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“With the Pandemic Everything Changes!”: Examining Welfare Reform and Conditionality *Prior to* and *During* the COVID-19 Pandemic Amongst NEET Experienced Young People

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to critically explore pre-existing and continuing welfare conditionality of NEET (not in education, employment, or training) experienced young people in the UK. The article traces the policy history of NEET over the last 25 years, to demonstrate the enduring nature of benefit sanctioning that NEET experienced young people have faced throughout a decade of austerity, Brexit, and now the COVID-19 pandemic. The article engages with key narratives from 43 interviews of NEET experienced young people and youth work professionals, undertaken prior and during the pandemic. Overall, the article argues that government actors and policy makers alike have not gone far enough to support NEET experienced young people. The article found that more structural and institutional levels of support from central government are needed to meaningfully engage NEET experienced young people in their education, employment, and training trajectories throughout periods of crisis.

Keywords NEET · COVID-19 · Youth · Welfare · Education · Employment

Introduction

The issue of being NEET has remained a significant policy concern for over 25 years in the UK and across the Global North and South. Across the UK, the numbers of young people who occupy positions outside of education, employment, and training has remained in a state of flux, which has peaked during localised and

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international events, such as the Global financial crash of 2007–2008, the austerity policies of 2010–2012, Brexit, and now the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic (Wrigley 2022). In England and Wales, this has occurred in the backdrop of losses to statutory careers guidance, youth services, and the introduction of policies based on heightened conditionality, including the Welfare Reform Act (2012) (cf. Holmes et al. 2021; Huegler and Kersh 2021; McPherson 2021).

It is important to acknowledge that alongside these policy developments, there are several underlying risk factors that are associated with NEET (Lőrinc et al. 2019). In the literature, there is a plethora of complex and dynamic risk factors, such as Free School Meal Status (FSM), Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND), possession of an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP), and a lack of basic attainment at Level 2 by aged 16 (i.e., 5 GCSEs grade 4–9 or A*–C) including English and Maths (known as ‘Attainment 8’) (Mirza-Davies 2014). Outside of these formal policy-related concerns, the everyday risk factors include fixed term or permanent exclusion from school, economic status, neighbourhood, early parenthood, mental health histories, and family breakdown (Maguire 2021). These risk factors have “the capability to increase the understanding of various vulnerabilities of young people by placing particular groups such as the low educated, early school dropouts, young mothers, or people with disabilities at the centre of policy debates” (Mascherini 2019:510).

Despite recurrent periods of political and social crisis, NEET policy thinking has continued to be “a contentious issue for policy makers, youth services, academia and government alike” (Wrigley 2019). Considering recent developments regarding COVID-19, little is still known about the everyday experiences of young people who are NEET during this event. More so, there is a dearth of evidence considering how such rapid policy transformations have impacted on NEET experienced young people and their wider support networks, *prior to* and *during* the pandemic. Much of the existing research, instead, focuses separately on the individual experiences of NEET experienced young people, without an in-depth examination of their wider support networks and the stigmatising effects of recent policy-related environments and infrastructure (Guerra et al. 2022).

To understand these issues—firstly, this article critically engages with the concept of ‘NEET’ and welfare reform policy transformations that has accompanied it. The article then critically assesses the impact of recent events regarding COVID-19 to understand the intersecting crisis of youth unemployment and education that has disproportionately impacted on NEET experienced young people. Thirdly, the article engages with the research methods that were adopted to understand conditionality and sanctioning for NEET young people prior and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fourthly, the article discusses the findings and analysis, which discuss pre-existing sanctioning and welfare conditionality prior to the pandemic, alongside the changes to education, employment, and training provision for NEET experienced young people during the outbreak of COVID-19 and first national lockdown. Finally, the article outlines a concluding discussion of NEET experienced young people’s experiences during the pandemic and the rapidly evolving policy environment associated with welfare reform and conditionality in relation to the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

Understanding 'NEET': Key Discourses of Education, Employment, Training and Welfare Reform

'NEET' as a policy discourse has been officially used in UK education and youth unemployment policy to understand the numbers of young people outside of education, training, or the labour market for over 25 years. The NEET population is aggregated by age (16–24 years old), gender, and geographical location (Simmons et al. 2014). According to the official definition in England and Wales, offered by Gov.UK (2019: Online), a young person is considered 'NEET' if all the following criteria applies:

