

What price the Covid Generation?

Martin Allen argues that, losing out most from the financial crash of 2008 and being referred to as a 'Lost Generation', today's youth, whether they are students or looking for employment, will constitute a 'Covid Generation'.

In recent years, young people have found it increasingly difficult to secure employment that will provide them with proper pay and security. Changes to the economy have meant they no longer make the relatively smooth transitions from school to work that were a feature of the post-war years. Facing a precarious future, the vast majority have chosen to stay in full-time education for much longer.

Yet rather than leading to the highly skilled, secure 'career' jobs once promised, young people are on average now four times as likely to be unemployed. If they are in work, then many will be 'overqualified and underemployed' - thus degrees may be required to get the jobs they currently do, but the increased levels of education are not required to perform them.

It is estimated that one third of university leavers do not get graduate-level jobs. Having to take lower paid work means pushing less qualified youth further down the labour queue. This downwards social mobility can be contrasted with the post-war expansion of 'middle' white collar jobs (now in reverse) that enabled significant numbers of working-class youth to be upwardly mobile.

Employment problems have been intensified by economic downturns - young people were hit most by the 2008 financial crash, taking several years to recover lost earnings. Their relative position compared to other groups has continued to decline - by 2020, unemployment for 18-24s not in full-time education was still over 10 per cent, with 1 in 12

classified NEET. Once referred to as a *Lost Generation*, a new *Covid Generation* will emerge from the current crisis and the deeper recession which follows.

Covid has also created an educational crisis. Thousands of A-level students, though benefitting from a summer without exam stress, have been stuck at home worried about how their grades will be awarded, missing out on end-of-year social events, and not able to leave 'properly'. It is predicted that between 15 and 25 per cent of school and college leavers will have considered university 'deferral'. Deferral may seem a sensible individual decision, but it will cause further chaos for universities already faced with the extensive loss of tuition fees from overseas students, and is likely to result in overloaded admissions next year.

There are also reports of cash-strapped universities refusing to allow current students to take time out from their studies. Meanwhile, it is estimated that over 30 per cent of those 'graduating in their garden' this year have had employment and internship offers withdrawn or frozen, with NUS reporting 80 per cent of final year students worried about employment prospects. Some might consider enrolling for Masters courses, hoping to improve their labour market chances next year.

Of course, not all young people are full-time students. The latest ONS figures are not able to show the full effect of the crisis on youth employment, but a Resolution Foundation survey

published in mid-May confirmed worries about young workers' vulnerability, finding that a third of 18-25-year olds had either lost jobs or been furloughed, disproportionately much higher than other age groups. It predicted youth unemployment rising by 600,000. Meanwhile, a Cambridge study at the end of March reported 69 per cent of younger employees already working fewer hours than the previous week.

According to Institute of Fiscal Studies research, 30 per cent of the workforce in those parts of the economy most hit by the Covid crisis are under 25, with the hospitality sector, employing the largest proportion of under 25s and also providing part-time work for thousands of students, predicted to lose 2 million jobs. In total, at least a million young workers have been furloughed. Many of these will eventually lose their jobs when financial support runs out.

Apprenticeships (mistakenly promoted as 'alternatives' to higher education) are likely to be hit further. The Sutton Trust reported that just 39 per cent were continuing as normal, with 36 per cent of apprentices furloughed, 8 per cent made redundant, and 17 per cent having off-the-job learning suspended. Concerned more about their existing workforce rather than training new ones, around a third of employers reported that they were likely to hire fewer apprentices over the coming year, or none at all.

How should campaigners and reformers respond?

It goes without saying that we should insist that reopened schools, colleges and universities are safe places for young people to complete their courses, but also try to promote positive alternatives for online and off-site learning if they are not. HE students, not taught since March, should be refunded fees and rents, or allowed to repeat the year free of charge. But with students having missed so much classroom time, next year's examinations can never return to 'normal'. As support for change grows, we have space to promote new types of learning and assessment.

Campaigners must continue promoting and developing an alternative pedagogy and campaigning for a better curriculum offer. If we are to continue with a separate vocational provision (recent Labour Party manifestos backed the 'pathways' approach and by implication the new T-levels), then this must be accompanied by assurances that it will lead to employment.

German vocational education and training remains distinct from academic study - taking place in separate schools - but has been relatively successful because it is linked to labour market demand and coordinated by employers, trade unions and local state agencies. There is nothing like this in the UK's unregulated qualifications system. As a result, where employers do need to recruit for intermediate level positions, excess graduates can be recruited.

German apprenticeships in particular have continued to perform a major role in the transition to adulthood, effectively serving as a 'licence to practice' in many occupations. In comparison, UK apprenticeships are an abject failure. Under a third of starts are by young people under 19, while almost 40 per cent are at GCSE level - a standard most young people have reached. Like David Cameron before him, Boris Johnson's commitment to provide all young people with apprenticeships is not based on any real understanding of the issues.

In view of changes to the occupational structure and the disappearance of many of the middle and technical level jobs that vocational learning and apprenticeships have been associated with - a development which the Covid crisis will intensify - it is questionable if we need vocational qualifications at all. Instead the emphasis should be on a good general education for everybody which includes practical and work-related education but also the reform of 'academic' learning and how it is assessed. All students could then be awarded a General Diploma, recognised by employers and universities.

However, the current crisis is primarily a jobs crisis. The collapse of employment opportunities means that reforming both post-16 provision and university education (in addition to abolishing tuition fees and restoring maintenance grants) will have to be combined with much broader policies. In addition to job guarantees and other employment protection measures, I would argue that some form of 'youth income' should be considered. The position of young people cannot be significantly improved without changes to the labour market and the economy that drives it. The Covid crisis provides real opportunities for challenging both of these.

