on urban dictionary also highlighted that she took weed; "like when your weed supplier texts you and you have to look up what they are saying on urban dictionary". Other students also admitted this; "I only had two spliffs this morning". (6) has a 14 month old daughter. There are two couples within the group with these relationships causing tensions. Some of this group was already established in the centre as they took part in a course there in October 2013. Students show an interest in films, music, football and video games. (10) had stayed up until 5am playing his PS3.

In the afternoon session the students did English (speaking and listening), focusing on research methods and debates. Students were encouraged to debate a number of issues and generally had strong opinions. When discussing immigration and 'Britishness' the students looked at identity issues in relation to Britishness. Some students were not sure whether they would define themselves as 'British', others highlighted their ancestry to show they came from other countries. Students had to work in groups to research for their debates on the following topics; Superman is better than Batman, Harry Potter is better than Lord of the Rings. They did not appreciate being moved out of their friendship groups. One student described how they were sat in groups where they finally felt 'comfortable' and did not want to be moved.

Students showed strong opinions on benefits which generally seemed quite negative despite large numbers of them being on benefits or having parents on benefits. One of the students mentioned the TV programme 'Benefits Street'.

The students at the centre are 16-24. They are working towards level 2 qualifications in media, English, Maths and ICT. While on the course they do one week of work
experience which they have to arrange themselves. The teachers said that they have three students who struggle to read and write.
A5: Interview questions

Memories and experiences of education

- Experiences of education
  - When did you leave school?
  - What did you think of school?
  - What were you like at school?
  - What qualifications do you have?

What did you do after school?
  - Have you done any other training courses? If so what?

- Experiences of employment
  - Have you been in employment? (job role, how long, what was it like)
  - What work experience do you have?

- Experiences of unemployment
  - How long have you been unemployed?
  - Why do you think that you are unemployed?
  - How does it make you feel?
  - Are you on benefits? (family, friends) What do you think of people on benefits?
  - When people ask you what you do, what do you say? (describe yourself)
  - How did you spend your time when you were unemployed?

What were you doing before joining this course?
  - How did you hear about the course? Why did you join?
  - What do you think of the course? (experiences, what have you learnt?)
  - Do you think you have changed during your time here? If so how?

Networks

- Who has helped you? Where do you go for support?
- What do you do outside of college?

Future plans

- What are you going to do once you have finished the course?
- What are your plans for the future?
- Do you think you will stay in the city?
A6: Participant worksheet tasks

Images the young people were given. From top left (Vanco, 2011; Clark, 2009; Wilson, 2011; Gunnell, 2011); from bottom left (Public Sector Executive, 2012; BBC News, 2010a; BBC News, 2010b) [Images removed due to copyright]

**Lower ability students**
Task 1
Pick one image
   a) What is the image of? (Think about the people, who they are, what they are wearing, where they are)
   b) Imagine you are there. What is happening? What can you see/smell/hear?

Task 2
Think about what a newspaper article about your experiences of unemployment would contain.
   a) Write 10-15 lines about your experience of unemployment (How long have you been unemployed? How does it make you feel?)
   b) Try to add a headline to your work

**Higher ability students**
Task 1
What are the images of? (Think about the people, the setting, are there any themes/similarities?)
Pick one image. Imagine you are there and write a short story about what is happening (What can you see/smell/hear?)

Task 2
Think about what a newspaper article about your experiences of unemployment would contain.
   a) Write 25-30 lines about your experience of unemployment (How long have you been unemployed? How does it make you feel?)
   b) Structure your work like an article. Include:
      a. A headline
      b. An image
The dark side of unemployment.

This is my experiences of unemployment and how it made me feel.

I’ll have a hanging inside my room, each my head hurt. I open my eyes and see my little sister getting ready for school, great it was still before it. Then I’d say to her “dearly why are you making so much noise its too early, shut up!” I wasn’t normally like the rest that I thought that’s the point of getting up if there’s no reason too. I’d dress myself up out of bed and go to the bathroom, turn on the hot water and wash my face, then ill play in the play in the bathroom and leave the hot water tap on and go down stairs. My mom would say “Laura why are you always” I have job Centre today. I applied for 12 jobs and still as reply I’m stuck in the cycle of you need experience to get a job but you need a job to get experience.

After I left a bath and got dressed I left my house for the first time down the street. Want it all. Three buses to go to the Job Centre. I had to walk 30 minutes walk to the Job Centre where it was well, my breathe and get told in the weather on the due to its down and wait for my service could I even see the dignified in less than 15% only, I went two job it in destroyed and I felt so embarrassed and out in the sitting area, I would get a job doing something but sometimes the feeling of depression is in my self. I feel like I’m resting from the people who go out and they add work for this money. I don’t know if we are going to look down at me and I’m how she feels I feel like that about myself too. I go home and just keep totally unnerved begging for all them to turn just once you.