- They are **not** enrolled on a full-time education course and are still attending or waiting for term to start or restart
- They are **not** doing an apprenticeship
- They are **not** on a government-supported employment or training programme
- They are **not** working or studying towards a qualification
- They have **not** had job-related training or education in the last four weeks

Office for National Statistics (ONS) data shows that at the end of 2021 689,000 UK young people between the ages of 18 and 24 years old were recorded as not in education, employment, or training (NEET). When compared to the same data from the previous quarter, the NEET rate had increased by 70,000 (Watson 2021). From this data, 368,000 men aged 16–24 defined as NEET in comparison to 322,000 of women. From an international perspective, 'NEET' has been applied to capture differing modes of participation and non-participation in education, employment, and training. The age boundaries differ for those who count as NEET, as across EU member states there is consensus on counting those up to aged 34 years old who are outside of education or unemployed (Mascherini 2019).

It is important to note that NEET policy thinking remains controversial in its application. For instance, Anoop Nayak (2015) points out that NEET policy focuses on the so-called deficits of young people and has attracted critique from wider commentators. Indeed, there has been a suggestion that 'NEET' is a 'net widening' approach which promotes risk management and neoliberal agendas, within the very systems and structures that are designed to support young people (Owens and de St Croix 2020). This has also triggered controversies regarding the potential for pre-emptive criminalisation of young people who have experienced being 'NEET' (Day 2022).

Over the last two and a half decades, there has been significant increase in attention by policy makers about young people who occupy this category, as "the growth of the NEET group is an even greater problem for society than overall unemployment, as it creates the risk of a lost generation" (Bruno et al. 2014: 594). Tyler (2013:161) points out that NEET policy developments focused on the "double axis of inclusion/ exclusion and work/ worklessness". For Tyler (2013) policies (including NEET) bolstered attention back onto to young people through

a plethora of negative media outputs, the creation of punitive Anti-Social Behaviour laws, Dispersal orders, and Parental orders that had the legislative potential to criminalise young people for trivial or previously non-criminalised behaviours (Day 2022). Moreover, employment or education programmes became a ‘bolt-on’ to promote further welfare conditionality and punitive sanctioning of young unemployed people (Tyler 2013). Certainly, this has attracted criticism for problematising young people’s lives and attempting to control the behaviour of young people living in economically marginalised localities and fuelling media myths and public anxieties of so-called workless communities (Jensen and Tyler 2015).

In England and Wales, the introduction of the Welfare Reform Act (2012) produced a series of sweeping and systematic changes to the benefit system for young people under the age of 25, which enhanced the conditionality and eligibility of in-work and out-work benefit entitlements (Crisp and Powell 2017; Holmes et al. 2021). It has been well documented where NEET experienced young people have felt the sharp end of such policy reform, as several structural factors have influenced education and employment outcomes over the last decade, such as the reduction in youth support services, family support, and wider labour market precarity (Cook et al. 2022; Holliman et al. 2023; Szpakowicz 2023). More so, these structural influences have been compounded by a series of events inter alia the Global Financial Crash of 2007/8, centralised austerity measures to public services and subsequent policy reforms.

The piloting of Universal Credit in January 2013 merged Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), housing benefits, and income support into one conditional single payment. Universal Credit (UC) is a set of conditional benefit payments offered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to those unemployed aged 18–65, who are deemed fit to work (Evans 2022). Claimants had to evidence up to 35 hours of job seeking activities per week to meet the conditions of the claim. Claimants had to engage in compulsory meetings at a DWP Jobcentre, monitored by a ‘Work Coach’. If the claimant failed to meet such conditions, they were ‘sanctioned’. Sanctions operated on DWP discretion and a formal ‘three strikes’ approach, which can include a formal warning, deduction of financial remittances, or termination of claim. Evidence from Holmes et al. (2021) demonstrates how the sanctioning regime serves to push conditionality onto NEET experienced young people through ‘threatening’ to lose benefit entitlements.

