**Further Education Provision for 16-18 Year Old NEET Young People: Policies and practices within the Coalition Government’s education reforms**

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**Abstract**

The annual rate for 16-18 year olds categorised as not in education, employment or training (NEET) in England fluctuated at 7-10% annually from 2000-2014 (DfE, 2017). Whilst Governments have maintained policy commitments to implementing NEET reduction strategies, in practice, there has been slow progress in reducing this rate. Further Education (FE) colleges are the major providers of NEET provision in England, but future viability of this provision is uncertain, given the increased marketisation and education for the economy agenda of recent governments, in particular, the Coalition Government. There is a dearth of research about the effectiveness of a series of Coalition Government NEET initiatives. This study, therefore, makes an original contribution to knowledge by investigating the Coalition’s policy reforms, and their impact and legacy for the FE sector. It examines the implications of these for various groups of stakeholders: FE providers, learners, organisations such as FE colleges and wider policy initiatives. The research provides crucial perspectives to address gaps in knowledge at the cutting edge of policy change.

This study, based on mixed-method research, involved interviews to gain insights from FE managers and policymakers, and focus group discussions with FE learners. The research makes an original contribution to knowledge through its findings which reveal tensions concerning the targeting of Government resources for NEET provision and the challenges many new initiatives present. Disconnection was evident in the emergence of an ‘industry’ of changing NEET initiatives based more on ideological preferences or Government assumptions than evidence-based policy. The rationale for policymaking was not always clear and local infrastructure change, combined with resources diverted to the private and third sector, questioned the viability of the FE provision. A key recommendation of the study is to extend the involvement of providers and learners in NEET policy development through shared knowledge. The findings of the study have significance for improvements to FE practice and policy, which may lead to reductions in the 16-18 NEET rate in England.

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**Glossary of Terms**  **x**

AABs Aspirations, attainment and behaviours

AADs Attitudes, abilities and dispositions

ASCL Association of School and College Leaders

AoC Association of Colleges

BIS Department of Business Innovation and Skills

CEC Careers Enterprise Company

CCIS Client Caseload Information System (used by local authorities)

CIPD Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

DWP Department for Work and Pensions

EBac English Baccalaureate

EET Education, employment or training

EFA English Funding Agency

EMA Education Maintenance Allowance

EOS Employer Ownership of Skills pilot

E2E Entry-to-Employment programme

EtF Education and Training Foundation

EU European Commission

EUROSTAT European Communities Statistical Office

EYE Engaging Youth Enquiry (part of the Nuffield Foundation Review 2008)

FE Further Education

FEFC Further Education Funding Council

IAG Information, advice and guidance

IES Institute of Employment Studies

IMD Index of Multiple Deprivation

ITB Industrial Training Board

LA Local Authority

L-CF Life Chances Fund

LEA Local Education Authority

LEPs Local Enterprise Partnerships

LFS Labour Force Survey

LSC Learning and Skills Council

LSIS Learning Skills Improvement Service

LYSPE & YCS Longitudinal Study of Young People in England and Youth Cohort Study

MSC Manpower Services Commission

NEET Not in Education, Employment or Training

NEP National Employment Panel

NfER National Foundation for Education Research

NDPD Non Departmental Public Body

PAs Personal Advisors (Connexions Service)

PSA Public Service Agreement

OECD Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development

ONS Office for National Statistics

RPA Raising the participation age policy

SEN Special Educational Needs

SEU Social Exclusion Unit

SES Social Economic Status

SIB Social Investment Bonds

SfA Skills Funding Agency

SFR Statistical First Release, (DfE’s measure of participation, age 16-18 England)

SSC Sector Skills Council

SSDA Sector Skills Development Agency

TEC Training and Enterprise Council

TES Times Educational Supplement

UTC University Technical Colleges

YCS Youth Contract Scheme

YEF Youth Engagement Fund

YIF Youth Investment Fund

YPLA Young Peoples Learning Agency

YOP Youth Opportunities Programme

YTS Youth Training Scheme

UNICEF United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

UKCES United Kingdom Commission for Employment Skills

**Chapter One: Introduction**

**1.1 *Genesis and parameters of the research***

This chapter defines the parameters for this research project and considers how the interest in this subject started. It presents the vision for this research and its location within broader work in the field which concerns the life chances for those 16-18 year olds categorised as not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET).[[1]](#footnote-1) Interest in this subject stemmed from my experience of the 16-18 NEET interface as an FE practitioner and national lead for qualification development. The initial research proposal began with questions about why the annual 16-18 NEET rate in England has fluctuated at 7-10% between 2000 and 2014 (DfE, 2014a). Coles (2014) estimates that this rate could account for more than 250,000 16-18 year olds each year. From July to November 2017, the estimated rate is 6.2% (DfE, 2018a). Whilst successive governments maintain a policy commitment to reducing the 16-18 NEET rate, progress has been slow on achieving it. The continuing loss of life chances for generations of 16-18 NEET in England is, therefore, a compelling choice of topic area for this research project.

The overarching purpose of this study is to examine the 2010-2015 Coalition Government’s approach to provision for NEET young people and to investigate the impact of its education reforms and initiatives on opportunities for 16-18 NEET to engage in Further Education (FE), the largest NEET sector provider (DfE, 2017b). It will consider processes of continuity in policy and change, over time. This chapter explores the dynamic of the research process and its main features. It presents the research context, theoretical concepts, and analytic frameworks used to refine the research aim, objectives and questions; and provides an overview of the research rationale and framework.

* + 1. ***Positionality and reflexivity***

The research project complements my prior work experience and professional practice. I have over 25 years of experience as a senior manager in educational contexts concerning widening participation. This includes being a Head of Department for Health, Social Care and Teacher Education in the FE sector. I worked for the Birmingham Learning and Skills Council (LSC) with responsibility for planning and funding of 16-18 and 19+ education and training. As Senior Strategic Manager for the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA), I had an instrumental role in national education consultations, policy formulation and qualification development for 16-18-year-olds. This involved partnership working with the DfE, BIS, LSIS, Ofqual, Ofsted and other stakeholders (schools, colleges, voluntary/private providers, awarding bodies). I commissioned educational research projects, and pilot improvement activities for widening participation; and have considerable experience in project evaluation. My experience, knowledge and acquired skills are thus highly appropriate to conduct research on this topic.

Cohen et al. (2011) maintain that the values and beliefs we hold affect a researcher’s stance or ‘positionality’. This may lead a researcher to make specific decisions within the research context. A researcher’s stance can be influenced by many experiences which affect their views about the social world and the nature of knowledge. Popper (1980) argues that no research can be totally value-free because researchers have subjective value systems and it is the researcher who interprets the data from the research. This reinforces the ethical responsibilities of a researcher towards their own biases. Hopkins (2008:70) maintains that “it is important that researchers exercise reflexivity and critical self-examination and seek to ensure their research is carried out in an ethical manner.” Reflexive accounts are used to acknowledge that education research cannot be value-free. A researcher’s background, beliefs or cultural understanding may influence decisions about research. My identity would include: an educated female of mixed heritage; and my perspectives are shaped by many influences such as teaching, social work and other work experiences. I lean towardsfeminism and socialism. This identifies subjectivities and shows my ‘positionality’. It informs me and allows others to recognise this reality and the potential for bias in the research process.

Richards (2015) emphasises the paramount importance of reflexivity and for the researcher to be aware of the way in which selectivity, perception, and inductive processes shape their research. I have sought to continually reflect and question the taken-for-granted knowledge that I will take into the study and the ways this influences my own role and decisions made. This research project deploys an Interpretivist Paradigm which is justified in the Research Methodology (3.2.3, 3.5.1.3). Reflexivity has particular relevance to the qualitative methodology used in this study, given that, “qualitative data are not collected but made collaboratively between the researcher and the researched” (Richards, 2015:51). Reflexivity has been integral to the research process from its start to its conclusion. I have strived to carefully and continually monitor my own research reactions, roles and biases that might affect this research. Positionality has been used as a tool to enhance the integrity of this study and improve the research process, and the analysis and interpretation of the data. Awareness of my own positionality encourages my continued reflection and actions to mitigate bias or undue influence in the research context.

* 1. ***The research journey***

This section examines how the critique of the literature (Chapter Two) frames the context for the research. It brings into focus theoretical positions which contribute to the development of appropriate arguments and intellectual themes developed in the different chapters of this thesis. This ensures that this research is well-founded and addresses salient research questions.

**1.2.1 *Policy context - NEET status***

In the UK, there has been an increasing emphasis on public policy interventions concerned with education for young people and their transition from education to work (Yates and Payne, 2006; Finlay et al., 2010). This can be traced back to the introduction of compulsory schooling by the Forster Act 1870, to the lengthening of the minimum school leaving age (to 15 in 1947 and 16 in 1972) and through to the creation of the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) in 1978, and the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) in 1983 (Finn, 1987). The literature reveals that there are continuities with the policy approach of the Coalition Government and the New Labour Government, in that from 2015, all young people are required to participate in education and training until the end of their 18th birthday (2.6.2.3).[[2]](#footnote-2) Raising the Participation Age policy (RPA), initially, a New Labour policy introduced in the Education and Skills Act (DCSF, 2008a) was reaffirmed by the Coalition Government in 2013. Continuity is evident with the Coalition Government’s introduction of the Youth Contract Scheme (YCS) in 2012 and Traineeships in 2013 and previous government training schemes.

Finn (1987:1) suggests that “major reforms have often been (altruistically) presented by governments as meeting the needs of the young people affected but the motives of policy-makers have never been that straight forward.” Raising the School Leaving Age (RSLA) and YTS are justified by claims that in producing a more effective and efficient workforce education reforms will resolve political and economic problems created by changes in the labour market (Ainley and Allen, 2010). The contradictions of reform policy evident in the literature can be seen to stem from the ideological underpinnings of particular governments (Chapter Two).[[3]](#footnote-3) RSLA, RPA and government training schemes have been criticised for ‘masking’ youth unemployment figures, and for ‘holding’ or ‘warehousing’ young people in types of provision which is often of little value for their transition to employment and/or training (Finn, 1987; Maguire, 2013a).

From 1945 to 1978, much of the literature views public policy as reflecting a social democratic consensus which sought to extend the benefits of education to all young people as a public good (Clift and Tomlinson, 2002; Biesta and Lawy, 2006)*.*[[4]](#footnote-4)Jessop (2013) suggests that education policy became increasingly directed by neoliberalism inherent in the Conservative Thatcher and Major Governments from 1979-1997. Social and economic concerns about young people becoming productive adult members of society heightened the focus of these two governments on youth social exclusion. Yates and Payne (2006) argue that failure to make a successful transition to employment was seen as one of the key risks of social exclusion for school-leavers. These issues formed primary components of subsequent governments’ policy approaches to young people (Finlay et al., 2010).

Since 1983, benefit sanctions were applied to 16-17 year olds who refused to take up a place on YTS (Finn, 1987). The introduction of a two-year YTS by the Conservative Thatcher Government in 1986 established full-time education or a place on a training scheme as the standard progression route for the majority of school-leavers. In 1988 16-17 year olds were excluded from entitlement to unemployment benefit, and the Social Security Act 1988 largely removed their entitlement to means-tested benefits.[[5]](#footnote-5) This made YTS compulsory for those who were unemployed, and Simmons and Thompson (2011:6) suggest that “the unemployed young person ceased to exist, and was replaced with a recalcitrant youth that was outside education and employment.” Youth unemployment, a precisely defined category for estimating the prevalence of labour market vulnerability among young people, was replaced by researchers and the government with Status Zero and then by a NEET category (Furlong, 2006).[[6]](#footnote-6)

**1.2.2 *NEET category***

The literature shows that the term NEET has some overlap with terms previously used to refer to young people who are not covered by any of the main categories of labour market status of employment, education, or training (EET). Williamson (2010) maintains that the term Status A (later changed to Status Zero) was first coined in 1993 for a study conducted in South Glamorgan by Rees et al. (1996). The term was used to refer to a group of young people, who on leaving school, fail to enter a training programme or employment. Rees et al. (1996:223) state that: “We have designated this status of being out of EET as Status O (Zero) as it seems to provide an extremely graphic metaphor for the dismal experience of marginality which besets many of the young people in this situation.”

Williamson (2010) further suggests that the acronym NEET was proposed in March 1996 by a senior Home Office civil servant in response to resistance on the part of policymakers to working with the earlier phrase, Status Zero. The term NEET was adopted under the Conservative Government of John Major in 1996 as a technical classification, and researchers also adopted the term in place of Status Zero, to avoid the negative connotations of ‘lack of status’ (Furlong, 2006; Simmons and Thompson, 2011). The term NEET was utilised by the New Labour Government in 1997 to describe growing numbers of young people aged 16-24 years old that were at risk or had failed to transition to FE, or to the labour market (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). In December 1997, the New Labour Government established a Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) in response to the significant personal impact of being NEET: “young people who have been NEET for six months or more are more likely than their peers to be unemployed, earn less, receive no training, have a criminal record, and suffer from poor health and depression” (Government News, 1999).

The SEU report *Bridging the Gap: New Opportunities for 16-18 Year Olds Not in Education, Employment or Training* stated that: “The best defence against social exclusion is to have a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training and experience” (DfEE, 1999:6). This conceptualisation of the term NEET focuses on the difficulties that young people face which may be associated with social exclusion. It reflects the neoliberal policy approach of the Conservative Thatcher and Major governments (1.2.1) and underpinned New Labour 16-18 NEET strategy interventions, such as setting Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets to reduce the 16-18 NEET rate and the introduction of the Connexions Service from 2001, and an Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) from 2000 (Hogarth and Smith, 2004).[[7]](#footnote-7)

**1.2.3 *Characteristics of NEET***

The NEET category is criticised in the literature for being based on the assumption that all NEET young people could be thought of as a homogeneous group, who face similar risks or difficulties, and therefore require identical forms of interventions (Finlay et al., 2010). Research by Furlong (2006) and Spielhofer et al. (2009) shows that NEET young people often come from very different groups and sub-groups, with quite different characteristics, experiences and needs. Young people in such groups may, therefore, face very different risks and transitions. They may have varying needs and require particular forms of policy intervention in terms of social welfare or training provision.

Research by Rees et al. (1996) illustrates that the characteristics of Status Zero young people in South Glamorgan reflected the overwhelming disadvantages they faced. The majority of those interviewed had experienced fractured childhoods, and acute family tensions were widespread. Many of the young people interviewed had experience of being in the care system, or of abuse within the family. Others had been homeless or involved in criminal activity. These patterns of disadvantage were seen to be reflected in the young people’s rejection of school. The levels of educational attainment for this group of young people were low; most of the respondents had gained no educational qualifications. The study in Scotland, by Furlong (2006:554) reveals that “the 16-18 NEET category combined those with little control over their situation with those exercising choice, thereby promoting a state of confusion about the term.” The characteristics of young people in this research included those who were long-term unemployed, fleetingly unemployed, looking after children or relatives, temporarily sick, long-term disabled, developing artistic or musical talents or those taking a short break from work or education. A universal NEET category can, therefore, encompass (privileged) young people who do not require any assistance or intervention to move back into EET (Yates and Payne, 2006).

This questions assumptions made by successive governments that NEET is automatically a problematic or negative status related to social exclusion and disadvantage for *all* young people (DfEE, 1999; DfE, 2016a). Yates and Payne (2006) further question these assumptions by drawing on the evidence from a DfES Report, *Understanding the Impact of Connexions on Young People at Risk* (Hogarth and Smith, 2004).[[8]](#footnote-8) The main groups of young people investigated in this report were those with learning difficulties and Special Educational Needs (SEN), young parents and carers, looked-after young people or homeless, asylum seekers and refugees, young offenders, substance misusers, school resisters and truants. [[9]](#footnote-9) Yates and Payne (2006) argue that being NEET is not necessarily a negative or problematic situation for many of those with parental or caring responsibilities or in other transitional states. Serracant (2014) suggests that policy approaches which conceptually link NEET with social exclusion lead to the negative labelling of *all* NEET young people, a focus on an individual’s deficits and stigmatisation.

**1.2.4 *Segments and sub-groups***

The *Longitudinal Study of Young People in England and Youth Cohort Study* [LSYPE & YCS], (DCFS, 2008c) provides survey analyses of post-16 participation.[[10]](#footnote-10) The findings show that 16-18 NEET is a diverse category and identify groups of significant characteristics, such as having 1-4 GCSE grades D-G, no qualifications, disability, lower socio-economic status (SES), truanting and having home/care responsibilities. These characteristics affirm previous research (Rees et al., 1996; Furlong 2006). Sub-groups of risk factors concerning health or behaviour common for 16-18 NEET young people are also identified, such as smoking, experimenting with cannabis, spreading graffiti or vandalising public property. The final LSYPE & YCS report (DfE, 2011a) broadened the sub-groups to include, those who were homeless, in care/out of care and lone parents. The Coalition Government discontinued the report series from 2010.

