

'Look mum, I just want to be a model'

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Teenagers today, say grumpy old men sitting in the corner of pubs, all want to be models, actors or footballers. However, carefully gathered statistics in Britain suggest that, for once, the grumps may have a point. Almost 12,000 teenagers in Britain, aged 13-16, were offered a choice of 69 possible future careers: the single most popular one among 13-14 year olds is acting, with a life in sports, or in military uniform also featuring highly. Over time, however, childhood dreams recede a little. By 17, acting has dropped out of the top 10, but nearly 20 per cent of teenagers continued to express a preference for a job in culture, media or sports. Such ambition is laudable, of course, but even the most optimistic predictions estimate that little more than 2 per cent of the jobs that will be available in Britain from 2020 will be in the sector. Such a conflict between dreams and reality could be easily dismissed, since few teenagers ever looked up at the stars imagining life as a welder or a locksmith – and, according to the research, not many in this survey do, no matter how vital, useful, or fulfilling such jobs can be.

Ambitions

However, research that began 40 years ago illustrates the serious point that lies behind this: 16-year-olds who hold ambitions that require significantly higher qualifications than they are likely to get are three times more likely to spend time unemployed.

Even though a quarter of all jobs will be in distribution, hotels or restaurants, only one in 40 teenagers has ambitions in such directions, while, perhaps surprisingly, fewer than one in 30 is considering jobs in banking or finance.

MPs recently warned that career guidance in schools is deteriorating worryingly. Students are getting information from the National Careers Service's website, or by phone from its staff, but no longer with face-to-face classroom briefings. Time spent with career guidance teachers, or employers, are of "the greatest value" to schoolchildren, since the advice they get from parents and friends is reliable but narrow in scope, while that coming from the media and online is unreliable, if broad. The preferences of younger teenagers are more critical in Britain than in Ireland because of the way in which the school curriculum narrows earlier for students: choices made early, if made badly, can hurt for a lifetime. The danger, warns the Nothing in Common report from the education and employers taskforce, is that too many young people will produce a mix of qualifications and experience unwanted by employers later on. In turn, this would later lead to a damaging period of "churn" . . . "as they adjust and seek new qualifications, training and experience relevant to other parts of the labour market", it added.

Official figures highlight the problems. Between November 2012 and January this year, 993,000 people aged 16-24 were unemployed, up 48,000 on the previous quarter but down 45,000 on the previous year – one in five of the total.

The British figures, of course, need to be read carefully as they include those in full-time education; if such students are excluded then the number falls to 672,000 – up 46,000 compared with the previous quarter but down 55,000 compared with the same period in 2011.

Some 250,000 people have been unemployed for over a year – the highest since 1994: "The impacts of this may be felt for decades," warns the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion. So-called Neets (those not in education, employment or training) will cost the UK £28 billion in welfare costs or lost opportunity on top of the perhaps incalculable human and social costs found on thousands of estates daily. Two years ago, University of Glasgow researchers probed students and parents in London, Nottingham and Glasgow, but found little linkage between their aspirations, and expectations, and the jobs most likely to be open to them.

Expectations

Parents' expectations were so unspecific as to be little more than useless. In many cases they were unable to offer advice or contacts that could ease the path of their progeny into the world of work. The cost of the lack of knowledge about the realities of work has been measured by the Journal of Education and Work, which found that people in contact with four employers or more while at school earn 18 per cent more than those who are not. In the poorest districts, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has contradicted the opinion of political conservatives that the poor do not aspire to a better life; instead, it highlighted their inability to turn their dreams into a reality.

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