The introduction of these policy initiatives has been critiqued for the emphasis on conditionality and enforcing sanctioning regimes upon already socially and economically marginalised young people, including those who are NEET experienced (McPherson 2021; Roberts 2022). Moreover, critics of Universal Credit have argued “the intensity of conditionality has also increased for young people through the additional mandatory conditions imposed under UC [and] the enhanced sanctions regime” (Crisp and Powell 2017:1795). A plethora of research from the United Kingdom has found that Universal Credit claimants who are specifically NEET face a variety of structural and interpersonal barriers towards participation including: family breakdown (Maguire 2021), heightened welfare conditionality and sanctioning (Tyler 2020), inconsistency in welfare payment schedule (Russell 2016), domestic insecurity and homelessness (Scullion et al. 2022), digital exclusion (Szpakowicz

2023), and social isolation and loneliness (Wigfield et al. 2022). Despite these issues and concerns, the utilisation of Universal Credit as a flagship welfare package for NEET young people remains in operation (as of 2023), which was introduced under the Conservative government's Welfare Reform Act (2012).

COVID-19 and NEET Experienced Young People: Welfare Reform and Reconfiguration

The COVID-19 global pandemic has caused significant disruption to all aspects of everyday life, political systems, work, education, global democracy, and international relations (Reay 2020). Arguably, this crisis has overshadowed concerns relating to NEET policy and the lives of young people who have experienced being NEET. The changes in policy, however, have impacted upon these young people *inter alia* their education trajectories, future job seeking opportunities, and welfare entitlement (Wiggan and Grover 2022). As of late 2021, the pandemic resulted in 5.4 million deaths worldwide, with over 146,000 deaths occurring in the UK, which has the highest mortality rate within European countries (Our World in Data 2021). In March 2020, the UK entered the first period of national lockdown, which was contextualised by the health and social care sector reaching crisis point, compulsory education migrated online (with GCSE and A-Level examinations cancelled), the service sector having paused, and gig-economy work halted, consequently “bringing in its wake rising unemployment, poverty and possibly economic recession, which will, in turn, intensify the already existing pressures on the educational system” (Reay 2020:319). The reverberations of the first national lockdown and subsequent lockdowns are still being felt in terms of economic uncertainty in the UK and the Global North, with the youth unemployment rate having increased during July–September 2020 to 14.8 per cent compared to 11.7 per cent in the period prior to the pandemic lockdown (Powell et al. 2021).

Indeed, Roberts (2022) acknowledges that as unemployment rose during 2020 for 16–24 years-olds, although NEET experienced young people in England and Wales have experienced forms of heightened and enhanced levels of precarity, due to service sector jobs, education funding opportunities, welfare support, and employability schemes being effectively shelved (albeit temporarily). By October 2021, pandemic-related Universal Credit uplifts of £20 were removed, leaving NEET experienced young people facing a cost-of-living crises and the additional social insecurities posed by the pandemic. This decision has not been without controversy, having attracted local, national, and international condemnation from bodies such as the UN and Amnesty International (Paliament.UK 2021). Others have also acknowledged that a wider range of young people outside of the NEET category have attempted to access support from overstretched welfare support services and occupied insecure labour market positions at a greater level since the COVID-19-related lockdowns (see Holliman et al. 2023; Scullion et al. 2022). Consequently, NEET experienced young people were, again, eclipsed by emergency social welfare and COVID-19-related labour market activation measures intended for those who were more likely to be able to re-engage in education, employment, or training

destinations post-pandemic than their NEET counterparts (see also McPherson 2021; Szpakowicz 2023).

The following section of the article discusses the methods for this research, followed by a comparative analysis prior to and during the COVID-19. As such, the article poses to understand how NEET young people were affected by the unfolding challenges of the COVID-19-related lockdowns and the synergies and parallels in-between such experiences beyond their education, employment, and training trajectories. In doing so, my argument emphasises the lack of safeguards for NEET experienced young people during the pandemic and the dangers of universal policy initiatives becoming a ‘bolt-on’ to a group that have been repeatedly denied dignity and tailored support.

Method

This section outlines the methods undertaken for the study which was carried out in the North of England between September 2019 and September 2020. The study adopted narrative interview methods with young people to elicit their understandings of how dominant societal structures and institutions (i.e., education, employment) shaped the young people’s everyday experiences (Heath et al. 2009). Narrative interviews were able to assist the young people in narrativizing their experiences of the past, present, and future (Plummer 1995). The interviews were designed utilising a topic guide, which offered a certain degree of flexibility and opportunity for the participants to decide on the flow of the interview.