Spielhofer et al. (2009) used statistical segmentation analysis from the LSYPE & YCS (DCSF, 2008c), to construct a more detailed breakdown of types of characteristics evidenced within larger groups of NEET young people. Three segments or NEET sub-groups emerged from this analysis; each sub-group identified distinct characteristics of young people in terms of their different experiences, achievements and motivations.[[11]](#footnote-11) The largest sub-group (41% of the sample) included those described as ‘open to learning NEET’ who were most likely to re-engage in education or training in the short-term. They had higher levels of educational attainment (Level 2) and positive attitudes to school. The second largest sub-group (38%) were classed as ‘sustained NEET’ having a negative experience of school, high levels of truancy and low attainment. This group was thought most likely to remain NEET in the medium-term. The ‘undecided NEET’ (22%) had similar attainment levels to those who were ‘open to learning NEET’, but were dissatisfied with the opportunities available to them and their ability to access them.

This study indicates that re-engagement of the sustained and undecided NEET sub-groups might involve more substantial levels of support and/or longer-term interventions than re-engagement from the open to learning sub-group. Spielhofer et al. (2009) conclude that different pre-16 and post-16 policy solutions are required to meet the needs of those in each of the 16-18 NEET sub-groups and that there is a need for improvements in curriculum, advice and guidance, and access to financial support. The report was published on the cusp of the general election in 2010. Its impact for NEET policy development may have been restricted by an incoming Coalition Government that made a concerted effort to dismantle much of the infrastructure of government and the policies created by the previous Labour administration (Hutchinson et al., 2016).

Based on research with 16-19 NEET in Scotland, Finlay et al. (2010) argue that the classification of NEET sub-groups is unhelpful, both for analysis and as a means for targeting support and policy interventions. Their research supports evidence of NEET risk sub-groups, for example, care leavers, teenage parents, drug users, offenders and school resisters. The identification and use of these sub-groups proved problematic because some young people interviewed were members of several risk sub-groups. The rapidly changing nature of young people’s lives meant that risk group identification constantly changed during the one-year research time-span. Hogarth and Smith (2004) revealed similar difficulties with group and sub-group identification and their use for trend analysis. Furlong (2006) suggests that the heterogeneity of NEET young people led both policy and research to disaggregate groups within the category, to enable the identification of the distinct characteristics and potential needs of various sub-groups, and target policies or services. However, this iterative process, so far, has not yielded agreed definitions (1.2.4). Furthermore, Finlay et al. (2010:862), caution about the assumption that any solutions proposed might deal with young people as homogeneous groups or sub-groups, rather than as individuals: “Tackling NEET lack of involvement requires individual responses that acknowledge their particular range of difficulties.” The Nuffield/Rathbone Engaging Youth Enquiry [EYE] (2008) also reported that the NEET group contains young people with very different needs and circumstances and that tailored ‘case-specific’ solutions are required.

**1.3 *NEET perspectives***

The early NEET literature recognises the diversity of different groups in this category (Furlong, 2006; Yates and Payne, 2006) and emphasises disadvantage and barriers that are associated with youth exclusion (DfEE, 1999). Some aspects of the policy literature emphasise other attributes NEET young people have been perceived to possess. These portray becoming NEET as a wholly more negative situation, conceptually connected to notions of ‘moral panic’, ‘benefit culture’, and young people with little motivation These perspectives are associated with the neoliberal Conservative Governments of Thatcher and Major and are reflected in employer surveys of the time, which focused on the cost to the state of work-shy and under-educated 16-17 year olds (Finn, 1987; Rees et al., 1996). Continuity with this neoliberal approach is evident in the New Labour Government-funded report, *Estimating the Cost of Being ‘Not in Education, Employment or Training’ at Age 16-18* (Coles et al., 2002). This report connects 16-18 NEET with the burden of state dependency and identifies the following characteristics as accruing to NEET: educational under-achievement, not in the workforce, poor physical or mental health or disability, substance abuse, and crime. NEET status became increasingly depicted by the New Labour government in neoliberal policy terms, such as reflecting risks, problems and negative orientations on the part of young people (Yates and Payne, 2006; Simmons and Thompson, 2011).

The New Labour funded report by Popham (2003) identifies low aspiration and motivation as being a characteristic evident throughout 16-18 NEET groups. It draws from psychological theory which together with literature about theories of learning, personalisation and well-being, are shown in Chapter Two, to inform many New Labour 16-18 NEET interventions. By emphasising low aspirations and disaffection as significant factors contributing to NEET disengagement: “Social problems, such as unemployment, ill-health and crime come to be seen in the light of individual dispositions and inadequacies, or as the outcome of perverse lifestyle choices” (Simmons and Thompson, 2011:7). This is akin to the Conservative Thatcher Government’s neoliberal policy emphasis on individualism, choice and market rights, where a person, rather than the state, is seen to be responsible for their own success, failure, and well-being (Biesta and Lawy, 2006). These authors suggest that the neoliberal policy emphasis on individualism and choice was retained by the Conservative Major Government 1990-1997 and the New Labour Government 1997-2010.[[12]](#footnote-12) Furthermore, Simmons and Thompson (2011:4) argue that the Coalition Government made ‘increasing inroads’ of marketisation and privatised delivery in education. This preference for the individual over the collective continued with the Conservative Cameron Government (2015-2016) and the Conservative May Government of 2016 to date and is evident in the growth of 16-18 NEET social enterprise initiatives, discussed below (1.3.1).

The Coalition Government categorised 16-18 NEET with having characteristics defined as: “Those with few or no qualifications and those with a health problem, disability or low aspirations” (DfE, 2012a). This definition, retained by the Conservative Cameron Government of 2015-2016, is narrow in comparison to that of the New Labour government above. It accentuates individual attributes of NEET status, such as a young person’s educational achievement and health. The Conservative May Governments, from 2016 to present, extended the NEET definition to include early parenthood, school exclusion and eligibility for free school meals (House of Commons Library, 2016a). Wider characteristics of 16-18 NEET status used by the Conservative May Government’s Life Chances Fund, include, “those who are in gangs, have no fixed abode, have used drugs, are refugees, are in care or are care leavers” (DfE, 2016a). This definition reinforces the characteristics of 16-18 NEET as being negative, diverse and complex (Bynner, 2013).[[13]](#footnote-13)

Conceptual flaws associated with the term NEET are identified by Simmons, Thompson and Russell (2013a:3): “it conflates a heterogeneous set of young people with different experiences and conditions into an artificially manufactured category … which reflects a construct of policy approaches.” The NEET category is viewed by Reiter and Schlimbach (2015:134) as, a new administrative and research category used as an indicator for comparative social and employment monitoring by national government, the European Commission [EU] (2014) and the Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development [OECD] (2014). Use of the term NEET has been criticised for being simultaneously, widely adopted and widely condemned for its imprecision (Hutchinson et al., 2016). Notwithstanding this, all of the above authors acknowledge the heuristic value of the term because it brings into focus a range of significant disadvantages or forms of social exclusion experienced by many 16-18 year olds.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The literature critique (Chapter Two) concludes that differing notions exist about who the 16-18 NEET are and this may influence decisions made by Government policymakers, and the views of FE providers. Hayward and Williams (2011) identify other factors affecting 16-18 NEET status, such as local labour market conditions, scarce resources and poor-quality ‘pseudo’ vocational programmes. Research by Simmons, Thompson and Russell (2013a) found that demand-side factors are not being sufficiently addressed by governments in comparison to the supply-side initiatives, which have been relatively well served by a series of schemes targeting 16-18 NEET. Ainley and Allen (2010:134) argue that an overall shortage in the number of jobs available and a lack of demand for youth labour indicates that: “Supply-side measures have to be accompanied by increased demand (for labour) so that educational reform must go hand in hand with labour market reform and regulation.”

**1.3.1 *Policy approaches and drivers***

Enabling entry to the labour market through education or training and promoting social mobility and cohesion, are viewed as continuing components of post-1945 governments’ policy approaches to young people (Rees et al., 1996; Furlong, 2006; Hutchinson et al., 2016). Biesta and Lawy (2006:7) contrast, “the neoliberal ideology of individualism, choice and market rights adopted by the Conservative governments of Thatcher and Major (with) the older social democratic ideology of their predecessors, which represented collectivism, solidarity and social rights.” Continuity with previous Conservative Governments’ neoliberalism is evident in the New Labour policy driver to improve the education and skills of the youth workforce (employability), and this underpins the labour market strategy of subsequent Conservative governments (Ainley and Allen, 2010).

Discontinuities with Conservative neoliberalism are apparent in New Labour policies regarding the welfare state and some limited redistributive policy, but Giddens (2001) and Jessop (2003) suggest that these are insufficient to fully justify the term Third Way.[[15]](#footnote-15) Governments from 1997 are examined in detail in Chapter Two and their use of the NEET category to develop strategic policy to address declining levels of social capital, rising youth unemployment and social exclusion (DWP, 2013a).[[16]](#footnote-16) Within the broad framework of neoliberalism, governments can have different policy emphases (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). This can affect the opportunity structures and choices made available to 16-18 NEET in terms of FE provision, and this has particular relevance to the current investigation.

Since 1997, successive governments maintained continuity in their policy commitment to full participation in education, training or work for all 16-18 year olds. The majority of public-funded 16-18 NEET provision since the introduction of the September Guarantee by New Labour (2007) has been within the FE sector (DfE, 2017b). The literature reveals that the underlying ideology informing 16-18 NEET reduction strategies for the New Labour Government (1997-2010) may be viewed as part of the new politics of emotional well-being (Ecclestone, 2007). It can also be viewed as the continuation of older neoliberal concerns about youth social exclusion and employability (Finlay et al., 2010). The Coalition Government’s strategy (2010-2015) may be seen to reflect its ‘Big Society’ agenda of enterprise, entrepreneurship and localism (DfE, 2010b; Crines, 2013). Apple (2013) and Szereter (2012) suggest that there is continuity between the Big Society and economic individualism inherent in Thatcherism.[[17]](#footnote-17) This approach is evident in policy drivers, such as education for the economy and increased marketisation, which makes more extensive use of employer-led and social enterprise initiatives to provide solutions to the 16-18 NEET problem (Chapter Two). This policy emphasis is evidenced in the following Coalition Government 16-18 NEET initiatives: YCS introduced in 2012; Traineeships (2013); and the Youth Engagement Fund (YEF) developed in 2014.

These three initiatives are premised on an assumption that they are, “programmes which increase skills, increase young people’s employment, and improve the UK’s global performance and competitiveness” (BIS, 2010:5). Research by Taylor et al. (2012) questions the assumption underpinning this policy: that improving skills provision will improve employment opportunities for 16-18 NEET. Simmons and Smyth (2016) suggest that neoliberal discourse underpins the development of a UK-knowledge economy, where government-led initiatives are designed to supply NEET young people with the human capital necessary to gain employment. Previous Conservative Government training schemes for 16-17 year olds, such as YTS (1983) are criticised in the literature for leading to ‘blind alley’ and exploitative employment situations for young people (Finn, 1987) and for providing training without jobs (Rees et al., 1996). Furthermore, Simmons et al. (2014a:11) maintain that NEET young people “often ‘churn’ between non-participation interspersed with short-lived participation in insecure and poorly-paid work and low-level vocational training programmes.” This can be costly for the state and may not be providing the pool of skilled workers required for the UK economy.

The Coalition Government’s policy driver of increased marketisation has taken forward competition for 16-18 NEET programmes outside of FE public-funded provision (Chapter Two, 2.2.3). The Coalition channelled £16M of Social Investment Bond (SIB) funding through employers, rather than to FE providers, to target YEF 16-24 NEET Skills provision (BIS, 2013a; BIS, 2014a) and £340M of Skills Strategy SIB funding to target 16-18 NEET for 2015-2016 (DfE, 2014b). This strategy of using SIB funding to target 16-18 NEET has been extended by successive Conservative Governments through the new Youth Investment Fund (YIF) and the Life-Chances Fund [L-CF] (DfE, 2016a.b). This confirms a position of continuity with neoliberal Coalition policies and its associated NEET initiatives.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**1.3.2 *Ideology, assumptions and themes***

Chapter Two provides a critique of policy theory and the influence of ideology on Government 16-18 NEET strategies. It is not clear in the literature whether the Coalition Government or successive Conservative Governments’ 16-18 NEET provision initiatives (outside of the FE sector) can offer sufficiently creative programmes to meet the diverse needs of 16-18 NEET cohorts, or support their continuing transition. Apprehension is evident in the literature about whether new competitors have the capacity to deliver high-quality programmes in this traditional FE market (AoC, 2013a; AoC 2016a). Simmons et al. (2014a:17) identify concerns about the ethical and material standards of 16-18 NEET provision and propose the introduction of a Youth Resolution endorsed by Government, employers, training providers and local authorities (LAs) to drive up standards in areas by “offering fair levels of pay, structured training opportunities, clear and accessible career progression routes, access to work-place mentors, and programmes of personal development and enrichment activities.” Similar concerns about raising standards and informing choice for public-funded provision underpinned the introduction of the Framework for Excellence (LSC, 2007). This accentuates issues about the soundness of the evidence base for Coalition Government NEET initiatives that are increasingly positioned in sectors (employer-led and social enterprise) which may largely operate outside national quality assurance frameworks. It signals risk elements in terms of new providers being teamed with young people who may have vulnerable characteristics evident in 16-18 NEET status (1.2).

**1.3.3 *Pertinent perspectives***

The literature critique reveals considerable debate about the reasons for 16-18 NEET status. Different perspectives are put forward, ranging from psychological, social and cultural factors, to school failure and labour market trends. Pring et al. (2009) view many Government 16-18 NEET interventions as being informed by psychological assumptions about the importance of positive self-esteem and self-efficacy (self-beliefs) for raising aspirations and improving educational outcomes. Research by Carter-Wall and Whitfield (2012) shows that many 16-18 NEET have high aspirations, but they lack the means or social capital to achieve them. The Coalition Government defines 16-18 NEET as having low aspirations (1.3) whereas research by Finlay et al. (2010) and Simmons et al. (2014a) suggests that many NEET young people have low expectations rather than low aspirations. Ainley and Allen (2010:136) also argue that young people often have “no other option whilst there are no jobs except welfare to work schemes [or] insecure, low skill, low wage, service sector jobs.” The study by NfER (2012) concludes that promoting self-esteem and young people’s confidence in their own abilities (self-beliefs) are essential elements for 16-18 NEET programmes and recommend personal and social education curriculum. There remain unanswered questions in the literature about the efficacy of self-belief for 16-18 NEET interventions (Gorard et al., 2012) or other personal and social education initiatives (Ainley and Allen, 2010). This identifies significant knowledge gaps, given that 16-18 NEET has been a target for Government interventions in England for over a decade.

The notion of lived experience (Pring et al., 2009) is synonymous with the concept of Habitus, which is viewed as “the durable, transposable dispositions inculcated in a person’s early life that unconsciously guide behaviour” (Bourdieu, 1990:53). Bourdieu's (1986) types of capital is acknowledged as having been productive in educational research for analysing areas which may enable or impede an individual’s access to agency (Stahl, 2016). Research by Reay, David and Ball (2005) suggests that the impact of habitus, internal practices in schools and the role of the teacher limited pupils’ career choices. Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) maintain that proactive teacher behaviour can challenge pupils’ negative capital. Findings from research with NEET young people by Siraj and Mayo (2014) as part of the longitudinal study *Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education* [EPPSE 1997-2014], reinforce the importance of parents and teachers as agents in the development of learning life-courses and social transitions.

Finn (1987) and Rees et al. (1996) highlight primary socialisation, fractured families and school resistance, as significant factors contributing to young people’s failure to transition to employment, training or further education. Perry and Francis (2010) suggest that insufficient cultural capital is a barrier to engagement for 16-18 NEET. These aspects of literature indicate that the disposition of habitus and forms of capital are significant factors influencing career choice and NEET status. There was less exploration in the above studies about the form of pedagogy or types of provision that best engage 16-18 NEET and how Government policy might impact on pedagogy was not sufficiently examined. For example, through the introduction of different versions of the National Curriculum for England (1988, 1997 and 2014).

**1.3.4 *Provision which works for 16-18 NEET***

Scant research is available in the public domain about the take-up of FE provision by 16-18 NEET or about what types of FE provision best engage these young people, or what curriculum should be included in Government NEET initiatives, such as YCS or Traineeships (Chapter Two, 2.4.2-5). The literature highlights that provision ‘which works’ might vary between 16-18 NEET segments (sub-groups) or individuals (1.2.4). Provision may also vary between FE providers due to factors such as pedagogic views about NEET characteristics (Simmons and Smyth, 2016) or government funding and historic FE provision delivery in local areas (Hutchinson et al., 2016). This may mean that the same opportunities to access FE provision may not be available for all 16-18 NEET. This accentuates knowledge gaps about who 16-18 NEET are, and what types of provision ‘work’ and engage these young people. These are significant areas which informed the focus of this research project.

**1.3.5 *Alternative models and practice***

The Coalition Government commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies [IES] (DfE, 2010a) to evaluate two New Labour Government 16-18 NEET pilots: the Activity Agreement and Entry-to-Learning which operated during 2006-2010. The research focused on curriculum, and the findings indicate the significance of self-beliefs and motivation in sustaining 16-18 NEET engagement and achievement. Furthermore, the Coalition Government funded NfER (2012) to conduct research about provision (what works) for NEET. The report from this research shows that a range of flexible provision, personal support and a vocational curriculum is essential for 16-18 NEET engagement and their transition to further education, employment or training. The above studies show little understanding of the influence of socio-economic factors on the 16-18 NEET context. None of the studies fully explored what constitutes good-quality vocational curriculum for NEET, or how to ensure labour market currency to support learner destinations to employment. The Coalition Government closed both pilots, and it is unclear in the literature to what extent these research reports informed subsequent Government NEET initiatives.