[Images removed due to copyright]
Information Sheet

"What does it mean to be NEET? Identities of young people who are not in education, employment or training"

Beth Suttill, School of Management, University of Leicester, Email: bs110@le.ac.uk

I am doing research on NEET young people in [city] and would like to invite you to take part. You do not have to decide today whether or not you will participate in the research and can take time to think about it. This sheet will give you information about the project. If you have any questions you may ask them now or later (my email address is provided).

What am I looking at?

There are currently 1.09 million people aged 16-24 in the UK who are classed as NEET. This includes a wide range of young people in a wide range of situations. I want to find out what being NEET means to you and how it impacts upon how you see yourself and your future.

Why are you being asked to take part?

You are being asked to take part in this study as your experiences of being NEET can help to create a better understanding of this group of young people and the support that they need.

What will you have to do?

You will be asked to participate in activities where you attempt to explore your current and future identities in a number of ways through mind maps, collages, life history maps and photographs. I will also be looking at some of the work you create in your sessions at [name of organisation]. You will then be asked to explain what you have created in an individual discussion with me which will be audio recorded with your permission. You do not have to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable with.

How long will it take?

I will be attending the centre on a weekly basis for around four months so that we can get to know each other. The activities will take place during your sessions at the centre and we can discuss individually how you would like to do the discussions, which will last around 20 minutes.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and it is your choice whether you choose to participate or not (and which parts you choose to participate in). You are able to withdraw from the project at any time. The information I collect from this research project will be used in my PhD thesis and shared through conferences and publications so that you are
able to have your voices heard by a wider audience. The data will be securely stored and your contributions will not be attributed to you by name. The information you provide will remain confidential unless I feel that you are putting yourselves or others in danger.

**Please circle your answers**

1. I have read and understood the information sheet and have had the opportunity to ask any questions.  
   Yes / No

2. I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.  
   Yes / No

3. I agree to take part in the study.  
   Yes / No

4. I am happy for my work to be used for this study.  
   Yes / No

5. I agree to take part in a short discussion/interview.  
   Yes / No

Name of Participant

Signature Date

Name of Researcher

Signature Date
A9: Ethics approval

To: BETHANY SUTTILL

Subject: Ethical Application Ref: bs110-afc1

(Please quote this ref on all correspondence)


School of Management

Project Title: What does it mean to be NEET? Identities of young people not in education, employment or training [Name of City].

Thank you for submitting your application which has been considered.

This study has been given ethical approval, subject to any conditions quoted in the attached notes.

Any significant departure from the programme of research as outlined in the application for research ethics approval (such as changes in methodological approach, large delays in commencement of research, additional forms of data collection or major expansions in sample size) must be reported to your Departmental Research Ethics Officer.

Approval is given on the understanding that the University Research Ethics Code of Practice and other research ethics guidelines and protocols will be complied with

- [http://www2.le.ac.uk/institution/committees/research-ethics/code-of-practice](http://www2.le.ac.uk/institution/committees/research-ethics/code-of-practice)
- [http://www.le.ac.uk/safety/](http://www.le.ac.uk/safety/)

The following is a record of correspondence notes from your application bs110-afc1. Please ensure that any proviso notes have been adhered to:

Jul 31 2013 11:28PM The research involves qualitative research with participants under the age of 18, and therefore will require a review from the full Research Ethics Committee. In my view the applicant has given a detailed justification for the proposed research, has demonstrated an awareness of the ethical issues involved in the research, and has undertaken reasonable steps to manage this risk.
Aug 12 2013 12:09PM    ETHICS COMMITTEE REVIEW<br>Comments from reviewer 1<br>- Reviewer 1 requested further information about the sorts of questions that will be asked during the interview: "as the researcher states that "the study [will] involve discussion of sensitive topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use)". It is still not clear to me what she is going to ask as 'investigating identity' is quite vague as a description of the research purpose."<br>- "Also, some additional info on the type of topics that will be addressed in the interview could be added in the informed consent form for the participant to be fully aware of what the discussion will be about."<br>- Comment from reviewer 2<br>- "I do think the informed consent sheet needs some attention. The section at the bottom of page one "The information I collect from this research project will be kept private. Nothing you tell me will be shared and nothing will be attributed to you by name." could be interpreted as nothing I say will be used in the research which presumably isn't true? I think it needs to be clearer on how the data will be used in the final thesis."<br>- Comments from Reviewer 3<br>- I agree that it would be useful to have a bit more information about the sorts of questions the applicant is planning to ask and how these might raise sensitive issues.<br>- I agree with the points regarding the wording of the consent sheet made by reviewer 1 and 2.<br>- "In difficult situations I will assess what mode of action will be in the best interests of the young person as protecting them is paramount. This may mean that it could be necessary to report certain sorts of information to official bodies although this would break the confidentiality of the participant." - can the applicant explain how they would proceed if this were to happen - will the applicant discuss any difficult situations with her supervisor before disclosing information to others, for instance?<br>- The application needs to explain how the interviews will be recorded and how the data will be stored in order to ensure confidentiality of participants.<br>Comments from Reviewer 4<br>The title of the proposed research intends to examine the experiences of group of young people where the population criteria are defined by their employment and education status, and specifically that they are not in employment or education. But then the brief and scope of the research expands out to potentially take in gathering information about young people's health, welfare, sexual activity, criminality and other sensitive subjects. The researcher needs to demonstrate that they have sufficient competence to manage these interviews, and some formal expert training in research methods on these groups and topics is necessary.<br>- How, for example, will the researcher deal with a situation where a respondent reveals details of criminal behaviour? What will the researcher do if a participant asks for help, advice or assistance? How will the researcher deal with parents, guardians etc. if they find out that someone for whom they have legal responsibility is taking part in the research and they object to this participation? Is the researcher sufficiently experienced to give advice and guidance to young people who may have mental health problems/issues? In order to deal with these potential areas of research ethics risk the researcher needs to clearly clarify the boundaries of their proposed interactions with the students (ie explain the sorts of questions they will be asking) and the strategy for dealing with potentially difficult situations (such as encouraging the young people to seek advice from the appropriate person/ agencies).<br>This is potentially very important research, but it does require specialist research expertise and/or a much more tightly defined set of boundaries for the research questions.<br><br>--- END OF NOTES ---
A10: Data analysis themes

Students

Experience of education (training), employment and unemployment

Experience of Education

- Schooling
  - Negative experience
  - Disrupted
  - Year/age they finished school
- College
  - Experience of
  - Negative experiences
- Qualifications
- Other providers
  - Organisations attended
  - Positive experiences
  - Negative experiences

Experience of Work

- Job Roles
  - Voluntary work
- Negative work experiences
  - Insecure/low paid
- Finding work
  - Where to look for a job/get support
  - Job interviews
  - Unsuccessful/loss of hope
  - Wanting to work
  - Positives of having a job
  - Reluctance/undecided
  - Conflicted

Experience of Unemployment

- Length of unemployment
- Engagement with agencies
  - Job Centre
  - Sanctions
- Negative consequences of being unemployed
  - Lack of routine/boredom
  - Lack of motivation/loss of confidence
  - Lack of money/independence
  - Being labelled/judged
- Barriers to education, training or employment (see also medical/psychological)
• Money
• Family/childcare/home life
• Qualifications/knowledge/skills
• Age
• Work experience
• Confidence/motivation
• Disability/personal health
• Not enough jobs
• Positives/Looking on the bright side

Self-portrayal

Portrayal of their lives
• Trouble/Crime
• The past
  • Progress
  • Trauma
  • Trouble

Self-Awareness

• Understandings of
• Consequences of lack of
• Benefits of having
• Impact on future aspirations

Attributes/Qualities (how they describe themselves)

Labels
• Medical/psychological
  • Mental health/Depression/Anxiety/Self harm
  • Illness
  • Epilepsy
  • Learning Difficulties/Disabilities/Speech impediments
• Nationality/ethnicity
• Religion
• Sexuality
• Youth

Body Image
• Issues
• Social Media
• Dress
• Tattoos and piercings

Confidence
• Lack of
  o Self-conscious
  o Difficult/annoying
  o Different/Misunderstood
• Opinionated

How they think they are viewed
• How it differs from their view of themselves
• Importance of the opinions of others
• Impact of 'positive' views

Interests
• Sex, alcohol and drugs
• Games
• Music
• TV/films
• Sport
• Dealing with stress

Networks

Living arrangements
• Hostels/Homelessness
• Own home
• With family
• Local area
  o Impact of mix of cultures

Family
• Children/pregnancy
• Relationship with parents/carers
  o Positive/Spend Time Together
  o Sources of support (inc. wider family)
  o Problems/conflict
  o Being monitored/held back/lack of support
• Fostered/adopted
• Siblings
  o Arguments/Do not get along
• Loss (in the family)
• Pets
• Relationships
  o Positive
  o Problems/conflict/distraction
  o Attitudes towards
• Friendships
  o Support
  o Arguments