In total, the sample consisted of 16 NEET experienced young people aged 18–25 years old—seven male and nine female. Eleven of the participants were of White British heritage, with five (1 male, 4 female) participants from ethnically minoritized backgrounds, including one young female of British Bengali heritage, one female of mixed Black British heritage, one female and male who had recently migrated to the UK and were Pakistani nationals, and, finally, a female from a Black British Caribbean background. Throughout September 2019–September 2020, 43 in-depth interviews were conducted—33 interviews with young people and 10 with key professionals. Follow-up interviews were undertaken in three waves; wave one consisted of 16 initial interviews. In wave two, ten young people continued to be re-interviewed and in the final wave (three) seven young people participated. Seven youth professionals participated in an initial interview, with three youth professionals taking part in a final follow-up interview. As can be seen from the ‘[Research Findings](#)’, gender and race/ethnicity had a significant effect on the young people’s lives, with several female participants managing complex health and childcare-related issues, which in part impacted on their welfare entitlement. More so, two participants from South Asian backgrounds (1 Pakistani national female and 1 Bengali British female) had significant intergenerational care responsibilities to siblings and extended family members.

NEET experienced participants were selected utilising the assistance of two gatekeeping organisations from youth, community, and careers advice services in the North of England. Both organisations provided support for young

people outside of education, employment, and training. One organisation offered a 13-week support programme that was specifically aimed at supporting NEET experienced young people (aged 16–25) back into education or the labour market. The second organisation provided careers advice, personal support, and fortnightly drop-in services for care leavers and NEET experienced young people. Snowball sampling from the organisations supported the recruitment of further young people and professionals of interest to this study (King and Horrocks 2010). Informed consent was obtained by all participants prior to research engagements. Anonymity was using pseudonyms, aliases were attached to organisations, and anonymisation of place and location names was utilised. The research was reviewed and reviewed in line with the University of Sheffield’s Research Ethics Committee (UREC). An additional lay review person nominated by the University of Sheffield was appointed to ensure procedural transparency, in line with institutional ethical protocols and to satisfy Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) ethical guidelines.

The initial guiding research question asked, “*What are the barriers and opportunities for NEET young people, in relation to Employment and Education/Training?*” and explored the social connections and networks that may avail such opportunities (such as family, friends, youth professionals, and educators). The study utilises narrative interviews and narrative analysis to recognise and make sense of the multi-faceted barriers and opportunities faced by young people and supplementing or counter narratives from youth professionals (Elliott 2005). These interviews explored their professional expertise, social support offered, and professional concerns. The youth professionals also contextualised the operational issues across the organisation and wider youth support sector. The youth professional’s expertise ranged from qualified youth workers, careers advisors, operational managers, and programme leaders on informal education programmes. Expertise ranged from 10 to 25 years of supporting young people in their respective youth support settings.

Given the unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and the first national lockdown (March–July 2020), the research methods were adapted to facilitate online and telephone interviews with participants. The research questions remained the same; however, the study began to ask additional questions, such as “*What are the barriers and opportunities for NEET young people, in relation to Employment and Education/Training (during the COVID-19 related lockdown)?*”. In-depth interviews were continued via an online browser-based programme (Blackboard Collaborate). For those without internet access, the telephone interviews functioned as a tool to capture their narratives without the need for complex technical and potentially time-consuming interventions. This way, all participants had the ability to continue their involvement in the research and contribute their experiences of being NEET experienced throughout the COVID-19-related restrictions. Due to local lockdown restrictions and new research protocols introduced by the University of Sheffield during the outbreak of COVID-19, research continued either online or via telephone. The fieldwork ended in September 2020, prior to the UK entering a second period of national lockdown.

Research Findings

This part of the paper now explores the findings alongside a discussion of the in-depth interviews with NEET experienced young people and key professionals from the youth support sector. The data explores issues surrounding pre-existing welfare conditionality and sanctioning regimes by central government that have affected NEET experienced young people in this research. It is important to understand that interviews undertaken in the first set of research findings were undertaken in the several weeks leading up to the UK's entry into the first national lockdown on 23 March 2020. The second set of findings relate to the changes in welfare regimes, conditionality, and sanctioning whilst COVID-19 restrictions were temporarily lifted in quarter three of 2020. The data demonstrates a comparison regarding welfare conditionality for NEET experienced young people *prior to* and *during* the COVID-19 pandemic utilising the narratives of several different young people and key professional participants.