Research by Simmons, Thompson and Russell (2013a:2) focused on the lived experience of 16-18 NEET and Government training programmes which aim to provide attitudes, abilities and dispositions (AADs) viewed as necessary for the workplace. Whilst the findings highlight that NEET learners “require programmes that both support and challenge them intellectually, and socially [the authors propose] a more holistic model of vocational education.” This curriculum model has similarities with the IES and NfER research findings above because it contains embedded soft skills, but significantly, it is combined with principled forms of knowledge (academic) and a traditional vocational training element.[[19]](#footnote-19) Another important difference proposed by these authors is a concomitant need for stimulating demand for the skills of 16-18 NEET in local labour markets. This confirms issues raised earlier about further research being required to improve the connection between supply and demand, to enhance transition from NEET provision to employment (1.3).

**1.3.6 *Contribution to knowledge***

The potential impact of Coalition Government policy changes, such as the closure of EMA and the closure of the Connexions Service (2010-2011) are largely not examined in the studies discussed above. Hutchinson et al. (2016: 718) argue that the Coalition Government’s ideological commitment to localism “can result in a ‘postcode lottery’ of support available, as can be seen in the post-Connexions landscape of provisions for youth.” The effect of other Coalition education reforms for 16-18 year olds is also not fully investigated in the NEET literature (1.3.3, 2.4.1). The literature critique highlights little involvement of FE providers in shaping Government policy and this is pertinent in a policy environment where Governments have been criticised by Hodgson and Spours (2011) for 16-18 NEET initiatives being developed by top-down policy levers without the involvement of those who provide the services.

The existing literature does not fully explore the perceptions of FE providers and stakeholders (policymakers) or whether an alternative rationale for FE NEET provision exists beyond responding to Coalition Government reforms. What is also missing in the knowledge base are perceptions and views of FE learners who have been NEET themselves. This justifies the rationale for the use of interviews with FE managers, their learners and policymakers in the current thesis to increase understanding about the impact of Coalition Government reform at the practice level. It will extend knowledge about the ways in which Coalition policy changes affect opportunities for 16-18 NEET to participate in FE provision and ultimately may have consequences for life chances.

These significant issues position the Coalition’s education reforms and their effect as a crucial focus for the current study*.* This will contribute to knowledge about whether these reform policies and their associated initiatives made headway with 16-18 NEET reduction. It provides a further lens to explore the viability of NEET provision in the FE sector within a climate of rapid Government infrastructure policy changes. Gaps in knowledge about these issues shape the aim and objectives of this thesis (1.4.1.1-2) and confirm the pertinence of the research questions developed which address these same issues. The current study is worthwhile. It contributes to knowledge and adds an FE practice dimension which produces outcomes that may inform improvements that can be applied and may potentially lead to reductions in the 16-18 NEET rate.

**1.4 *The research framework***

The literature review established the 16-18 NEET research context and helped shape the research aims and objectives encompassed in this investigation.

**1.4.1 *Research rationale***

Fundamental to the current research study, as discussed above (1.3.1-5), are emerging themes drawn from the literature review which inform the research questions and which were used to shape the research design. These concern types of provision best suited to 16-18 NEET, the impact of Coalition Government education reforms and the nature of the evidence base underpinning policy development. This ensured that this research maintains appropriateness to context and contributes to knowledge about the unique interface between Government policy, FE providers and the needs of 16-18 NEET learners. Analysis drawn from the literature critique justifies the pervading Interpretivist Paradigm used in this study. This approach was used to identify knowledge gaps to be explored and to generate worthwhile research questions. Two overarching primary research questions are derived from the research aim, and secondary questions resulted from the research objectives.

**1.4.1.1 *Aims***

To examine the Coalition Government’s approach to provision for 16-18 NEET young people and to investigate the impact of its education reforms on 16-18 NEET provision in the FE sector.

**1.4.1.2 *Objectives***

The research objectives are to:

1. Identify factors influencing 16-18 year olds’ participation in FE NEET provision.
2. Determine what type of FE provision [works] for 16-18 NEET best sustains their engagement and transition to further education, employment or training.
3. Examine the impact of Coalition Government education reform initiatives on opportunities for 16-18 NEET to participate in FE and the viability of NEET provision in this sector.
4. Extend knowledge in the field about provision which engages 16-18 NEET young people.
5. Contribute to theory, policy and practice.

**1.4.1.3 *Research questions***

1. What factors influence 16-18 year old participation in FE provision?
2. What type of FE provision works for 16-18 NEET and best sustains engagement, and why?
3. In what ways do gender, ethnicity, disability or social class affect the opportunities available to 16-18 NEET?
4. What are the barriers that NEETs face when seeking transition to further education, employment or training?
5. In what ways are the Coalition Government’s education reform policies affecting provision for 16-18 NEET in the FE sector?
6. What is the impact of the Coalition Government’s education reform initiatives on 16-18 NEET engagement in FE?
7. How are the Coalition Government’s education reform policies affecting the viability of NEET provision in the FE sector? [[20]](#footnote-20)

**1.4.2 *Thesis organisation***

Chapter Oneintroduces the research topic, the focus of the study and its context. It expands on why this particular subject is worthy of investigation. It presents the critical evaluation and reflection on existing literature which has been undertaken in Chapter Two, in order to establish gaps in knowledge which the study addresses. Chapter Three offers a justification of the research design and for the choice of mixed-method research. The fourth and fifth chapters focus on presenting the analysis of the data. The Conclusion, Chapter Six, enables readers to understand what research has been undertaken, what conclusions are drawn from the evidence in the findings and how the study addresses the research questions. Key messages are presented, which reflect themes and issues noted throughout the study.

**Chapter Two: Literature Review**

***2.1 Purpose and aims of the Literature Review***

The overarching purpose of this literature review is to explore how the Coalition Government’s education reforms from 2010 to 2015 may be affecting opportunities for 16-18 NEET to engage in FE provision. This is an important focus because FE is a major 16-18 NEET provision provider.[[21]](#footnote-21) This review considers the policy theory base and policy drivers underpinning the Coalition Government’s education reforms and its strategies to maximise the participation of 16-18 NEET. It examines the Coalition Government’s approach to provision for NEET young people, dealing with processes of continuity and change over time. The benefit of reform is discussed, in particular, whether reform will increase opportunities for 16-18 NEET participation, or make NEET provision problematic and less viable for FE providers, which could lead to a reduction in participation. It also considers whether private and voluntary sector providers may take over such FE provision. Neoliberal elements of the Coalition’s reform policy have continuity with those of the previous Labour government – notably the emphasis on choice and marketisation in education provision, and Lupton et al. (2015:49) suggest that “the scale of these changes eclipses anything Labour enacted in the thirteen years previously.”

**2.1.1 *What national data reveals***

The measurement of 16-18 NEET rates is complex and varies between agencies, such as the DfE and the OECD. The literature review utilises the DfE's definitive measure of participation at ages 16-18 and national NEET rate estimates published in the Participation Statistical First Release (SFR).[[22]](#footnote-22) The trend analysis in this source showsthat the 16-18 NEET rate for England remained relatively stable at around 7-10% during 2000-2012 (DfE, 2013b). Participation rates for 2013 show the 16-18 NEET rate for England at 9.6%, 194,500 young people (DfE, 2014a). An Office Research Report by UNICEF (2013) placed the UK 24th out of 29 countries for education, with almost 10% of young people classed as NEET and the lowest FE participation rate in the developed world at 74%.[[23]](#footnote-23) The OECD (2017) estimates that the proportion of 15-19 NEET in the UK (8.4%) in 2016, is just above its NEET rate average (6%).[[24]](#footnote-24) The persistent NEET rate problem has been recognised by both New Labour (1997-2010) and the Coalition Government (2010-2015), and by successive Conservative Governments (2015-to-date). Whilst they have implemented targeted 16-18 NEET strategies, progress in reducing the proportion of NEET young people has been slow (Hayward and Williams, 2011; Widdowson, 2018). This has significance for young people’s life chances given the potential lifetime consequences and costs of NEET status, such as social exclusion, substance misuse, mental health and long-term unemployment identified by Rees et al. (1996), Yates and Payne (2006) and Coles et al. (2010).

**2.1.2 *Structure of the review***

The main body of the literature review is structured according to three emerging and relevant themes: policy theory, factors influencing 16-18 NEET status, and the Coalition Government reform priorities. The themes derive from a general wider view of the literature critiqued, but evaluation of primary sources for each theme narrows down the research focus. This provides insight into the relationship between the area of research chosen, the research aim and the wider subject area. The inductive-deductive hierarchy of concepts model (Punch and Oancea, 2014), is applied to frame the aim and objectives for this study in alignment with evaluation from the main body of the literature review. The literature review affirms gaps in knowledge and generates the research questions.

**2.2 *Policy theory***

**2.2.1 *Policy approaches***

The term policy has been defined functionally to mean: an “explicit or implicit single decision or group of decisions which may set out directives for guiding future decisions (public policy) or to guide the implementation of previous decisions” (Haddad, 1995:18). Apple (2017:5) suggests that policy texts are important ideological constructs not only as indicators of shifts in rationale but also as constitutive elements of a particular hegemonic, and that, “hegemony is not found in one’s head but is made up of everyday cultural, political, economic and ideological practice.” The Education Act 2011 and associated reform priorities may be regarded as a constitutive element of the Coalition Government’s political ideology.

The social democratic principles underpinning the post-war consensus focused on improving equality of educational opportunity and tackling social disadvantage through state education (Finn, 1987). The New Right, epitomised by the Conservative Thatcher Government, focused on the importance of neoliberal ideas and introducing a free-market into education: enhancing marketisation, increasing competition and choice (Panchamia, 2012). New Labour policies reflected some New Right neoliberal views, and others continue with social democratic views (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2014).[[25]](#footnote-25) This policy discourse (commonly termed Third Way), combined economic efficiency alongside a commitment to social justice (Buckler and Dolowitz, 2006). Continuity and change with the Coalition Government’s policy approach are explored below together with the impact for 16-18 NEET participation in FE provision.

Hill (1999:25) maintains that “Education policy does not exist in an ideological vacuum. It affects and is affected by other areas of policy, not least financial policy.” Financial support for young people in full-time education, set out in the Education Act 1962and subsequent legislation (1975), consisted of discretionary awards from LEAs and fee remission (Gillard, 2011). This reflects a social democratic commitment to education for all (Clift and Tomlinson, 2002). Elements of a redistributive approach to social exclusion are apparent in New Labour’s policy for reducing the NEET rate. It introduced the EMA pilot from 1999 and Activity Agreement pilot (2006-2010) to attract disengaged young people back into learning. These initiatives recognise the relationship between income-inequalities, poverty and NEET status evident in studies by Rees et al. (1996) and Coles et al. (2002). There is a discontinuity in this policy with the Coalition Government closing both initiatives from 2011, as discussed below (2.2.6.1, 2.3.2). Simmons and Smyth (2016:137) argue that “the Conservative-led (neoliberal) Coalition Government, was determined to overturn some of the limited redistributive policies (social democratic) introduced by previous administrations.”

The New Labour Government and the Coalition Government’s education policies state a commitment to full participation in education, training or work for 16-18 year olds. The Coalition’s policy paper *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A Strategy for Social Mobility* (HM Government, 2011) confirms adherence to previous New Labour initiatives, such as RPA, apprenticeships and access to Higher Education. Both Governments accentuated social mobility, skills and employability. They both developed 16-18 NEET strategies, but the underlying ideology for doing so is different. Ecclestone (2007) views the New Labour Government’s NEET strategy as being part of the new politics of emotional well-being which reflect concern about social exclusion and declining levels of youth employment. The Coalition Government’s strategy reflects the Big Society which informed its legislative programme and states that “it is enterprise; it is entrepreneurship that is going to make this agenda work” (Conservative Party News, 2011).[[26]](#footnote-26) Whilst common policy trends (above) can be discerned across these two governments, Apple (2013) argues that the Big Society is a continuation of Thatcherism, and neoliberal ideology characterised by economic individualism and a market society.

The Thatcher Government introduced a succession of youth training schemes geared to the needs of employers and industry (Rees et al., 1996). Ainley and Allen (2010:23) suggest that “by 1983 over 3 million 16-19 year olds were signed up for YTS, often run by private employers and other agencies the state subsidised.” New Labour increased expenditure on work-related training and expanded the role of the private sector through LSC commissioning for youth training provision (Panchamia, 2012). The Coalition Government’s strategy document *Skills for Sustainable Growth* (BIS, 2010) sets out the benefits of an education for the economy agenda. This is based on the assumption that increasing young people’s skills levels, has the capacity to increase their employment and improve the UK-global performance. This document speaks of building a Big Society where skills “has the potential to transform lives by transforming life chances and driving social mobility” (BIS, 2010:5). The policy driver of education for the economy is inherent in the Education Act 2011 (2.2.2) and may be seen as being part of a wider (neoliberal) ‘economic global hegemony’ (Olsen, Codd and O’Neill, 2004:4).

Egdell and McQuaid (2016:2) criticise this policy for concentrating on the development of young people’s human capital for the UK-economy, rather than focusing on their freedom to make career choices that they value. This raises the philosophical debate about the nature of knowledge and what education means in society. Peters (1967) perceived education as being a valuable end in itself, rather than being a means to an end, such as, to meet the demands of a world-class skills base. This debate is evident in post-1945 government education policy reflected by the social democratic consensus regarding the value of general education for all pupils (Finn, 1987). The growth of employer involvement in education by the Labour Wilson Government from 1964 and the failure of comprehensive schooling 1966-1973 led to the Great Debate about the purpose of education 1976-79.[[27]](#footnote-27) Education and training for 16-19 year olds and the demands of employers for recruits with sufficient skills were a key focus of this debate. Finn (1987:105) suggests that this led to a new educational consensus and “more direct subordination of education to what were the perceived needs of the economy.”

Ainley and Allen (2010) also argue that Thatcherism subordinated education to a narrow view of employer requirements with a division between academic qualifications and training provision (employability skills). This led to a succession of government youth training schemes. The New Labour White Paper *14-19 Education and Skills* (2005) set out its major 14-19 education reform programme (HMSO, 2015).[[28]](#footnote-28) The Diploma, a composite qualification, was launched in September 2008*.* It was available to learners between the ages of 14 and 19 at Level 1 to Level 3 to bridge the divide between [general education](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Curriculum_(England,_Wales_and_Northern_Ireland)) and [vocational education](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vocational_education); Foundation Learning provided a broad-curriculum for learners at Entry Level to Level 1 and targeted 16-18 NEET (LSC, 2008). The Coalition Government closed both reforms from 2010, and there was a return to a traditional curriculum reminiscent of the Thatcher era with a division between academic education and skills training schemes, as discussed below (2.4.1).

Continuity of the employability skills policy approach isevident from the introduction of YOP (1978), the *Leitch Review of Skills*(HM Treasury, 2006), through to *Plan for Growth* (BIS, 2011). Cross-country research (OECD, 2014), shows only ‘correspondence’ between government policies to enhance skills and labour force participation. Research by the Centre for Economic & Social Inclusion (CESI, 2014:6) advocates joining-up local services to create a more responsive skills and employment system, “capable of reclaiming the lost generation of young people by providing better skills, improved guidance and pathways to employment.” Simmons and Thompson (2011) criticise New Labour and Coalition Government NEET policies for focusing on the supply-side and not tackling demand-side deficiencies in the context of social mobility, skills and employability. “Particular challenges are evident in interventions to shape employer demand either through financial or other incentives.” (Hutchinson et al., 2016:711).

Engaging employers is not a new policy approach. The Labour Wilson Government established Industrial Training Boards (ITBs) financed by industry sectors but administered by employers and trade unions. Their purpose was to improve industry training and design a levy/grant system to remedy the failure of the labour market to deliver sufficient skilled workers (Blundell et al., 1996). The Industrial Training Act (1982) placed responsibility for training to industry, reduced the number of ITBs and launched the YTS in 1983 (Ainley and Allen, 2010). In 2002, the New Labour Government created a National Employment Panel (NEP), Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA). There is continuity in the purpose of SSCs and ITBs. Following the *Leitch Review of Skills* (HM Treasury, 2006), the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) was formed. This industry-led Non-departmental Public Body (NDPB) superseded the SSDA and NEP in 2007. Its purpose was to promote employer involvement in vocational training (Beamish, 2015).

The Coalition Government retained UKCES and invested £91M in the UKCES Employer Ownership of Skills (EOS) Pilot for NEET training provision in 2012 and made subsequent investments (UKCES, 2013). The Government introduced the YCS wage incentive scheme in 2012 to increase employer-demand but this scheme showed 4,700 recruits, just 8.8% of its annual target and was closed (Wintour, 2013a). The Conservative May Government closed the EOS Pilot in 2016 and UKCES in 2017 following a Public Spending Review recommendation (Parliament, 2016a). This indicates a discontinuity with the employer-led approaches developed by the Coalition and the Cameron Government.