Communities they are part of (see also local area)

• Music
• Social networks
• Characteristics

Future Selves

Aspirations

• Education
  o College
  o University
  o Other providers
  o Get qualifications
• Work
  o Apprenticeships
  o Volunteering
  o Dream jobs
  o Stable/decent job
  o Prepare for work
• To help people
• Home
  o Buy a house
• Family
  o Marriage/relationship
  o Children
• Money
• Stability/happiness
• Hobbies/Activities
  o Driving/cars
  o Music/art/literature
  o Travelling
• Not 'living a life on benefits'
• Short term goals for 2014
  o Support needed

The Centre

Attitudes to Learning/Education

• Disinterested
• There to learn
• Lacking confidence (subject specific)
• Learning as a struggle
• Positive

Lessons
• Functional skills
• Media
• Personal social development
• Employability
  o Work experience placement
  o Final week visitors
• Mentors

Impact of being at the centre
• Sense of self
• Safe place
• Making progress/building confidence

Views of 'others'

At the centre
• Students
  o Comparison
    ▪ Treated differently?
    ▪ Cannot be bothered
    ▪ Age
  o Friendships/relationships
    ▪ First impressions (characteristics)
    ▪ Support
    ▪ Distraction
    ▪ Conflicts/break ups
    ▪ Intimidating
• Staff
  o Not 'teachers'
  o Sources of support
  o Feeling 'misunderstood'/conflict

People on 'benefits'
• Family members on 'benefits'

Unemployed young people

Friends (outside the centre)

Other groups
• Immigrants
• Gypsies

Tutors and staff

Networks and Recruitment

Views of the students

• Attributes
• Development/progression
• 'Youths'
• Unemployed/disadvantaged

Problems

• Support
  o Emotional/pastoral
  o Money
• Academic ability
• Unprepared for work
  o Job snobbery
• Behaviour
  o 'Messing around'
  o Criminal behaviour
  o Apathy/disengaged
  o Attendance

Views of other staff

Views of schools

Views of people 'on benefits
## A11: Example of coding process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experiences of Unemployment</strong></td>
<td>(3) Before I came on this course I was in unemployment.</td>
<td>(25) My experience is I had no job.</td>
<td>(26) In most cases it's unavoidable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5) I have never been in work, however I have been</td>
<td>(7) I have been unemployed for a long time. I have</td>
<td>(27) Hard to cope with for some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>looking and applying for over 2 years now, I have</td>
<td>tried looking for jobs and have had many interviews</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>looked so many different places, so many</td>
<td>but have been unsuccessful a lot of times there is</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>different types of jobs. None of the job managers</td>
<td>not enough availability of jobs because quite a lot</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>got back to me.</td>
<td>of people try applying for the one job.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length of unemployment</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(13) I have been unemployed for the past 4 years, with my last</td>
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<td></td>
<td>job being a paper round for the local</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>job being a paper round for the local</td>
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<td></td>
<td>co-operative.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Engagement with Agencies</strong></td>
<td>(12) was transferred by Connexions</td>
<td>Some of the issues of not being in work were</td>
<td></td>
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<td>30</td>
<td></td>
<td>having 'no life' and losing faith in the system.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(7) I have had some help from school and connections but so far</td>
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<td></td>
<td>all I have been able to do it college courses.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Job Centre</strong></td>
<td>During the break (3) discussed benefits with (15) and (7);</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>(3) &quot;Do you go to sign on?&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(15) &quot;Yes&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>(3) &quot;My time has changed. I have to go at nine in the morning&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;Do you sign on?&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(7) &quot;No&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>She (15) also still has to go for meetings at In Training. She</td>
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<td></td>
<td>has been told by the Job Centre to stop her current course and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>do one in business admin. She has already told them that she</td>
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<td></td>
<td>does not want to do that.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>While we were working together she told me that she has to sign</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>on every Monday at 9.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Enterprise Partnership (2015) *ESF funded activity to support individuals who are NEET in [city] and [county] area*. [City]: European Social Fund.


Rae, G. (2013) 'Tough on people in poverty: new report shows public's hardening attitudes to welfare', *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*, 14 May, Available at:


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Walther, A. (2009) "It was not my choice, you know?" Young people’s subjective views and decision-making processes in biographical transitions' in I. Schoon and R.K. Silberson (eds.) Transitions from school to work: globalisation, individualisation, and patterns of diversity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 121-144.