Pre-existing Conditionality and Sanctioning Leading up to the COVID-19 Lockdowns

The challenges of NEET experienced young people managing Universal Credit and legacy benefits, in a period of heightened welfare conditionality, are nothing new (see also: Tyler 2013; Whelan 2021). Yet, both key professionals from youth organisations and NEET experienced young people discussed in detail the ongoing issues of pre-existing Universal Credit sanctioning regimes as being inappropriate and unfit for purpose. It has been well documented, elsewhere, the complex, intersecting, and dynamic risk factors affecting NEET experienced young people, such as family breakdown, care-leaver status, lack of formal educational attainment, and socio-spatial marginalisation (Russell 2016). NEET experienced young people echoed the concerns from key professionals. Several young people had claimed state benefits once they had reached 18 years old and experienced benefit sanctioning. This was due to administration errors by the Department for Work and Pensions, discrepancies in their Universal Credit claim, or failure to comply with Jobcentre Plus processes and procedures. One key professional, a careers advisor with 25 years' experience, reflected on the interpersonal and structural risk factors facing NEET experienced young people:

If you've got someone that's living a chaotic life, that's got problems with housing, family, maybe alcohol, drug-related activities, they're not going to be ready to settle down and engage in education and then that's a knock on effect [...] it costs more money in the long term if [we] don't invest at the early stages, you'll get more people drawing the DWP benefits when they hit eighteen (Jenny, Careers Advisor, January 2020).

Due to changes introduced under the Welfare Reform Act (2012), NEET experienced benefit claimants were not entitled to full payments that could appropriately cover rent payments and the cost of living (Shildrick 2018). As a result, NEET experienced participants frequently felt unable to manage their finances and would have to ‘trade off’ between which shopping, or utility bills could be repaid each month prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. One young person (Jake, aged 19) recalled experiences of being a care leaver and living in a single occupancy residency, where he did not have adequate sustenance. He noted that his ‘out of work’ Universal Credit payments would be inconsistent each month and would have large financial gaps in upholding his cost of living. This meant he was unable to buy necessities such as food and toiletries. Jake explained that this occurred because of sanctioning due to missing Jobcentre appointments with a Work Coach. Jake cited his relationship with the Jobcentre as ‘crap’, due to the discrepancies in his payments and the high staff turnover of staff at the Jobcentre. At the time of interview, Jake discussed how his Universal Credit payment schedule had been frozen by the Jobcentre due to a change in his personal circumstances and gaining paid employment. Importantly, Jake noted that he had a poor relationship with family members, particularly with his mother as he subsequently entered a Local Authority care home at 15 years old. Therefore, he did not have many family members or friends who he could contact for emotional and financial support. Jake also noted frequent gaps in aftercare because of leaving local authority care post-16 years old. He discussed being left without access to finances for nearly four months in his independent living facility:

When you get a job, it affects UC [Universal Credit] because they can't pay you the same payment. I used to get £251, I went onto my statement, and I got zero pounds. I was like, "Wait a minute, why do I have zero pound?" I went four months with no money. I would have starved for months and probably would have been dead by now (Jake, February 2020).

A common theme from the data demonstrates that NEET experienced Universal Credit claimants had recurrent cycles of precarious and low paid across several sectors—most commonly care work, retail, and agency-based factory work. Certainly, this confirms similar findings from other pathbreaking scholarship, such as Shildrick et al. (2012) who postulate that young people living in economically disadvantaged towns and cities across the North East of England experienced recurrent shifts between low paid employment, unemployment, and underemployment. This type of work, which culminated from the legacies of de-industrialisation in the 1980s and the growth of unstable employment in such localities, ascribes to what Shildrick et al. (2012:18) coined as the ‘low pay, no pay’ cycle. In their words: “it refers to a longitudinal pattern of employment instability and movement between low-paid jobs and unemployment, usually accompanied by claiming of welfare benefits”.

Safaa (aged 21) had recently migrated to the UK from Pakistan. She had undertaken factory work with an employment agency on the suggestion of her Work Coach at the local Jobcentre. Her narrative highlights another dimension of the ‘low pay, no pay’ cycle and gained precarious work on the directive of the Department for Work and Pensions (see also Shildrick 2018; Shildrick et al.