**2.2.2 *Policy analysis frameworks***

Hill (2006) maintains that to look critically at education policy, it needs to be subject to questions that fall into three categories: the aims of the policy, its context, and its impact. This framework is adopted to explore the Coalition Government’s education policy. A number of specific policy aimsare encompassed by the Education Act 2011 and are supported by broader thematic aims which reflect an underpinning ideology of enterprise to encourage choice and to increase quality in education through a market of providers. The statedpolicy objective is to radically reform education to improve the quality of teaching, raise standards, increase skills and close the gap between the richest and the poorest pupils. This represents an ideological belief that enterprise and skills will close the social class gap, and that increased employment is the result of education geared towards market needs. Appendix 1 provides a review of initiatives emanating from the Act, by policy themes related to the aims of the Act. Similar themes, which reflect the Big Society agenda are evidenced in the Conservative Party General Election Manifesto in 2015 (Conservative Party [GB], 2015:17, 35).

The Education Act 2011 takes forward wide-ranging legislative policy, and suggests that “it is only through whole system reform that education can be transformed to make a nation of one of the world’s top performers” (DfE, 2010c:7). The Coalition’s reform policy introduces profound structural change. For example, in schools it allows parents, charities and private companies to establish and run their own schools in the state sector. The evidence base cited to support the growth in academies and free schools is drawn from findings of a cross-country survey conducted in November 2012 (OECD, 2013).[[29]](#footnote-29) The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) expressed caution about the robustness of the evidence base for many reform policies, and questioned the Government’s consultative style and the ability of strategic planning to match the pace of reform. In response, the Secretary of State for Education confirmed that, “the pace of reform is to accelerate and was adamant that the majority of school leaders supported reform. If you can’t hack the pace, man-up.” (TES, 2012).

**2.2.3 *Increased marketization***

A main focus in the literature concerns whether the Coalition Government’s increased marketisation of 16-18 NEET provision can provide creative programmes to increase participation. The marketisation of education and training has continuity with a new economic model of competition introduced in education by the Thatcher Government (Finn, 1987). This neoliberal approach was adopted by the New Labour Government. For example, the Academies Programme was a part of New Labour’s education strategy to improve educational standards in disadvantaged communities. It built on the City Technology Colleges initiative introduced by the Thatcher Government in the 1980s. An Academies Evaluation Report (DfES, 2005) identified concerns about the poor performance and the accountability of academies, and Gorard (2005) questioned whether academies were performing better for equivalent students, than the schools they had replaced.

The Coalition Government’s rapid expansion of academies represents a fundamental shift in education policy, with a move from Government funding and local management of schools, to a mix of Government funding and private management.[[30]](#footnote-30) Some FE colleges are finding it more difficult to recruit learners due to increasing competition in local areas for the established FE 16-18 NEET market (AoC, 2014a). There is new competition for traditional FE provision from secondary academies, free schools, University Technical Colleges (UTCs), Youth Contract Scheme (YCS) and Traineeship providers. Local academies which offer vocational subjects for 14-18 year olds are now providing competition for FE 16-18 NEET provision. In May 2012, there were 1,807 academies (AoC, 2013b), and by July 2015, 58% of state-funded secondary schools were operating as academies (DfE, 2016c).

The Coalition Government’s launch of UTCs and the YCS from March 2012 encroach on the FE 16-18 NEET market.[[31]](#footnote-31) There is some debate about whether academies and UTCs have the capacity to deliver vocational and skill provision for the traditional FE 16-18 NEET market. Research by Kettlewell et al. (2017: ii) highlights quality concerns in UTC provision, such as widespread use of non-accredited vocational qualifications, and low student performance, and that, “over time UTCs may damage the credibility of the technical and vocational sector.” Simmons and Smyth (2016) suggest that rather than there being a pedagogic basis for the introduction of market-like competition between schools, FE and youth training programmes, this policy is a form of neoliberal localism, which may reflect a legitimation crisis in capitalism.[[32]](#footnote-32)

**2.2.4 *Quasi-markets***

The Coalition Government expanded quasi-market competition through commissioned annual funding of £127M for its YCS initiative, which targeted 16-18 NEET. The published list for the YCS commissioning round for 2012-2013 shows that all the contracts were awarded to private providers working in partnership with LAs and/or social enterprise groups: not one FE College secured a delivery contract (DfE, 2013d). The YCS was phased out from March 2016, and replaced by the Youth Engagement Fund (YEF), with £16M Government SIB funding channelled through employers (not FE providers) over three years.[[33]](#footnote-33) A further £340M Skills Strategy SIB funding targeted 16-18 NEET in 2015-2016 (BIS, 2013a; BIS, 2014a). SIBs are a payment-by-results system, where private investors fund projects, often through charities and social enterprise (DfE, 2014b).

Successive Conservative Governments have continued this Coalition Government policy. SIB-funded 16-18 NEET initiatives were maintained by the Conservative Cameron Government (2015-16), such as the Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC). The Conservative May Government (2016 to date) has championed additional SIB initiatives targeting 16-18 NEET; for example, the Life-Chances Fund (L-CF) with £30M funding, and the New Youth Investment Fund (YIF] with £80M (DfE, 2016ab; DWP, 2016). It is not clear whether SIBs can deliver high-quality programmes to meet the diverse characteristics of 16-18 NEET or engage these young people and achieve successful outcomes. It is also not clear whether FE colleges can achieve this either. In 2014, Ofsted’s annual lecture on FE criticised colleges for their poor record in helping NEET young people. It recommended that much more needs to be done to involve employers and track educational progression on NEET programmes (Fitzjohn, 2014).

There is uncertainty about the evidence base for the Coalition’s policy of marketisation in education and competition from outside the public sector (Ainley and Allen, 2010; Lupton and Thomson, 2015). There is also apprehension about the role of FE and the viability of 16-18 NEET provision with regard to 39 Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) introduced in 2012, with £740M funding. The Coalition Government adopted the recommendations of the *Heseltine Report* (BIS, 2013d) and put LEPs in overall control of setting local skills strategies and to work with local FE colleges to deliver this agenda. Concern has been expressed about the readiness of LEPs to take local education and training agendas forward (AoC, 2013b).

In 2015, the [Coalition] Government introduced an Area Review procedure to drive efficiencies in the FE sector through a process of local mergers (BIS, 2015). The review focus on an income generating business model may not fit well with colleges driven by a community provider mission (AoC, 2018). Declining financial health combined with the impact of college mergers make it difficult for some colleges to invest in facilities required to compete in a quasi-market environment for 16-18 NEET project funding (Widdowson, 2018). Increased marketisation, localisation of funding (LEPs), and Area Reviews mean that “purchasing decision-power has moved in the market” (Keohane, 2017:28). Within this climate business risks to the achievement of output-based government funding makes FE NEET provision for vulnerable NEET young people problematic because it is more resource-intensive to secure achievement outcomes (NfER, 2012; Widdowson 2018). It may, therefore, be less viable for some FE colleges than other types of provision. Coalition neoliberal policies and their continuation by successive Conservative Governments to date, may lead to reductions in FE NEET provision which, in turn, would diminish opportunities for 16-18 NEET participation.

**2.2.5 *Diversification – public management***

The White Paper *Open Public Services* reinforces the Coalition Government’s commitment to reform of the delivery of public services by extending the role of private and third sector organisations, as provider agencies commissioned by the Government (DfE, 2011d). Alcock (2012:4) views this as a Big Society ‘devolution’ policy agenda “allowing charities, social enterprises and voluntary organisations to step in to replace a reduced public welfare provision, hard hit by the austerity needed to rebalance the public finances.” This aspect of the reform programme puts more emphasis on 'stake-holding’ in education at a local level. It provides opportunities to join-up local stakeholders and public services to create a skill and local labour force system which is more responsive to 16-18 NEET (CESI, 2014), as discussed above (2.2.3). It also brings challenges regarding accountability. The third sector, local employers or philanthropic groups may be viewed as providing experimental policy solutions for 16-18 NEET (Wrigley, 2017).

This Coalition policy approach has continuity with the new ‘public management’ pioneered in education and training by the Thatcher Government, and extended by New Labour where “central government agencies contract out funding to public and private institutions competing with each other for students and bidding in tender other services” (Ainley and Allen, 2010:23). Programme funding for YTS was centrally held by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) and often bypassed FE and LAs in favour of third sector or private training providers (Finn, 1987).[[34]](#footnote-34)This approach is evident in the introduction of the Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) initiativeconsisting of 72 regional networks of private training providers from 1989 and by the New Labour Government when TECs were superseded by the LSC from 2001-2009 (Panchamia, 2012).Competition and market mechanisms also expanded for 16-19 provision in the FE sector through the use of output-based funding which replaced the block grant funding system from 1992.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Szereter (2012) cautions about difficulties with using a payment-by-results funding system because payment is for achievement rather than soft impacts, such as confidence building. Whilst this system increases competition among providers, it also creates a perverse incentive structure. Many cases of ‘unit-farming’ or fraud where providers claimed qualification achievements for non-existent learners were identified by the National Audit Office (NAO, 1996).[[36]](#footnote-36) This was a major problem for the MSC, TEC and LSC funding agencies with some providers placing students into temporary employment to trigger outcome payments (Panchamia, 2012). This issue is of particular concern because under the Coalition Government much of the New Labour Government’s local and regional infrastructure and local administration had been removed (Alcock, 2012). It questions the evidence base for the continuation of such policy in terms of its benefits for provision with vulnerable 16-18 NEET?

There is a question about how to ensure proper regulation and accountability within the parameters of the Coalition’s more diverse education system (Carr-West, 2012). Welfare to Work provider A4E, which handled £140M of government contracts, was investigated over multiple fraud allegations (BBC News, 2012a). The Education Funding Agency (EfA) launched a probe into financial irregularities at E-ACT, an academies chain of 35 schools (Paton, 2013). Yates and Payne (2006), Rees et al. (2014) and Lupton and Thomson (2015) identify persistent problems with funding agencies failing to implement effective management and administrative systems to monitor outcome payments on government youth provision. This provides a cautionary note about the need to safeguard ethics and standards and maintain public scrutiny within a diversified open-market education system. This area was a policy concern for all three main political parties in the general election of 2015 and in the referendum of 2016. It supports the proposal for a Youth Resolution with employers and providers to commit to material and ethical standards when working with young people (Simmons et al., 2014a). It has particular significance given the vulnerable characteristics identified in 16-18 NEET groups and sub-groups which FE learners may present (Yates and Payne, 2006; Spielhofer et al., 2009).

**2.2.6 *Ideologies and policy approaches***

Hayward and Williams (2011) suggest that many Government education policies post-1997 focus on aspirations and individualise the problem of underachievement. Underachievement is often located exclusively with working-class families and positioned within ‘failing schools’ in areas of social and economic deprivation (Perry and Francis, 2010:10). New Labour tried to address this and drive up standards by diversifying the market and introducing an Academies Programme in 2004, and the Coalition Government accelerated this diversification (2.2.3). Redistributive policy and financing led New Labour to target education spending in particular areas to address social exclusion, such as Excellence in Cities (GOV.UK, 1999). By 2003, 72 Education Action Zones were established with the aim of raising the attainment levels of students in low-income inner-city areas. *The Leitch Report* (HM Treasury, 2006), raised concerns about the low staying-on rate in education post-16 and shortages in labour market skills. New Labour increased expenditure by the national introduction of a means-tested EMA from 2004-2005.[[37]](#footnote-37) This provided £30 a week for 16-18 year olds from low-income families to study full-time in FE colleges or sixth form colleges.

**2.2.6.1 *EMA, Connexions and RPA***

EMA take-up was accompanied by a high cost, with expenditure increasing from £206M in 2004-2005 to £580M in 2009-2010 (Parliament, 2011). Research by NfER (2010) provided limited evidence that EMA was effective in increasing participation. It reported only 12% of respondents who received an EMA benefited.[[38]](#footnote-38) The Coalition Government’s view was that “the ‘deadweight’ cost in EMAs – the 88% who said receipt of EMA did not affect participation - is too high” (Parliament, 2011). Clark and Simmonds (2010) argue that New Labour’s EMA policy was essentially a political decision reflecting social democratic ideas rather than financial efficiency. The closure of EMA from 2011 reflects continuity with the neoliberal notion of individualisation associated with the policies of Thatcherism (Panchamia, 2012). This conception justifies the Coalition’s decision to remove funding from programmes, such as EMA and Connexions, and to place the responsibility for NEET status with young people themselves (Hutchinson et al., 2016).

The EMA was replaced with a £180M discretionary Bursary Fund for 16-19 year olds in 2012. The inadequacy of this new scheme was viewed as the biggest single reason for a decline in FE enrolments for the poorest and most vulnerable students with the lowest skills levels (BBC News Education and Family, 2011a). As reported by Reinis (2011) many colleges were topping up support for students from their own budgets. Summers (2012:1) suggests that “the government has a moral duty to invest in adequate help for 16-19 year-olds from poorer backgrounds or risk losing a whole generation to the trap of long-term unemployment.” There has been a fall in the 16-18 NEET rate since the closure of EMA, from 7.6% in 2014 to 6.2% in 2016 and this has been attributed to an increase in the proportion of 16-18 year olds participating in education and training (RPA), combined with an increase in the youth employment rate (DfE, 2018a). The closure of EMA and its replacement with the Bursary Fund may risk undermining any benefits of the Coalition Government’s education reforms, such as participation in the full-time Study Programme introduced from 2013, for students from low-income families.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The [Employment and Training Act 1948](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Employment_and_Training_Act_1948), led to the establishment of a national Youth Employment Service which became the Careers Service from the 1970s to 1990s (Hooley et al., 2014). From the 1980s, Finn (1987) and Rees et al. (1996) point to the failure of career education in schools and the limitations of the Careers Service. The Conservative Major Government continued the Thatcher era’s privatisation of public services, by removing the management of the Careers Service out of local authority control. This led to the contracting out of the service to partnerships developed between LAs, TECs and private providers during 1993-1997. The Education Act of 1997 placed a duty on schools to provide an appropriate career education programme and the focus for the Careers Service was to target prioritised groups, such as those not in learning or work post-16 (NfER, 2001).

New Labour replaced the Careers Service by the Connexions Service partnerships and Personal Advisers (PAs) from 2001. The primary aim of Connexions was to re-engage socially excluded young people [NEET] (DfES, 2002). Each Connexions partnership area was set specific targets to reduce the 16-18 NEET rate (NAO, 2004).[[40]](#footnote-40) Yates and Payne (2006:4) argue that a payment-by-results system led to an inappropriate emphasis on chasing targets resulting in ‘fire-fighting’ situations in which:

Young people receive less attention because they will require more resources; young people are pushed into training and education that they feel they are not ready for; and, young people at high risk but who are already in education, employment or training are neglected.

The Education Act 2011placed the statutory duty tosecure access to independent careers guidance on schools and colleges and advised them to buy into careers advice and services. The Coalition Government released LAs from their statutory responsibility for the Connexions Service and closed the service in 2012. Simmons and Thompson (2011) suggest that this change in policy created a market in guidance. This has continuity with the privatisation of careers services by the Conservative Major Government and with the neoliberal policy from the Thatcher era to weaken LAs’ involvement in education (Chubb, 2014). The National Careers Service [NCS] (launched in 2012) was criticised for providing inadequate guidance by website or telephone and that “the most vulnerable youngsters were the most likely to be hurt by these deteriorating services” (BBC News Education & Family, 2012b). The cross-country study by Hooley et al. (2014) showed that since the closure of Connexions, LAs, schools and colleges are doing less and what is being done is often being done at a lower quality.

In response to significant criticism, the Coalition Government developed the CEC, a multi-million-pound SIB programme which was introduced in July 2015 (DfE, 2016d).[[41]](#footnote-41) It aims to establish a network of volunteer Enterprise Advisers, drawn from industry, to work directly with schools and colleges to develop employer engagement plans and to act as mentors to young people at risk of dropping out of education (Long and Hubble, 2018). This policy change has been severely criticised for the duplication of services by the NCS, and the CEC (DfE, 2017f; House of Commons, 2015b). A BIS Sub Committee Report judged that:

A host of policy changes, initiatives and new bodies introduced by Government have failed to make serious improvements, and in some cases have been counter-productive with regards to careers guidance, creating a confusing and costly mess. (Parliament, 2016b).

The Conservative May Government’s *Careers Strategy* (DfE, 2017c) retains the CEC and includes the launch of new SIBs for disadvantaged pupils. Continuity between the Coalition and successive Conservative Government approaches to careers services for young people is evident in the expansion of employer-led solutions and SIB initiatives.

RPA policy was initially introduced by New Labour’s Education and Skills Act (DCSF, 2008a). In 2013, the Coalition Government affirmed RPA until 18 years of age becoming a requirement from 2015 (DWP, BIS and DfE, 2013). This has continuity with RSLA policy. In 1918 the school-leaving age was raised to 14, then 15 in 1944, and 16 in 1972. Similar arguments have been made for each of the increases in compulsory education and RPA. These include: to protect young people from exploitation by employers, to increase participation among the most disadvantaged families, and to improve human capital for the economy and for young people themselves (Gorard and See, 2013). Similar criticisms have also been made, such as it reduces young people’s choice (Finn, 1987), it is expensive (Spielhofer et al., 2007), and it masks governments’ attempts to improve youth unemployment figures (Maguire, 2013a).

RPA is not the same as RSLA because the education and training could encompass provision in a school or college, with a work-based training provider or be as part of a job (Spielhofer et al., 2007). Participation can be through full-time education, volunteering combined with part-time study, or by undertaking an apprenticeship. Central to the aims of RPA policy are raising attainment in education and training and tackling the NEET problem, but there are no penalties imposed for those who do not comply with the duty (House of Commons, 2014). Figures for June 2014, reveal that the proportion of 16-18 NEET dropped to 7.6% (House of Commons, 2014) and the estimate for the end of 2016 is 6.2% (DfE, 2018a). The DfE maintains that RPA contributed to the decrease in the 16-18 NEET rate (DfE, 2018a.b).

**Table 1: Participation of 16-18 year olds in education and training, England. (Participation SFR Main Summary, DfE, 2018a)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Not in any education, employment or training** | **End 2014** | **End 2015** | **End 2016** |
| Aged 16 | 3.6% | 3.2% | 2.9% |
| Aged 17 | 5.7% | 4.9% | 5.2% |
| Aged 18 | 13.4% | 11.3% | 9.8% |

Table 1 shows a declining NEET rate for all age groups from the end of the year 2014 to the end of the year 2016.[[42]](#footnote-42) There is a reduction in the number of NEET at age 16, but there is an increase for the subsequent year at age 17 and a more than tripling increase at age 18. ONS data (2015) reveals a trend of fewer 16-17 year olds in the NEET category, with higher numbers in the category at aged 18 and 19-24 years old. This trend supports Simmons and Thompson (2011) who argue that 16-17 NEET often gain short-term employment in unskilled jobs but return to the NEET category at a later age. The NEET rate at age 18 declined over the three years in Table 1, and this is proportionate to the declining rates at age 16. A declining NEET rate trend for those aged 19-24 years old is also evident at the end of the year for 2014-2016 (DfE, 2018a). Notwithstanding this, Hutchinson et al. (2016:7) suggest that Government policies may need to reflect a larger 18+ NEET rate and that “NEET status may not primarily be a problem of transition from school (at age 16), but rather a more long-term problem about … attachment to learning and labour markets.”

The literature highlights the legacy of Coalition Government policy approaches for successive Conservative Governments, the FE sector and young people. It is not clear from the literature whether some factors will continue to present barriers to 16-18 NEET participation. The social problems and financial hardship experienced by many RPA learners may continue to be compounded by the closure of EMA. Reintroducing the EMA for 16-18 year olds was a pledge in the most recent Labour Party Manifesto (Labour Party Manifesto, 2017: 40).

**2.3 *Factors influencing 16-18 NEET engagement***

Considerable debate is evident in the literature concerning factors influencing 16-18 NEET engagement. This section examines the different perspectives and assumptions underpinning Government approaches to 16-18 NEET, such as sociological and psychological explanations, and school failure. It reviews research studies including evaluations for Government 16-18 NEET pilot initiatives.

**2.3.1 *Perspectives***

Bourdieu’s theory (1986) captures how individual choices are related to dominant groups. Reay, David, and Ball (2005) highlight the impact of ‘institutional habitus’ and how internal practices in education may limit students’ career choices. They identified ‘teacher habitus’ as an agent in this process. The Nuffield/Rathbone EYE (2008) revealed that teachers’ own ‘habitus’ and their beliefs about what is best for students, may limit NEET young people’s career choices. Research by Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2009) shows that teachers often challenge pupils’ negative self-beliefs and proactive teacher behaviour is a source of improving pupils’ outcomes. This questions the more negative explanation of the interaction between education and students suggested by the EYE Review (2008). Oliver and Kettley (2010) argue that teachers may be instrumental in trying to change inferiority derived from pupils’ habituses, but a teacher’s personal views influence the degree to which they consciously want to engage in this. Thompson (2011:25) examined field positions associated with E2E NEET provision and concluded that although learners are supported to make progress “confluence of learner habitus, tutor expectation and field positions – although precisely what Bourdieu teaches us to expect – is a stable configuration that ensures learners continue to be excluded.” This opens up areas for the investigation into the tutors’ role as ‘agents of control’ over students’ educational opportunities and how students’ habitus may be transformed.

A record of poor school attendance and school exclusion was shown to influence post-16 participation by Rees et al. (1996) and Finlay et al. (2010). The experiences and views of the young people participating in the research undertaken by both sets of authors were very similar. There was a commonality in findings. For example, problems in school were often due to “a combination of personal attitudes and behaviours (of young people) and also factors related to teacher attitudes and behaviours” (Finlay et al., 2010:862). Many young people had difficulty with the authority structure of schooling, and this affirms the conclusions of the Nuffield/Rathbone EYE Review (2008). Furthermore, practices of excluding young people led to a vacuum of no alternative provision, because “neither the school system or other support agencies appear to have been in a position to mount an effective response to the young peoples’ – frequently determined - rejection of school” (Rees et al., 1996: 225).

Multiple reasons for NEET school failure identified by Perry and Francis (2010) are not fully explained by teacher-pupil behaviours, such as material disadvantage or lack of resource. “For these young people who are most marginalized there are powerful continuities between earlier experiences of social and educational disadvantage and that of Status O” (Rees et al., 1996:226). Pring et al. (2009) attribute NEET school failure to the failure of successive governments to address inequalities in society and Hayward and Williams (2011) maintain that governments have a duty to provide resource and opportunity structures for 16-18 NEET. The LYSPE & YCS study (DfE, 2011a) acknowledges that 16-18 NEET education providers must have sufficient resources to address the multiple-faceted issues NEET present.

Research by Siraj and Mayo (2014) utilises theoretical and methodological concepts from bio-ecological models of human development, psychological theories of child-rearing (vulnerability and resilience) and Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of social class as part of a life-course composition which is continuously created. The research draws on the EPPSE Study, which follows the progress of 3,000 children aged 3–16 in England, since 1997 (DfE, 2015a). Socio-economic status (SES) is used to explore class practices in terms of resources, interactions, and status. The findings emphasise the resilience or benefits of social and cultural capital and the development of agency by young people. This study highlights areas to extend knowledge about class practices of exclusion and vulnerability in education (risk or exclusion) and potential actions to address these issues.

The earlier discussion shows that the disposition of habitus and the position of education can be seen to influence young people’s career decisions. The above studies less easily account for labour market issues or changes in public policy. These are integral areas to the 16-18 NEET context, and for explaining why if the majority of NEET want to work, they cannot find employment (Hayward and Williams, 2011)*.* It is also difficult to account for variations in regional or local 16-18 NEET rates that may have an economic cause. Fuller configuration is needed about global economics (recession), economic structural change (decline of traditional industry) and government employment policy.

**2.3.2 *Research studies***

Investigating 16-18 NEET young people’s own experience, the Nuffield/Rathbone EYE (2008) used a qualitative methodology combining interviews with 500 16-18 NEET; regional workshops conducted with 16-18 NEET, providers and youth workers, and focus groups to listen to the ‘voice’ of the young people. Questions were asked about the lives, aspirations, types of support 16-18 NEET would find helpful. The research revealed high aspiration levels amongst all the young people: the majority wanted to work and to be economically independent, but there was a shortfall in economic or personal means to realise their aspirations. This finding questions the policy assumptions underpinning many Government 16-18 NEET interventions. Hayward and Williams (2011:185) argue that:

Attention needs to be given to the provision of opportunity structures. Discourse about low aspirations individualises the problem of youth unemployment [and masks] the duty to make available real prospects for a secure and sustainable job.

Research by Finlay et al. (2010) engaged 26 young people in the NEET category in the construction of life story accounts. The majority of the young people wanted a job, a home and possibly children and “many of their career aspirations were modest and achievable with the right support” (Finlay et al., 2010:864). The authors suggest that when policymakers describe young people as having low aspirations, they mean low expectations. A discourse of low aspiration places the NEET problem on young people rather than improving their choice options for education, employment and training. This has resonance with neoliberal notions from the Thatcher Government that blamed “the ‘deficiencies’ of young people themselves – rather than the lack of employment for them [as the cause of their non-participation]” (Ainley and Allen, 2010:22).

Research by Todd (2012) and Carter-Wall and Whitfield (2012:4) reveals that many 16-18 NEET have high aspiration levels for their employment: they want to attain professional, managerial and skilled jobs or go to university; for example, “Rather than raising aspirations in order to raise attainment, there is a real need for support to learn more about educational and career options so that they understand the routes into post-16 compulsory education or employment.” Simmons, Thompson and Russell (2013a:2) argue for “A shift from individualised and ultimately limited discourses of well-being and self-esteem to a more holistic model of vocational education rooted in broader conceptions of social justice.” The latter authors and Maguire (2013b) maintain that many 16-18 NEET experienced poor-quality training initiatives and vocational provision of little value for their transition to work or education. Many NEET respondents in the Nuffield Review (Pring et al., 2009) wanted paid work rather than taking vocational qualifications. They often had an active dislike and negative experience of schooling, and an inability to cope with school authority structures. Localised and structural employment was evidenced with most participating regions having limited employment opportunities.

The Nuffield/Rathbone EYE (2008) indicates that the majority of those interviewed lacked qualifications and experience required for scarce jobs. Simmons and Smyth (2016) use the notion of ‘erosion of motivation’ to suggest that young people question the value of education or work when employment is scarce, or when available jobs have low pay or exploitative conditions. For many 16-18 young people interviewed in the Nuffield Review (Pring et al., 2009) their lived experience was seen to make disengagement a rational response. Finlay et al. (2010:865) concluded that being NEET “is a rational response to low expectations in terms of opportunities available in the local labour market for jobs, [they require] more choice of provision, and more chances and more opportunities to reach their aspirations.” Simmons (2017:2) argues that “there needs to be attendant programmes of job creation if policymakers are serious about improving the prospects of NEET.”

In 2010, the government commissioned IES to evaluate the Activity Agreement and Entry-to-Learning Pilots for 16-18 NEET that operated during 2006-10. The research involved three strands: quantitative evaluation (survey data); process evaluation (case-studies in 14 pilot areas); and quantitative data collection to assess success. Intended outcomes included: identification of what worked well on the programmes, a deeper understanding of the personal and structural issues faced by 16-18 NEET; and the types of support that best enable engagement. The two programmes were shown to be effective with all the pilot cohorts: 49% of Activity Agreement participants (2008-2009) engaged in education or employment activities after the programme. Some 61% of Entry-to-Learning participants left the pilot with positive destinations in 2009. Beneficial approaches were identified, such as personalised learning, flexible provision and intensive one-to-one support with a personal advisor. The IES research (DfE, 2010a) shows that both pilots drew on theories of well-being and cognitive theories from psychological research about the process of education and how people learn. For example: learning-centred approaches (Kolb, 1984), personalised-learning (Leadbeater, 2004) and social-cognitive approaches (Pajares and Urdan 2006). Both pilot programmes contained personal skills development and activities designed to promote confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy,which were viewed as an indicator of improved educational attainment. [[43]](#footnote-43)

Self-concept can be broadly defined as “a person’s self-perception formed through experience with and interpretation of their environment” (Marsh and Hattie, 1996:40). Self-esteem is an individual’s evaluation of their own worth, and self-efficacy is defined by Bandura (1997:3) as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” and represent an individual’s belief in their own ability to achieve something. Pajares (1999) found that self-efficacy effects are more clearly established in terms of promoting motivation to engage, the exertion of effort, goal and task persistence. A poverty of aspiration is evident in the New Labour Government’s Aimhigher Programme (2002-2010) and in a series of Government White Papers 2004-2009, and the Ofsted Report *Unseen children: access and achievement 20 years on Evidence* (Ofsted, 2013a)*.*[[44]](#footnote-44) The Coalition Government’s approach to raising aspirations is less prominent in education reform policy documents. It is discussed mainly in policy to help reduce poverty and social injustice where raising aspirations centres on young people’s employment, and the education for the economy agenda (DWP, 2013a).

This area has been subject to intensive research. Valentine DuBois and Cooper (2004) conducted a meta-review which confirmed that self-belief can influence student academic achievement, but there was no empirical basis to support self-beliefs being a strong influence on student achievement. The IES research (DfE, 2010a) identified conditions that are critically important for allowing providers to capitalise on the benefits of self-belief and strengthen student achievement. These include: opportunities for mastery, student choice, involvement in learning activities, and targeted goal achievement. These conditions were effectively evidenced in the personalised learning approach used in the pilot programmes. The IES research emphasises the importance of emotional aspects of learning and experience, and the role of personal development activities and one-to-one support. Students gained more positive views (self-belief) and this led to achievements, such as positive destinations, which ranged between 49 and 56%. Whilst the IES findings require further longitudinal studies with similar 16-18 NEET programmes to substantiate outcomes, they do indicate the significance of psychological insights into the nature of the relationship between self-confidence, self-esteem, motivation and achievement. This increases knowledge about the provision that works for 16-18 NEET. However, the Coalition Government discontinued both of the pilot programmes from 2011.

A limitation of social cognitive theories, such as Pajares and Urdan (2006), underpinning the pilot’s activity is a lack of understanding of socio-economic factors which may influence NEET learner achievement. There is little evidence to show how promoting self-belief improves attainment for 16-18 NEET in terms of those from disadvantaged backgrounds (low SES), or those with learning difficulties. Colley (2003) found self-concept approaches problematic and argues that more personalised responses enable the education system to develop students’ own emotional labour as a commodity. Gorard et al. (2012) reviewed information from 166,000 pieces of evidence in 3,651 studies between 2000 and 2012 in England, on the causal impact on educational outcomes of aspiration, attainment and behaviour (AABs). This review provides no definitive answer about the effectiveness of psychological constructs, such as aspirations and attitudes. The study found self-concept approaches problematic in terms of the definition and measurement of concepts, such as aspiration, self-concept, self-esteem or self-efficacy. Several studies in the research used psychological terms, interchangeably making it difficult for the authors to extricate the influence of one construct from another. These authors question whether Government expenditure on policy and practice activity that has been undertaken over the past decade based on the assumption that AABs can be influenced to improve young people’s educational attainment can be justified. They argue that “these psychological constructs may be a ‘red-herring’” (Gorard et al., 2012:11).

Simmons, Thompson and Russell (2013a) conducted two ethnographic studies to explore the relationship between attitudes, abilities and dispositions (AADs) and Entry-to-Employment (E2E) provision. The first study in 2008-09 involved 63 interviews with learners, tutors, provision managers, and Connections advisers; and 87 hours of observations. A second study explored trajectories for young people who had been NEET for substantial periods of time and included 78 interviews with a similar sample. The research outcomes recognise the benefits of programmes that build self-esteem, and this is comparable with findings from the IES pilot evaluations (2010a). Shortfalls are identified in the forms pedagogy and tutors’ assumptions about NEET, which limited the scope of learning, and employment opportunities. The success of E2E in improving employability was inconclusive. The authors propose a curriculum model which embeds ‘soft skills’ and personal effectiveness (generic knowledge forms) with more traditional modes of knowledge (singular and regional).[[45]](#footnote-45) The inclusion of the latter knowledge contrasts with findings from other studies in section 2.4.1, such as NfER (2012) which indicates that 16-18 NEET find traditional curriculum hard to achieve, and the LYSPE & YCS study (DfE, 2011a), which shows that the majority of 16-18 NEET operate at Entry-Level 1. This raises issues about whether singular or regional knowledge forms would be feasible. It questions the position of those with higher-level abilities and what provision options might be appropriate for them.

A need to stimulate demand for 16-18 NEET skills to increase job opportunities in local labour markets was also identified in the studies by Simmons, Thompson and Russell (2013a). More than half of those participating in the second piece of research secured poor-quality or short-term work and returned to NEET status, often repeating similar employability programmes. This is similar to a holding effect and the blind alley situations experienced by young people on YTS and other government youth training provision (Finn, 1987; Rees et al., 1996). It affirms the warehousing of NEET evidenced by Maguire (2013b). Demand-side measures to tackle low pay and poor working conditions are taken forward by Simmons et al. (2014a) in the case made for a Youth Resolution.

Continuity in policy approaches to more closely involve employers in education and youth training from the Labour Wilson Government to the Coalition (Finn, 1987; Ainley and Allen, 2010), are discussed above (2.2.1). The New Labour Government’s employer engagement policy driver was a strategic objective for the LSC (DCSF, 2009b). Emphasis on matching supply with demand is evidenced in the LSC’s regional skills plans but the LSC closed in 2010. Whilst the Coalition Government introduced LEPs from 2012 to lead on local skills and employer demand, there has largely been a regional skills vacuum since the regional development agencies were abolished in 2012 until the emergence of combined regional authorities in 2015. The interface between combined regional authorities, LEPS, LAs, FE and training providers currently appears to be in a position of flux and negotiation. Hutchinson et al. (2016:716) view this changing local administration as being problematic, and that:

It could be speculated that the vacuum was deliberately introduced to allow youth policy to be re-orientated towards the needs of employers and private sector providers of services and away from local authorities [the public sector].