2012). Safaa recalls how she had worked over the seasonal holidays of Christmas and New Year 2019-2020, which was supplemented by in-work Universal Credit payments. She details the exploitative workplace practices:

I think, like by 5 o'clock if there wasn't much work to do, everybody knew that, you just grab a brush, grab like a broom and stuff, and just start sweeping the floors and stuff like that. I worked there like with Christmas and Boxing Day, [...] [by 3rd Jan] I had a text from the agency that I was working for "thank you for your service, but you don't have to come in tomorrow" So, it was basically like a huge crowd of all these people sacked (Safaa, February 2020).

In addition to working in precarious circumstances, Safaa notes how she was expected to care for her sibling who was diagnosed with a learning disability and experiencing several developmental, psychological, and physical barriers in attempting to access appropriate support services. She had to manage the structural processes and procedures of the Jobcentre, along with her family's income and respective Universal Credit claims (see also McPherson 2021; Scullion et al. 2022). Safaa had the additional responsibility of managing the complexities of the welfare system in England and Wales for several close family members. Importantly, Safaa also spoke of a gendered and cultural dimension of her experiences managing Universal Credit, whereby she had to cope with feelings of judgment of what relatives from her middle-class surroundings in Pakistan would think about her working in a factory or being in receipt of social welfare (cf. Cook 2018; Shain 2021). She notes "[In Pakistan] – it's like a term where you call them 'la hasil' [Urdu – pointless / having no practical use/ no valuable purpose] and that's basically like – it's not like an insult, but it's not like the best thing for them". Here Safaa touches upon the intersectional nature of welfare related stigma and shame which transcends cultural/familial social ties (see also Tyler 2020).

Allied to the themes raised by Safaa and Jake, Ayla (aged 20) who had been a Universal Credit claimant for several months, artfully summarises the issue with precarious and under employment faced by NEET experienced young people. At the time of interview, she had finished working for an employment agency in the local textile factory owned by a high street retailer, which was one of very few employment options presented to her by the Jobcentre. Comparable to Jake, Ayla had also managed growing-up within the care system and supporting her mother who had long-term experiences of ill-health. Despite this, Ayla had managed precarious and short-term agency work in a similar way to Safaa. Ayla points out that:

They're all agency [...] They'll hire you from a certain point, like now there's nothing –till about Feb/ March time... 'til whenever the peak period hits, then once that's over then they just lay you off. [...] the companies that are employing you because they know that you're agency, they treat you like shit basically. (Ayla, January 2020).

NEET experienced young people noted how they had experienced recurrent shifts in under-paid and precarious employment. The accounts presented in this

section have dismissed understandings of NEET young people that focuses on individual moral and individual deficits, which have been historically proliferated by successive government actors, policy makers, and media narratives (Shildrick 2018; Tyler 2020). This article has so far demonstrated how pre-existing and new forms of welfare conditionality have intensified in the backdrop of successive cuts to state benefits and services designed to support NEET experienced young people in managing adverse social conditions. More so, the barriers and opportunities faced by NEET experienced young people prior to the pandemic demonstrate that a plethora of familial remittances, cultural norms/expectations, and gender-based caring responsibilities also show a complex intersection with the precarities and discontinuities of welfare support in England and Wales and ‘low play/no pay’ cycles (cf. Scullion et al. 2022; Shildrick 2018).

“With the Pandemic Everything Changes!”: Experiences of Welfare and Benefit Conditionality During the Initial COVID-19 Lockdown

The arrival of COVID-19 and subsequent public health measures and periods of lockdown had a significant impact on public and statutory services, alongside recurrent economic, social, and political crisis since the pandemic outbreak. For a period (30 March–July 2020), NEET experienced participants were not required to engage with Jobcentre appoints and formal work searching was suspended (Wrigley 2022). During this time, Universal Credit payments were temporarily uplifted by an additional £20 per week in England and Wales, to support with heightened costs of living during the COVID-19 initial lockdown (Wiggan and Grover 2022). Intervention programmes and careers support advice were put on hold during lockdown. In its place came a series of lockdown engagement activities, such as CV building, online taster courses with local educational providers to occupy the young people’s time (fieldnote June 2020). Key professionals noted how there had been a relaxing of hard ‘outcome’ cultures that previously engulfed professional youth work practice and organisations working with NEET experienced young people (Howard 2022). One intervention programme manager noted how the pandemic inadvertently led to heightened engagement by some service users, but was reflexive of the rapidly changing support structures in their locality, stating:

With the pandemic everything changes! and you don’t know how people are going to respond to it. There were young people that responded really well to it and did accept offers of support. That was ranging from things like just updating their CVs, applications for college or applications for jobs or other training programmes (Jacqui, Intervention programme manager, June 2020).