The earlier discussion indicates that NEET status is an over-simplified categorisation which suppresses the heterogeneity of young people and their transition trajectories (Furlong 2006; Bynner, 2013). NEET young people may come from different groups and sub-groups, with very different experiences which may require a wide range of transition opportunities. (Yates and Payne, 2006; Spielhofer et al., 2009). Research by Reiter and Schlimbach (2015) explores the transitions of young people in a city in western Germany. This research analyses 21 cases from a qualitative longitudinal study about secondary school-leavers in school-to-work transitions. Some 180 interviews were conducted over three phases of data collection during 2012, with 16-20 year olds. A key finding is that young people are well aware of the problematic nature of NEET status and they “avoid or exit NEET status by accepting transition to de-qualifying, ‘stopgap’ activities, such as educational support programmes or marginalised employment” (Reiter and Schlimbach, 2015:134). These authors suggest that disguising socially undesired NEET status qualifies as an act of system justification.[[46]](#footnote-46) ‘Stopgap’ solutions are equated to state mechanisms that:

Camouflage periods of low value in terms of education and professional development as meaningful activity. It keeps young people out of the unemployment statistics, as well as, out of the NEET statistics. (Reiter and Schlimbach, 2015:146)

These findings are consistent with studies by Maguire (2013a, 2015) and Simmons et al. (2014a) which maintain that structural features of the UK youth transition system lead to precarious learning and work trajectories for 16-18 NEET, such as participation in inadequate employability programmes or exploitative employment situations. These latter authors reveal that transition to employment is often short-term, insecure and frequently followed by young people re-entering the NEET category at a later age. This adds to an understanding of the higher numbers of young people in the NEET category at aged 18 and 19-24 year olds (NAO, 2008; ONS, 2015), discussed above (2.1.1 and 2.2.6.1).

Research by Egdell and McQuaid (2016) focuses on young people participating in two Welfare-to-work programmes in Scotland. It applies a conceptual framework based on a capability approach that seeks to promote empowerment, social justice and well-being, through economic and educational engagement (Sen, 2011). It considers the opportunities and freedom open to young people to make choices that they value, rather than just taking any job; and access to resources they need to improve their employability. The findings reveal tensions between young people’s aspirations and a lack of opportunities in the local labour market. Tensions are also apparent between the goals set by funding agencies and the educational aims of programme providers. Egdell and McQuaid (2016:4) argue that learners “should have a voice in the development and content of programmes and be active participants in their own learning and personal development, and not just passive recipients of services.” Importantly, they require that resources are made available which can be converted into an enhanced capability to do work that they value. The authors recommend that Government improve demand-side approaches to create opportunities for young peoples’ integration with local labour markets, and this reinforces the research findings by Simmons, Thompson and Russell (2013a).

**2.4 *Coalition Government reforms to 16-18 education and training***

Earlier discussion critiques government 16-18 NEET strategy policy (2.2-2.3). The New Labour Government strategy draws from the policy document *Reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET): The Strategy* (DCSF, 2008b), which includes NEET policy interventions, such as: the September Guarantee; EMA; the Connexions Service; RPA; and investment in pilots. The literature indicates that New Labour conceptualised the NEET issue as being part of a broader skills agenda for economic growth, underpinned by making educational opportunities available irrespective of background, or social disadvantage (2.2.6). Hutchinson et al. (2016) argue that this approach is an attempt to combine utilitarian economic policy aims with an increase in social justice.

Comparison with the Coalition Government’s response to NEET reveals continuity between policy approaches, in areas such as RPA and investment in education and training initiatives. The Coalition Government’s 16-18 NEET strategy is set out in the policy paper, 2010 to 2015 *Government Policy: Young People* (GOV.UK, 2015). This identifies the reforms to 16-18 year old education and training (apprenticeships, access to higher education and employability skills) as the central platform for NEET policy development. For many 16-18 NEET operating at Entry to Level 1 (2.4.1) employability skills would be the main option.

The next section critiques the Coalition Government’s reforms to 16-18 year old education and training. It considers the position of vocational qualifications following the Wolf Review (DfE, 2011c) and the introduction of the National Curriculum. It reviews Coalition 16-18 NEET initiatives such as YCS (DWP, 2013b) and Traineeships (BIS, 2013b). These largely under-researched aspects of the education reform priorities are a focus of some controversy in the literature. There is little research about FE provision which ‘works’ and is best suited to 16-18 NEET or whether Coalition Government initiatives were sufficient to increase NEET participation. These gaps in knowledge relate to the aim of this research (Chapter One).

***2.4.1 Reform of qualifications and curriculum***

The LYSPE & YCS (DfE, 2011a) shows that the majority of 16-18 NEET operate at Entry-Level 1. Government-funded vocational education qualifications at this level for 14-19 years old were listed on a DCFS/DFE Section 96 data-base. Section 96 is a section of the [Learning and Skills Act 2000](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/21/contents) which gives the Secretary of State the power to fund approved qualifications for young people aged less than 19 years old. In March 2012, the Coalition Government reduced this list from 3,500 to 327 qualifications (DfE, 2012c). The remaining qualifications were mainly in generic areas such as work skills or employability. These qualifications do not have a specific vocational element or contain regional forms of knowledge advocated by Simmons, Thompson and Russell (2013a), or work experience skills that are required for progression to vocational Level 2, apprenticeships or employment. The 2015 Performance Tables (DfE, 2013e) have 117 funded qualifications listed because only large qualifications (180+hours) are included since 2014, and Entry-Level 1 qualifications do not count towards 5+A\*-C GCSEs or the English Baccalaureate (EBac) measures. These reforms restricted the range of funded qualifications available for FE providers to deliver on 16-18 NEET programmes.

Findings from research by IES (DfE, 2010a) and NfER (2012) show that the provision which best engages 16-18 NEET contains a mix of short vocational qualifications and personal development. Guidance on RPA (DCSF, 2009a), also advocates a personalised curriculum for 16-18 NEET at Entry-Level 1 with flexible study options. The Foundation Learning pilot (DfE, 2012d) had 16-18 NEET as a target group and contained a mix of vocational, personal and social development qualifications; functional skills; and personalised learning. The Coalition Government closed this programme from 2011 and commissioned Professor Alison Wolf to carry out an independent review of how vocational education for 14-19 year olds can be improved to promote successful transition into education, employment or training. The Wolf Review’s (DfE, 2011c) key recommendations included: ensure all young people study English and Maths until they achieve A\*-C GCSE; and reform of the funding system to remove perverse incentives that devalue vocational education. These recommendations were accepted by the Coalition Government in May 2011 and inform the policies of the successive Conservative Governments from 2015-to-present. NfER research (2012:4) argues that:

The need for a varied and flexible (vocational) curriculum has limitations with the current curriculum refocus as a result of the Wolf Review recommendations and the introduction of the EBac. This means that such flexibility is hard to achieve in practice.

Simmons (2017:1) suggests that the changing nature of curriculum means that, “some forms of knowledge have been largely flushed out of vocational education.” Government NEET initiatives favouring employability programmes limit opportunities for young people to acquire more formal knowledge, qualifications and personal capital. This can disadvantage them in the labour market and restrict the possibilities for educational progression.

The Coalition Government introduced the EBac as a measure in the 2010 performance tables to recognise where pupils have secured C grade at GCSE or better across a core of academic subjects which form the basis of the new National Curriculum. This return to a more traditional GCSE curriculum may not suit 16-18 NEET cohorts. Hayward and Williams (2011) and NfER (2012) indicate that many 16-18 NEET find a traditional curriculum hard to work with or achieve. A Parliamentary Select Committee (House of Commons, 2011), raised concerns about the negative impact of EBac for 16-18 NEET. Consultation on the national curriculum revealed that the teachers’ union NASUWT, the Institute for Public Policy Research and practitioners criticised EBac subjects for being too difficult for 16-18 NEET to achieve, and for having little relevance to young people wanting to follow a vocational career (DfE and BIS, 2013:12). As reported by Wilby (2013) 100 education professors and lecturers signed a letter denouncing the national curriculum plans and were accused by the Secretary of State for Education as being bad academia, Marxists and enemies of promise fighting excellence.

**2.4.2 *Youth Contract Scheme (YCS)***

The Coalition Government launched the YCS from 2012 to underpin RPA and reduce the 16-18 NEET rate. There was an open competition to lead on YCS and the criteria for a successful bid was “the ability to demonstrate a proven track record in getting people into education or work with training” (DfE, 2013d). All the successful bidders were from businesses, charities, private providers and LAs. There were no successful sole FE college bids or FE consortium-led bids (DfE, 2015b). The YCS is essentially a business and employer-led initiative, which reflects the growing influence of political ideology (Big Society) in shaping the Coalition Government’s NEET policy initiatives and an increasing emphasis on an education for the economy agenda.

Performance data for the first YCS 16-17 year old NEET cohorts in 2012-13, shows that 4,364 young people enrolled compared to a target of 18,333, [25% to target] (Wintour 2013a). Only 1,202 young people achieved a positive outcome such as an apprenticeship or full-time education. This yields a success rate of 27%, which is well below the minimum level of performance qualification success rate used for Ofsted Inspection of 65% for Level 1 qualifications (SfA, 2012). In terms of track record criteria, 25% of the Department for Business Innovation and Skills’ (BIS) 2011-2012 budget for independent training provider provision for 16-18 year olds was not delivered (FE Week, 2013a). This raises concern about the rapid growth in Government-commissioned provision and whether successful bid providers will recruit 16-18 NEET or achieve intended outcomes (Hutchinson et al., 2016).

YCS provides an alternative to the National Curriculum, but it represents a return to a system of skill-based education for lower achieving 16-18 NEET, and the National Curriculum for higher achieving 16-18 year olds. Finn (1987) raised similar parity of esteem concerns in the 1980s regarding post-16 pathways being segregated into traditional mainstream GCSE provision or YTS and employability provision. It represents an assumption that all 16-18 NEET are low ability, but this is not always the case. Maguire (2013b) maintains that whilst certain characteristics, such as disaffection with education or low socio-economic status are more prevalent, mainstream groups operate under the radar of policy interventions. Further research is needed into the abilities and characteristics 16-18 NEET present and provision best suited to meet the diverse needs evident in NEET groups, and sub-groups (Yates and Payne, 2006; Spielhofer et al., 2009). There has been no audit (in the public domain) since the LYSPE & YCS study (DfE, 2011a), about the take-up of FE 16-18 NEET provision by the level of a learner, by NEET group or sub-group, or using segmentation analysis for indicators such as gender, ethnicity, or disability. The Conservative Cameron Government closed the YCS initiative from March 2016 (its planned lifespan), and an evaluation report concluded that, “16-18 NEET are a segmented population with widely varying and multi-faceted needs” (DfE, 2015b:137). This report recommended that Government interventions require a targeted approach with a co-ordinated local response to identify and meet the diverse needs of 16-18 NEET groups; and to increase synergy between guidance and support services. It is noteworthy that the Coalition Government reform policy had a direct impact in closing items mentioned in the above recommendations. These include; closure of the Connexions service, EMA, and the diminishing role of LAs (2.2.6.1, 2.5.3). This reinforces the importance of extending knowledge about the efficacy of Coalition Government policy interventions.

**2.4.3 *The Study Programme***

The Coalition Government reformed the post-16 funding formula from 2013-14, funding ‘full participation’ by introducing a 540+ hour ‘Study Programme’ for all 16-19 year olds (DfE and EFA, 2012). A condition of funding is the requirement for all learners to study English and Maths until they achieve GCSE grade C.[[47]](#footnote-47) There is a slim increase in Coalition Government resource to fund this new policy initiative with the change to the Study Programmes generating a resource increase of between +0.9-1% for 17-18 year olds (DfE and EFA, 2012:26).

Research by the University of York (2010) estimates the average lifetime cost per 16-18 NEET person at £104,000 in public finance costs. This incentivises Government interventions to reduce the 16-18 NEET rate, but policy tension is evident because in 2011-2012, there was a 5.7% reduction in the Coalition Government’s education budget in real terms. The AoC (2014a) estimates that the impact of Coalition Government funding reductions for the FE sector (2010-2014) represents a 5% cash cut. A downward trend in Government spending continued with a 17.5% lower full-time funding rate being paid for FE 18 year old students and a 24% reduction in the FE adult budget in April 2015. From 2015, LEPs took responsibility from LAs for the spending of the European Social Fund (ESF) budget (£170M annually), which was traditionally used for FE 16-18 NEET projects. No FE NEET project funding was allocated by LEPs for 2015-2016 (NAO, 2016).[[48]](#footnote-48) These trends indicate that the Government has been cutting funding rather than providing more resources for the FE sector, the largest provider of 16-18 NEET provision.

**2.4.3.1 *Enterprise education***

The Study Programme puts a post-16 focus on enterprise education. The aim is for all students to gain work experience and to develop so-called employability skills. This requires increased engagement with employers by incorporating enterprise/work experience activities into students’ Study Programmes. Work experience activity is differentiated according to the student’s level of study. An A Level student will be involved in study visits with local enterprises. Students below Level 2 will focus on employability skills, and extended work experience (up to 5 months) can be given to students to prepare them for apprenticeships through the Traineeship, introduced in September 2013 (2.4.4). This increased volume of work experience activities places substantial new capacity demands on employers. Enterprise education has continuity with previous governments’ employer engagement policy approaches, discussed above (2.2.1). This mirrors the New Labour Government’s strategy evident in, *Building Stronger Partnerships* (DCSF, 2009b). It was a core agenda for the LSC (2001-2010) which had statutory power to secure work experience for young people through the Education Business Link Partnership (EBLP). The Coalition Government withdrew funding for EBLPs in 2011 and it was left to schools and colleges to decide whether to buy into these services locally. There are tensions in this policy because there are no financial incentives for organisations hosting a work placement (Hutchinson et al., 2016). Arguably, young people are providing cheap workforce labour because unlike apprenticeships, they are not required to be employed (or paid) by the work placement provider. The extended work experience strategy reconciles the problem of how to engage an increasing volume of 16-18 NEET within the Coalition Government’s RPA policy. Maguire (2013b:3) argues that “stimulating demand for young workers is important but short-term temporary working patterns do not facilitate access to permanent jobs and young people may become trapped in precarious ‘in and out of work’ trajectories.”

**2.4.4 *Traineeships – employer-led solutions***

Traineeships target NEET young people and aim to develop their skills for progression to an apprenticeship or employment (DfE, 2013g). The core programme consists of a work placement and work skills training alongside support to improve English and Maths to GCSE grade C. Traineeships reflect elements of a curriculum model, advocated as working well for 16-18 NEET in research by IES (DfE, 2010a) and NfER (2012). Employers or providers are left to decide which young people are recruited to a Traineeship on the basis of them “having a reasonable chance of being ready for employment” (DfE, 2013h: 6). This criterion is not explicit and decisions taken may vary between programme providers and result in unequal access to Traineeships for 16-18 NEET.

The recognition for completing a Traineeship rests with the employers/providers and is in the form of a reference from where the work placement is undertaken. Employers/providers design the curriculum, the selection of any qualifications used, and they may award locally recognised certificates. This raises issues about quality of programme content: standards, such as ‘is one programme as good as another?’ and opportunities to access, such as ‘are programmes available in all local areas?’ Based on research evidence from longitudinal studies, Maguire (2013b) identifies vocational education working in partnership with employers as being a successful intervention with NEET young people, but argues that it needs to be accompanied by the attainment of credible qualifications and learning that has real currency in the labour market. This reinforces the findings by Simmons, Thompson and Russell, (2013a) about marginalised provision leading to few positive outcomes in terms of transition to employment. A similar concern about young people frequently progressing from YTS provision to blind alley or exploitative employment was raised by Finn (1987), and Ainley and Allen (2010).

The Coalition Government views employers as leading the delivery of Traineeships (DfE, 2013g). In 2012, the Government invested £91M in the UKCES (EOS) Pilot and this was followed by subsequent investment in 2015-2016 (2.2.1). This pilot promotes employer-led skills solutions and employers in the scheme are funded directly to deliver Traineeships. This raises issues about the evidence base for employer-led 16-18 NEET provision, given the poor YCS performance data discussed earlier (2.4.2). It reflects the Coalition Government’s commitment to the neoliberal policy drivers of education for the economy, enterprise and entrepreneurship, and marketisation. The influence of these ideological drivers are prominent in other Coalition education reforms analysed in this chapter, such as the expansion of academies, provision of careers services, and work experience services for young people (2.2.3, 2.2.6.1, 2.4.3.1). Continuity with this policy approach is evident in the Conservative Cameron Government, but some discontinuity is shown by the Conservative May Government’s closure of the EOS pilot from 2016 and UKCES in 2017, as reported by The Telegraph (2017).

**2.4.5 *Summary***

The reform of education and training has been a focus of successive post-1945 governments (2.2.1). It has resulted in generations of 16-18 year olds being subject to new qualifications and training schemes which have often been introduced at short notice and have often been short-lived (Widdowson, 2018). The literature reveals the emergence over the past decade of an ‘industry’ of changing NEET policy initiatives based more on the ideological preferences of Governments than a pedagogic evidence base (2.2.3, 2.4). A plethora of factors are shown to affect 16-18 NEET participation in education and training which range from the disposition of habitus (Colley, 2003), the nature of the curriculum (Ainley and Allen, 2010 ) and school authority structures (Finlay et al., 2010), to psychological factors (Furlong, 2006), and labour market forces (Simmons, 2014). There are unanswered questions about which factors are crucial to not staying on in education or training. There is scant data about take-up of 16-18 NEET provision in the FE sector or agreement about the types of curriculum that are best suited to meet the diverse needs presented by 16-18 NEET. This is significant given that 16-18 NEET has been the subject of targeted Government interventions for almost two decades. Education reform provides an opportunity to gear education more to the needs of learners in a changing society. The question of whether Coalition Government policy and its legacy for successive Conservative Governments, is sufficient to tackle the 16-18 NEET problem involves broader questions about the effectiveness of new provision, its scale and management (Hutchinson et al., 2016). These issues inform the research agenda for this study, which aims to extend knowledge in the field and stimulate the direction of travel for policy and practice.

**2.4.6 *Research questions***

As a result of the literature review, the following research questions were formulated to be addressed in the study:

|  |
| --- |
| 1. **What factors influence 16-18 year old participation in FE provision?** 2. What type of FE provision works for 16-18 NEET and best sustains engagement, and why? 3. In what ways do gender, ethnicity, disability or social class affect the opportunities available to 16-18 NEET? 4. What are the barriers that NEETs face when seeking transition to further education, employment or training? 5. **In what ways are the Coalition Government’s education reform policies affecting provision for 16-18 NEET in the FE sector?** 6. What is the impact of the Coalition Government’s education reform initiatives on 16-18 NEET engagement in FE? 7. How are the Coalition Government’s education reform policies affecting the viability of 16-18 NEET provision in the FE sector? |

**Chapter Three: Research Methodology**

**3.1 *Introduction***

Munn and Drever (2007) view the decisions taken at various stages during a research study as being interconnected because they stem from the initial selection of the research questions. Bell and Waters (2014) suggest that methods should be chosen because they answer the research decisions about which data is best for particular purposes and which data collecting instruments are best designed to do the job. The ‘Hierarchy of Concepts’ model (Punch and Oancea, 2014) has been applied to organise this research. This model makes explicit the levels of abstraction (concepts and questions) relating to the research. In this study, the research questions contributed to the decision to use a mixed-method approach to collect both quantitative and qualitative data to address these questions. This shapes the research approach to data collection, analysis and processing of the results.

**3.2 *Ontology, epistemology and paradigms***

The research methodology is based on philosophical considerations about the purpose of educational research in general, the research questions that need to be addressed, and the aim of this study. As with other social sciences, educational research makes a distinction between positivist and interpretative research philosophies or paradigms. Denzin and Lincoln (2017) maintain that these two models of explaining the social world are underpinned by certain assumptions about the foundations of truth and knowledge and what constitutes social reality, and they subscribe to two specific methodologies: the quantitative methodology and the qualitative methodology respectively, which are discussed in section 3.3.

**3.2.1 *Ontology and epistemology***

Pring (2000) and Denicolo and Becker (2012) view the purpose of research as the production of new knowledge, and the search for truth, as an overriding principle informing all research. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995:21) define educational research as “the systematic and scholarly application of the principles of a science of behaviour, to the problems of people within their social contexts.” Educational research encompasses wide-ranging issues concerning how various facets of education are perceived, experienced or evaluated. Thomas (2007) and Punch and Oancea (2014) concur that a key purpose of educational research centres on how we can learn from research to improve existing knowledge, policy and practice. Slack (2003) suggests that educational research provides explanatory models and has the capacity for developing interventions which encourage young people’s participation. This sort of function has vital importance for 16-18 NEET where school failure has been shown to be a prominent factor leading to NEET status by Pring et al. (2009).[[49]](#footnote-49) Nevertheless, Rees (1996) and Simmons and Thompson et al. (2011) indicate that some 16-18 NEET have high ability and may have achieved well at school, which suggests that not all NEET were low achievers at school.

It is intended that analysis from the data collected in this study can be applied and may contribute to improvements in FE practice. This confirms the conceptualisation of education put forward by Schoenfield (1999) where pure and applied research are not in conflict, but work in synergy to make contributions to knowledge and practice. The approach and methodology adopted by a researcher are usually based on ontological assumptions “concerned with the grounds of knowledge, the belief in what exists, what is real, the nature of being and the essence of the social phenomena being examined” (Basit, 2010:6). Axiology gives rise to the researcher’s epistemological assumptions: what knowledge is; ways of researching the nature of reality and phenomena.

**3.2.2 *Axiology and reflexivity***

Axiology can be instrumental in decisions made about methods and data collection required for the creation of reliable and valid knowledge. Denzin and Lincoln (2017) concur with Hitchcock and Hughes (1995:23) that: “The researcher decides whether social reality is external to individuals, and is hard and objective or if the reality is the product of the subjects’ own perception and cognition (human experience).” At the start of this research, consideration was given to the values and beliefs that I, as the researcher, may hold and my positionality (1.1.1). This can be seen to be influenced by many experiences which affect my view of the social world and the nature of knowledge. It is acknowledged that this may affect particular decisions or judgements made within the research process.

This has particular relevance for how I gathered and interpreted the data. Mason (2012) argues that the researcher is inevitably implicated in the process of data generation and interpretation and advocates the use of reflexive methodological accounting. Throughout the research process, I have continually exercised reflexivity and critical self-examination to ensure that the research is conducted in an ethical way. Other mechanisms, such as reflexive accounts, critical-peer forums and regular supervision, have been used to acknowledge my subjective value systems and any undue influence these may have on the research situation. This approach to the research process, the analysis and the interpretation of the data enhanced the integrity of this study.

**3.2.3 *Paradigms***

Kuhn (1962) views a paradigm as denoting a worldview or an accepted model for a valid scientific way of examining phenomena, or researching and pursuing a field of knowledge. It provides a consensus about what problems should be investigated and how to investigate them. This section provides a critique of the chosen paradigms which underpin the framework of this research.

**3.2.3.1 *The positivist paradigm***

This paradigm investigates human behaviour by methods from the natural sciences. Knowledge is developed through the accumulation of verified facts and hypotheses which are generated deductively from scientific theories and tested empirically. Objective enquiry is undertaken by a quantitative methodology where data is collected in an unbiased way so as to yield numerical and statistical data analysis (Bell and Bryman, 2007). Inherent in the positivist approach is the view that it is possible to measure social behaviour independent of its context and that social phenomena can be viewed objectively. Cohen et al. (2011:9) maintain that “positivism takes no account of observation, experience or the complexity of human behaviour because the tenability of hypotheses relies solely on data evidence in terms of fact-yielding proof.” Fact-yielding proof does partially address the research questions used in this study because numerical data collection (survey) can explain where 16-18 NEET groups exist, their participation rates and typology.

**3.2.3.2 *The interpretive paradigm***

Interpretivism defines the subject matter of the social science as people and their institutions. It uses a different research procedure based on inductive theory construction. Bryman (2016) suggests that this provides understanding from the world of human experience and the perceptions of individuals. This recognises the richness that individuals and social groups provide and the role of the researcher to create representations of this (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017). Research is, therefore, a subjective undertaking with knowledge being generated as the researcher interprets participants’ narratives and experiences, and seeks to discover patterns that could be used to explain wider principles. The researcher’s role is one of analysing the various interpretations that subjects give to their social experiences. This acknowledges that multiple realities can make measurement difficult but that phenomena can be better understood by studying them in detail within the context in which they occur. This paradigm is highly-relevant to the research aim and objectives of this study.

**3.2.3.3 *Mixed-method paradigm***

Johnson et al. (2004:14) argue that: “A key feature of mixed-method research is its ‘methodological pluralism’ or eclecticism rather than it having an affinity to a single paradigm.” It allows for the triangulation of research questions across multiple methods deployed, and this reinforces validity. Bell and Waters (2014:119) describe this process as “being able to see the same thing from different perspectives and thus to be able to confirm or challenge the findings of one method with those of another.” This justifies the selection of methods from different paradigms used by this study. The research questions drive a methodology that has multiple instruments for data analysis, both numerical and qualitative. Critical evaluation of the meaning of findings in the data analysis chapters identifies and examines areas of similarity, mismatch or conflict between the findings arising from the different methods and participants. The mixed-method research sequence used is set out in Appendix 2.

**3.3 *Methodologies***

Denicolo and Becker (2012:127) define methodology as “the theoretical and philosophical case for the choice of research approach, design and techniques, including data analysis techniques and data collection tools.” Mason (2012:32) argues that “identifying a methodological strategy should not necessarily be about finding a philosophical label for your approach, so much as finding a coherent and consistent approach to answering your research questions.” This section justifies the selection of a mixed-method methodology to achieve this purpose.

**3.3.1 *Quantitative methodology***

This methodology has advantages because it can quantify differences and similarities, produce comparisons in standardised forms, and help determine measurable relationships between variables. The survey used in this research generated numerical data about FE 16-18 NEET provision (3.5.4.1). Positivism had limitations for this study as empirical evidence needs to be substantiated by being tested scientifically or recounted, such as by large-scale research. This study also requires an approach where parts of the ‘real world’ are not reduced to the rigorous application of testing phenomena using the interaction of variables devoid of humans (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017) because a central objective of the research is to contribute to practice and policy.

**3.3.2 *Qualitative methodology***

This methodology views the social world to be created by human experience. The researcher interprets and explains social reality as it is perceived and created by the research participants themselves. Denicolo and Becker (2012:67) maintain that: “It makes the fundamental assumption that individual participants will hold different world views, while their very engagement in the research might well impact on those views.” Others, such as Drever (2006), have criticised it for being too descriptive and producing biased data due to the subjective role of the researcher. Mason (2012) argues that researchers can reduce subjectivity through reflexivity and academic rigour. In this research, a qualitative methodology is adopted to meet those aspects of research questions which seek to gain an understanding of meanings or interpretations of the NEET phenomena from an FE practitioner perspective and the perceptions of 16-18 NEET learners themselves. The literature identifies these areas as under-researched aspects (Hodgson and Spours, 2011).

A qualitative approach has benefits for this research. It generates participatory perspectives which can be political or change related, and it can produce findings which are regarded as having transferability (Denicolo and Becker, 2012). Miles and Huberman (1994) summarise the strengths of qualitative data in terms of realism, richness and a longitudinal perspective. It has the capacity to locate the meaning of experience within the social world, and place phenomena within their context. This is crucial in seeking to extend knowledge of under-explored aspects of the NEET context. It focuses on the authenticity and appropriateness of the research to the participants in terms of practice utility, which Schoenfield (1999) views as being the purpose of educational research. This is a central objective of this study.

**3.3.3. *Taking forward mixed-method methodology***

There are advantages and limitations in the adoption of a research methodology based solely on one of the traditional paradigms. Ercikan and Roth (2006:14) argue that the polarization of research into either quantitative or qualitative approaches is: “neither meaningful nor productive…because, in fact, there is compatibility between the two.” In the current research, a mixed-method strategy was used based on fitness for purpose and applicability. This involved gathering data sequentially to address the research questions, such as collecting survey and interview data; using both types enriched the data analysis.[[50]](#footnote-50) It allowed access to the ‘voice’ and ‘experience’ of FE managers, policymakers and learners; and to a range of explanations to improve knowledge of NEET provision in location. It extended the scope of the research design by “combining particular with generality, the patterned regularity with contextualised complexity” (Cohen et al., 2011:24).

**3.4 *Approaches***

Bell and Waters (2014:24) argue that “classifying an approach does not mean that one approach has been selected or that the researcher may not move from the methods normally associated with that style: there are occasions when qualitative researchers draw on quantitative techniques and vice versa.” This section justifies the approach taken in this study to address the research area and questions.

**3.4.1 *Survey***

A survey approach is used in this research because it allowed for data collection at a particular point in time to explain the 16-18 NEET context. Using a small-scale survey had advantages because it provided a broad picture of circumstances and some viewpoints across a subset of the sample population (FE colleges). This approach meets the research purpose by gathering numerical data about what types of 16-18 NEET programmes are provided in FE colleges, and how the Coalition Government’s reforms might have an impact on this provision. A survey had other benefits too: many factors in the research questions were covered; data was gained through an online questionnaire, and there was no interviewer bias.

**3.4.2 *Case-study***

Basit (2010:18) suggests that case-study is “a study of instance in action and one instance meant to illuminate similar cases or phenomena.” Munn and Drever (2007) argue that case-studies do not exclude other approaches and that they may be used to follow-up a survey, and they can also precede a survey. Interviews can be used with case-studies as an interpretative means for developing conceptual categories or as a means of identifying issues for further investigation. Yin (2009:19) maintains that “case studies can blend numerical and qualitative data, they are a prototypical instance of mixed-methods research; they can explain, describe, illustrate and enlighten.” Each of these approaches has advantages and drawbacks, but their integration makes a crucial contribution to the nature of this research study because it generates the most appropriate kinds of data required to address the research questions and for what the research aims to achieve.

The main benefit of the case-study approach is its capacity to portray individuals in social situations and to provide descriptive narrative accounts of their perceptions and views. In this study, the case-study instances include interviews with individual FE managers and policymakers (FE stakeholders) and focus groups with FE learners. This extends understanding about the FE 16-18 NEET context based on the meanings of the research participants themselves. Case-studies can also be used to identify common or unique features in an attempt to uncover interactive processes at work. Yin (2009) maintains that they can encompass decisions about implementation processes and improvements (organisational change). FE colleges (as organisations) and individual FE managers have common characteristics and unique features, as discussed below (3.6.1). This enables the research to build on such features and to reveal various interactive processes at work, which may shed light on the implementation of Coalition Government reforms. Such processes would remain hidden using a survey approach alone.

Case-study instances focus on the unique case, and significantly for this study, the perceptions of learners who have been in the 16-18 NEET category. This type of data yields rich descriptive material that provide insights that can be used for improvements in policy or practice (Cohen et al., 2011). Bell and Waters (2014:13) criticise the case-study approach as “it is difficult for researchers to cross-check information from the study of single events in comparison to interviews conducted over a long period of time in ethnography.” The use of qualitative methodologies raises a common criticism discussed earlier, concerning interviewer bias or selective reporting (3.3.2) and the importance of reflexivity in the data analysis process (3.2.2). Yin (2009) argues that case-studies generate analytic rather than statistical generalisations. Bell and Waters (2014) suggest that research findings derived from case-studies have transferability and replicability.

**3.5 *Methods***

This section explains the decisions made to create the research framework. It expands on the specific methodology and methods which underpin the research, and the reasons for the approach taken being most suitable, as discussed in 3.2.3.3, 3.3.3, 3.4.

**3.5.1. *Choice of research pathway***

From the outset of this study, I considered the area of research and what it aims to do. It focuses on FE provision for 16-18 NEET together with the perceptions and experiences of FE providers and their learners, within the context of the Coalition Government education reforms. I took into account what the scope of such an investigation was likely to involve and its expected outcomes. Of primary importance was the purpose of the study, in that the research should be usable for practice and policy, and contribute to knowledge (Thomas, 2007; Punch and Oancea, 2014), as discussed in Chapter One and 3.2.1. The main goal was to focus on what questions needed to be answered and what shape the answers might have (Richards, 2015). The research purpose and questions influenced the selection of paradigms (3.2.3.3), and the choice of the research paradigm determined the methodological approach, and methods used to collect data for this study (Cohen et al., 2011). The rationale for these decisions is considered below.

My ontology reflects components of the social world which I identified as being of central relevance to my research purpose and questions, and this informed my epistemological position. It reflects the belief that:

Reality is subjective and multiple as it is interacted with by participants in the study, including the researchers, who in turn have to recognise and declare their inevitably value-laden and biased (interpretive) approach. (Denicolo and Becker, 2012:65)

The research needed to be capable of being responsive to the particular, and to the participants’ own perceptions, experiences, and social interactions and to make sense, of these (Mason, 2012). Realism would not have been appropriate, because it views social reality as being objective and existing external to individuals’ beliefs or understandings. This research required knowledge (explanations) situated with individuals; to gain their perceptions and views about their experiences as FE educators or learners; within social interactions associated with this. This is resonant with the ontological position of Idealism.

This led me to consider a qualitative methodology, as this position is most suited to the research questions which seek to gain knowledge and understanding of people’s meanings or interpretations of the 16-18 NEET phenomenon, such as from the perspective of FE managers or to gain the perceptions of NEET learners, themselves. Critical reviews by Hodgson and Spours (2011) and Heywood and Williams (2011) identified these aspects as requiring further understanding in terms of their being conducive to improvements in FE practice and government policy formulation. This acknowledgement of the value of FE managers and learners as research participants, through their positions as ‘expert insiders’ in the FE NEET context, is also evident in the Nuffield/ Rathbone EYE review (2008).

**3.5.1.1** ***Integrating – mixed-methods***

The epistemology followed an interpretivist paradigm, and the research began from an inductive stance. As the research developed, with further reflection about the essence of the research purpose, it became apparent that I was also looking for associations derived from a deductive source. I, therefore, considered issues involved in using and integrating methods of data generation. I continued to review the research literature in the area and the use of different methodologies and methods. Spielhofer et al. (2009) had productively used a mixed methodology approach in a study concerning 16-17 NEET sub-categories. Similarly, Siraj and Mayo (2014) effectively conducted mixed-method research with NEET young people. A mixed-method methodology is used in the current study which involves integrating methods for the overall research design.[[51]](#footnote-51) Accordingly, I believed that the most appropriate approaches for investigating this particular research context were case-study and survey (3.4). Richards (2015) and Bryman (2016) argue that the quality of data produced by integrating methods is further enhanced by the triangulation of methods. This strategy is used in this research to corroborate data yielded by one method with another, such as survey data generated through questionnaires with data gathered through semi-structured and qualitative interviews (3.7.2). This integration of methods informed the decision making which went into designing and planning the overall research process.