Despite this apparent engagement, young people were reflexive of the difficult realities of claiming Universal Credit during lockdown. It has been noted previously how sanctioning regimes were relaxed during the initial COVID-19 period of lockdown. However, some NEET experienced young people still experienced great difficulty in balancing the growing cost of living in addition to the added threat of illness and the breakdown of wider support services, institutions

and structures. As Hall (2021:2) reminds us: “public services were hanging by a thread, institutions heavily neoliberalised, people and groups increasingly marginalised, and social inequalities widening”. Caitlyn (aged 25) who was a long-term legacy benefit claimant and NEET experienced recalls the difficulties in managing a long-term health condition that had left her unable to work:

I had an abscess and obviously I would have preferred to actually go back in see the surgeon but when obviously all this kicked off [COVID-19], they cancelled all the clinics, they were only speaking to people over the phone, so I don't yet know whether my surgery has worked [...] We're four months down now, so yeah, I feel better than I did, but my mental health hasn't been great (Caitlyn, July 2020).

For the young people able to work during the pandemic, they were acutely aware of real potential for their Universal Credit and legacy benefits to be cut, despite the relaxing of sanctioning regimes during the first national lockdown and fractional lift in conditional payments. Caitlyn cited her family members as unhelpful in navigating welfare support and experiences of ill-health during the pandemic. Akin to Safaa and Ayla's narrative in the previous section, Caitlyn had long-term care responsibilities to her partner and various family members, which intensified the precarity and seeking of welfare assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic (cf. Holliman et al. 2023; Scullion et al. 2022). Jessie (aged 20), however, exemplifies an intensification of the ‘low pay, no pay’ cycle during the pandemic and the disposability of her labour as a young and precariously employed supermarket worker. She points out during an online interview:

I got the job at Tesco at the end of March. I've only recently finished at Tesco early June.... It to an end because the contracts ended, and they couldn't really extend it anymore. So hopefully like I can find something else again (Jessie, July 2020).

Jessie recalled how her extended family networks, such as her father's best friend and boyfriend's grandmother, provided additional advice and job seeking support, including searching for local vacancies, reading CVs/applications, and reassuring Jessie of the difficulties in trying to gain stable employment during times of global uncertainty. As MacDonald et al. (2023) reflects from their study of economically marginalised young people experiencing lockdown, the COVID-19 pandemic embolised the already pre-existing inequalities within the labour market and education. For many, however, the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns heightened anxieties and worries about finding work and elevated some concerns about financial security because of the continuously changing and conditional welfare reforms in England and Wales (cf. MacDonald et al. 2023; Shildrick 2018). Throughout the interview process, Jessie expressed her underlying anxieties about how finding work would alter her claim for Universal Credit. Jessie remained alarmed about financial discrepancies or capped/sanctioned payments, as the Department for Work and Pensions services were not easily accessible due to the lack of face-to-face consultations during this period.

From an interview undertaken in the same timeframe, Leeroy (aged 19) reflects somewhat positively on claiming Universal Credit during the first national lockdown. He recalls how his payments increased slightly during lockdown. However, this was nothing to be celebrated as Leeroy posits how the payments were not enough to maintain his living standards. The narrative below points out how Leeroy did not think his Universal Credit claim stretched far enough during lockdown:

INTERVIEWER: *“Can you tell me more about your Universal Credit claim during lockdown?”*

LEEROY: *“At first they was still doing the standard amount that I would get through Universal Credit but they increased it by I think about six, seven pounds or something like that, to help us through, but obviously it just feels like the normal pay, to be honest, ’cos it’s not that sort of significant increase, really, so it’s probably a couple of quid.”*

Leeroy explained how, like several young people, he had struggled to maintain his Universal Credit claim during the pandemic to support his living costs and the ‘misrepresentation’ of welfare claimants during the pandemic. He also discussed how family members would frequently ‘blame’ him for issues within the household, as Leeroy was the only member of his household who was not in employment or education during the first national lockdown. He states: *“There was a lot of arguments. There was always things that happened in my household that affected me because they was aimed at me, because which happened over the lockdown that I was blamed for, that I didn’t do”*. Evans (2022:693), drawing on the work of Tyler, points towards the stigmatising effect and divisive logic around benefits, which unveils a system where “claimants are pitted against the ‘hardworking’ majority”. Indeed, Leeroy perceives that he was on the receiving end of blame and stigma from family members due to him being out of work, whilst other family members were providing essential work during the pandemic.

Leeroy also echoes this divisive logic when probed about common representations of young people who are in receipt of benefits:

INTERVIEWER: *“Do you feel like there is a misrepresentation or misunderstanding?”*

LEEROY: *“In a sense of miscommunication between obviously parts of media and people and the public because I’ve seen posts on it on Facebook, a lot of people are saying how do people get this how come they’re on x amount of Universal Credit, and it’s just like, easy! [...] It’s like we don’t get that much! It’s not that much that we actually get from Universal Credit.*

I only get £161 every two weeks [...]. So, obviously, most of my money goes there and I’ve got my food shop to do. I’ve got other shops to do [...] it’s all gone, there’s people who don’t understand... maybe speak to people who are on Universal Credit and getting a better understanding of Universal Credit than just looking at how much to get?”.

Although uplifts in benefit payments have been welcomed, it is clear to see they did not go far enough to support NEET experienced young people during the pandemic. This is evident through the participants not being able to sustain stable employment or engage with educational trajectories throughout the pandemic-related crisis and beyond. Given the recent direction of welfare policy in England and Wales, it remains doubtful if any further unprecedented additional structural or economic redistribution will be given to NEET experienced (Guerra et al. 2022). Especially those who are in receipt of conditional and means tested benefits throughout the ongoing cost-of-living crisis of 2022–2023. The narratives of NEET experienced young people during the COVID-19 lockdowns have signified a wider societal deficit in providing appropriate structural support, engagement, and understanding. This is despite such young people providing forms of essential work that presented real health and well-being risks and detriments during the pandemic.

Concluding Discussion

Through critically exploring the narratives of NEET experienced young people and key support professionals, this paper has allowed us to understand how welfare conditionality and sanctioning has continued to be utilised inauspiciously against NEET young people during recurrent political and social crisis. The empirical research which informed this paper has revealed how key professionals, such as youth work and educational professionals, are acutely aware of the ongoing challenges faced by NEET experienced young people and had to adapt to the changing policy and work environment, during periods of rapid structural, institutional, and economic challenge. Many of these challenges have been underpinned by changes to state benefits under the auspices of the Welfare Reform Act (2012) and the introduction of Universal Credit in 2013. Despite such reforms taking place over a decade ago, my argument has demonstrated the continuity of pervasive policy reforms that deny NEET experienced young people dignity and care from a variety of sources (including government, family, friends, and wider support networks) when experiencing the unprecedented nature of a global pandemic. By providing a snapshot of NEET experienced young people's lives prior to and during the pandemic, I have demonstrated a continuation and intensity of the barriers experienced by this demographic in England and Wales (see also Cook et al. 2022; McPherson 2021). It is also important to note that, NEET experienced young people have remained critical and conscious of the insecure social structures and precarities of education, employment, and training prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The paper has also shown how NEET experienced young people have had the tenacity to challenge the inequalities associated with benefit sanctioning, recurrent periods of insecure work, and social abjection of this demographic. The paper has pointed towards the need for greater structural and fiscal reinvestment in NEET policy thinking that combat the 'low pay, no pay' status quo for NEET experienced young people (Shildrick et al. 2012). The COVID pandemic has exposed the insecurity of institutions and structures such as education and health care, alongside the potential for further austerity measures associated with the cost-of-living crisis.

Fractional uplifts in state benefits during the initial COVID-19 pandemic have not gone far enough for claimants under the age of 25. The paper has suggested the need for bolstered support structures and meaningful financial remittances to manage the ongoing precarities and shortfalls in educational support and employment during times of national crisis, such as what has been demonstrated throughout the pandemic.

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Declarations

Ethical Statement The project was approved by the University of Sheffield University Research Ethics Committee (UREC), Reference Number 028138. The project was additionally reviewed by a lay member of UREC, in accordance with funding requirements from the Economic Social Research Council (ESRC). All data was anonymised, and full informed consent was gained from all human participants.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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