**3.5.1.2 *Research paradigms***

The positivist paradigm is deductive and the research questions required quantitative data about FE 16-18 NEET provision, such as patterns of recruitment (3.2.3.1). In contrast, the interpretive paradigm is inductive (3.2.3.2) and leads to a qualitative methodology. Qualitative data was also necessary because the research sought to gain a deeper understanding from those involved in the 16-18 NEET context. This reflected the key objective for the research to be usable to practice and policy and to contribute to knowledge (3.2.1). The research purpose also involved attempting learning something new, rather than testing something that is already known (Denicolo and Becker, 2012). These features required data drawn from people’s accounts and observations (FE managers, learners and policymakers). This justifies the choice of a mixed-method paradigm (3.2.3.3) to provide the variety and depth of data most suited to address the research questions and the outcomes the research was seeking to achieve.

**3.5.2 *Rationale for the approach chosen***

A survey is a typical approach used in a quantitative methodology. Munn and Drever (2007) suggest that the advantage of a small-scale survey is that it can provide a general picture of circumstances and some viewpoints across a subset of the sample population (FE colleges in the West Midlands). From this, a comparison can be made about the similarities and differences with other similar groups of subjects. This approach was chosen because it had the following advantages. It allowed a substantial amount of data to be collected in a short time period. It produced factual data about the numbers of 16-18 NEET recruited to FE provision and the programmes (curriculum) available. The literature indicated that this type of data was not available in the public domain (Coles, 2014; AoC 2015c.d; DfE, 2018d). Cohen et al. (2011) suggest that the survey is particularly useful in such contexts.

Case-study is a typical approach used in a qualitative methodology. Qualitative data generated by case-study was also required because the research sought to gain meaning from the participants to explain the FE NEET context (3.2.1). Richards (2015) suggests that deeper understanding and insights are gained through the researcher’s interpretation of the views and perceptions of participants, chosen for their relevance to the research purpose and questions. Case-study is used to provide the unique case, and this fits the research purpose of this study to gain participants’ views and perceptions of the NEET context (Chapter One, 3.4.2.1). The instance of action is meant to illustrate other similar cases and the findings from research using this approach are regarded as having transferability and replicability (3.5.2).

The case-study instances chosen include interviews with FE managers, learners and policymakers. Research by Reiter and Schlimbach (2015) productively used case-study instances to gain a deeper understanding of NEET status and youth transitions to employment which questioned government policy assumptions. This reinforces the value of using this approach to provide rich accounts in contextualised settings. The limitations of case-study were considered, such as the complex data for interpretation associated with this approach (Drever, 2006). In this study, reflexivity and critical self-examination have been integral to the research process and strategies were developed to address distortion in data analysis (3.2.2, 3.10.2).

The survey approach provides factual data, but it has limitations in providing explanations, to wholly encompass the research purpose and questions in this study.[[52]](#footnote-52) Other research techniques are required to give a fuller picture. A sequential mixed-method approach aligned with a model put forward by Munn and Drever (2007) is, therefore, used for this research (3.3.3). The survey collected quantitative data and presented a broad picture of the NEET problem being investigated. Participants were then chosen to follow-up the findings revealed by the questionnaire in case-study instances. This combined approach produced “a good fit between its component parts, especially between questions and methods” (Punch and Oancea, 2014:78).[[53]](#footnote-53) The mixed-method approach was feasible in terms of access to respondents and interview participants, and it was feasible within the time constraints of this thesis.

**3.5.3 *Reasons for the rejection of other approaches***

The concept of variable and the measurement of variables are essential to the quantitative methodology used in Experimental Design. The idea that manipulation of a variable (cause) may lead to the change in the value of another (effect) underpins experimental research (Punch and Oancea, 2014). The requirements of this approach limit its usefulness for this study. The identification of matched and identical experimental groups would be problematic to establish or maintain because 16-18 NEET is shown to be a diverse group and young people often move in and out of NEET status (Yates and Payne, 2006; Finlay et al., 2010). Sub-groups within NEET status, such as vulnerable or looked-after groups (DfE, 2016a), would increase ethical concerns associated with this approach. Time and cost factors associated with large-scale experiments also made the approach prohibitive.

Ethnography is used to study people in naturally occurring educationalsettings by using interpretative methods of data collection (Bernard, 2013). It involves the researcher’s “first-hand experience or immersion in a setting” (Mason, 2012:55). The approach uses direct observation of one group or more in a setting over a long period of time, and participant observation. “Ethnographic study may well be relatable in a way that will enable members of similar groups to recognise problems and, possibly, to see ways of solving similar problems” (Bell and Waters, 2014:15). This supports the objectives of the current research to achieve utility to practise. Ethnography presented logistical difficulties about maintaining typical groups given the transient nature of NEET groups, discussed above. There were time constraints for thesis research, such as conducting observations with participants over a long time span. Given the potential benefits of this approach, ethnography may be a follow-on recommendation for research with a wider scope.

Action Research is conducted by practitioners (as researchers), often as a self-critical enquiry or where they have identified that specific knowledge is required to bring about small-scale change, in a given one-setting practice situation, such as improvements in teaching and learning. The participatory approach with participants, and the aim to make changes within a researcher’s workplace (Cohen et al., 2011; Richards, 2015), make this approach unsuitable for this study. Action Research projects might form a recommendation which follows the research report from this study, such as if FE practitioners identified a need to tackle a particular 16-18 NEET problem in a specific situation and setting.

**3.5.4** ***Method - instruments***

This section puts forward the rationale for the choice of methods and instruments utilised to ensure that valid and reliable data was collected. The techniques used, and the types of data they were planned to produce are discussed.[[54]](#footnote-54)

**3.5.4.1 *Questionnaire***

The main purpose of a questionnaire survey is measurement using a standardised method of data collection (3.4.1). It provides an even stimulus to large numbers simultaneously and the data generated can be easily transferred to numerical values. Bell and Waters (2014) view questionnaires as being an efficient use of the researcher’s time. Data can be collected from respondents by email, and an online form and the researcher does not need to spend time travelling or in interview situations. Drever (2006) suggests that by using closed questions the analysis of questionnaire responses is more straightforward than using interviews and the use of standardised questions is an advantage because the researcher is more in control of the stimulus. Disadvantages of questionnaires include the amount of time required to draft, and re-draft questions, considering categories of response for each question, and making adjustments from piloting activities. However, they reduce researcher bias which is the usual criticism of interviews (Richards, 2015).

A questionnaire “is concerned with demographic characteristics, opinions, attitudes and the social environment” (Bell and Waters, 2014:14). These items are evident in the research purpose and questions. Themes from the literature critique informed the main sections of the questionnaire (Appendix 3), and the questions asked were mapped to the research questions (Appendix 4). This enabled data to be collected about types of FE programmes and issues influencing provision, such as Government funding.[[55]](#footnote-55) It yielded numerical data leading to descriptive statistics about recruitment and success rates over a three-year period, 2011-2014, which permitted good-trend analysis. The data addressed knowledge gaps evident in the literature critique by identifying clusters of factors influencing young people’s take-up of NEET provision (Chapter Two, 2.4.5). The main benefit of using the questionnaire was its potential for identifying patterns across FE colleges in the sample. This sharpened the focus on policy affecting FE provision, such as increased marketisation.

**3.5.4.2 *Interviews***

There are several types of interviewing techniques with different aims based on different principles. Drever (2006) classified these as being: formal, less-formal and informal; structured, semi-structured and un-structured; focused or non-directive; informal interviews or respondent interviews. To obtain further insight into the effects of reform policy on NEET participation, qualitative data was gained through follow-on interviews.

**3.5.4.3 S*emi-structured interviews***

Semi-structured interviews with FE senior managers were selected because this type of interview is suited to small-scale research with a limited population. They yielded data of greater depth than the questionnaire because the interviewees could answer at some length and in their own words. The use of prompts and probes and follow-up questions allowed participants to expand on and explain their views and perceptions about Coalition reforms and NEET provision. This allowed me to “keep an open mind about the shape of what they need to know and to allow concepts and theories to emerge from the data” (Bryman, 2016:10). It uncovered important data, vital to addressing aspects of the research questions, not covered by the questionnaire.

I decided in advance the main topic areas and questions to be asked in the interview schedule for senior managers (Appendix 5). These were thematically linked to the literature critique and mapped to the research questions (Appendix 6). Using a pre-determined framework for the interview schedule helped ensure consistency across the sample and allowed for comparison. Denicolo and Becker (2012) suggest that a shared frame of reference makes this method suitable for investigating professional concerns, such as education policy and practice. This research method was practical given the limited timescale for this research. Information gained through the interview questions gave a 100% return rate compared to the lower return rates usually associated with self-completion questionnaires, which Mason (2012) estimates to be 20-25% on average.

The semi-structured interview allowed me to follow-up ideas and probe interviewees to investigate motives and feelings. Supplementary questions were also asked to explore issues further. Disadvantages of this method included: interviews take time (usually 45-60 minutes plus travel time); and there is always the danger of interviewer bias, as discussed in 3.3.2. The wording of questions requires precision, topics need to be selected, and methods of analysis needed to be considered. The preparation time was demanding, such as drafting and piloting instruments.

**3.5.4.4 *Focus group discussions***

For more significant results about the provision context in-depth data was sought from learners in FE colleges who had experienced being NEET. Bell and Waters (2014:187) maintain that “focus groups are undoubtedly valuable when in-depth information is needed about how people think about an issue, their reasoning about the way things are, why they hold the views they do’’. Group discussions provided a vehicle for participants to share and compare their perceptions and experiences in the context of peer-related NEET activities. The data produced uncovered valuable meanings and unique shared representations about FE NEET provision drawn from the participants’ lived experience.

The discussion groups had benefits, such as generating data quickly at a low cost and for triangulation with other methods in mixed-method research. Smithson (2000) suggests that care should be taken with the unconscious use of language or non-verbal cues which might show a researcher’s strength of feeling towards particular views put forward by group participants because this can influence the validity of the emerging data. The researcher needs to be a skilled interviewer to manage the focus group dynamic and to avoid any possible domination by one member of the group. I was able to draw on my prior work experience operating focus groups for government consultations. Themes from the literature review and issues arising from the questionnaire findings informed the topic areas developed for the group discussions and provided a stimulus for follow-on telephone interviews with policymakers (Appendices 7 and 8).

**3.5.4.5 *Telephone interviews***

Cohen et al. (2011:51) suggest that “policymakers support particular political agendas which drive decision making in education policy.” The critique of literature highlighted that reform policy was driven more by ideological preferences or assumptions made by policymakers, rather than by a pedagogic evidence base (Chapter Two, 2.4.5). Telephone interviews with participants experienced in policy development were used to provide insight into dimensions of the Coalition Government’s NEET policy strategies. Telephone interviews were chosen because they had the advantage of providing ease of access to individuals that may be difficult to meet: busy officials or a wide-spread sample (Burke and Miller, 2001). The sample was recruited through existing professional networks. Basit (2010) views telephone interviews as being less obtrusive than face-to-face interviews, involving less travel time and being more cost-effective. However, Bell and Waters (2014) suggest that it is difficult to establish rapport in telephone interviews due to the absence of non-verbal cues. Careful preparation, planning and piloting activities were undertaken to mitigate the disadvantages associated with this method. Cohen at al. (2011) suggest that the maximum duration of the telephone call should be 15-20 minutes but in this research, the interviewees had substantial knowledge about the NEET policy context and were able to make comprehensive responses within this time frame.

**3.6 *Sample***

**3.6.1 *Research context***

The research was conducted in the FE sector and the setting selected was FE colleges. The sample for the survey and case-studies (Appendix 2) was drawn from FE colleges because FE is the major provider of 16-18 NEET provision (DfE, 2013a), and operates at the cutting-edge of Government education reform policy. FE colleges are one of a number of Government funded education and training providers that can be defined as being part of the broad education provision sector for 16-18 years olds. The FE sector has its own Government remit funding, legislative framework and is subject to Ofsted inspection. FE colleges have their own sets of structures and business activities that make it a distinct sector with its own culture.

**3.6.2 *Survey sample***

The sample population was seven Chief Executives from FE colleges in the West Midlands (FE in a range of possible organisations). There were 25FE colleges in this region out of a total of 348 in England, in November 2014 (AoC, 2014b). The maximum sample size used for this research study was 23 FE colleges, and this reflected those FE colleges which delivered 16-18 NEET provision. By collecting data from this smaller regional subset (sample) of the population, the data gained by the questionnaire can be viewed as representative of the FE college population (Cohen et al., 2011). A probability sampling method is used because “it is the main way to seek a representative sample selected” (Bryman, 2016:164). This **sampling** method uses a form of random selection that assures the different units in the sample population have equal probabilities of participating in the research activity. Cluster sampling is used when relatively homogeneous groupings are evident in a [statistical population](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Statistical_population). The total population is divided into these groupings, and a simple random sample (a subset of a sample chosen from a larger set of the population) is selected. The principle of simple random sampling is that every object has the same probability of being chosen (Cohen at al., 2011). [[56]](#footnote-56) The sample population was readily identifiable, I had sufficient resources to contact the population, and it fitted with the time constraints of the research.

The questionnaire was administered by email and completed online by the Chief Executive of each of the seven FE colleges participating in the research. The sample characteristics included: substantial knowledge of provision; experienced in NEET cohorts; completion of annual Government funding returns and Ofsted inspection. These attributes provided a sample with the necessary expertise to be able to answer the questions in the questionnaire and understand the terminology used. A briefing paper was prepared for the AoC to send out in advance to the Chief Executives of 23 FE colleges in the West Midlands to help recruit the sample (Appendix 9).[[57]](#footnote-57) This paper described the parameters of the questionnaire, its context within the wider research activities, and the benefits to be gained. The benefits appealed to the professional interests of FE colleges by virtue of the AoC having supported the pilot study for the research. The research focus was topical and presented potential business benefits to be gained about market factors. Detailed information about the research was provided in a Project Information Sheet and an accompanying Informed Consent Form (Appendix 10).

**3.6.3 *Face-to-face interviews with FE managers***

This sample consisted of five FE senior managerswho confirmed they wanted to participate in follow-up interviews and focus groups. I used findings from the questionnaire to refine the selection of this sample by using indicators such as experience of provision; knowledge of reform policy; and having learners making successful progression from 16-18 NEET provision. A theoretical sampling approach was adopted “selecting groups or categories to study on the basis of their relevance to the research questions” (Mason, 2012:24). This linked the sampling strategy closely to address the research questions, the kind of data required and arguments which might be constructed based on the analysis of this data. Drever (2006) estimated the time involved in conducting a semi-structured interview is one hour; this does not include travel time to the location, or administrative tasks such as, preparation and planning for the interviews, or transcribing tape-recorded interviews. A sample of five interviews fitted the time constraints and logistics of this research project and was manageable.

**3.6.4 *Focus groups with learners***

This sample was drawn from three FE colleges where a senior manager had participated in an interview. Purposive sampling was chosen because: “The primary concern is to acquire in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it” (Cohen et al., 2011:157). A non-probability dimensional sampling method was also used to select this sample. Quotas were set using the following characteristics: achievement of NEET programme and progression within FE. Bell and Waters (2014) reinforce the importance of participants in a focus group having a shared interest to discuss. All the focus group participants had experienced 16-18 NEET provision in FE. They were asked in advance if they would be interested in participating and they all confirmed their interest. The participants received a Project Information Sheet with an accompanying Informed Consent Form (Appendix 11). Open-ended themes from the questionnaire data analysis informed topic areas developed for this activity (Appendix 7).

Cohen et al. (2011) recommend between four and 12 participants to make up a focus group with some allowance made for people not turning up on the day. In this research, a smaller group size of three to five participants was used to allow greater opportunity for participants to contribute to the discussion. Three FE colleges provided one focus group discussion and these were coded alphabetically as group M, N or O in the fieldwork schedule (Appendix 12). Five learners participated in focus group M, three learners participated in group N, and five participated in group O. There were three focus group discussions conducted in total, with a sample size of 13 learners participating in focus group discussions in total. The sample size was sufficient to compare data across the focus groups, and it was efficient in terms of time, given the parameters of this study.

**3.6.5 *Telephone interviews with policymakers***

This sample of five participants was drawn from policymakers whose work involved the FE 16-18 NEET context and Coalition Government policy. Using professional networks, interviews were arranged and held with representatives from stakeholder organisations selected for their expertise, such as DfE and AoC. The selection of the sample was by critical-case, which is similar to stratified sampling. This concerns selecting “people who display the issue or a set of characteristics in their entirety in a way that is highly significant for a study to address” (Cohen et al., 2011:230). I specified in advance a set of criteria (characteristics) that the study needed to address, to ensure that these appeared in the sample selected. The characteristics identified: influential position within education policy and professional knowledge about the NEET context. The sample size was five telephone interviews; this was sufficient to ensure the depth of response required and the validity of data yielded, from this sample drawn from a small population of experts in the field. Telephone interviews had the advantage of reducing travel costs and were an efficient use of time both for the experts (often key people in organisations who may be difficult to meet) and for me.

**3.7 *Validity and reliability***

This research study incorporates different interpretations of the principles for validity and reliability required by quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, which draw from paradigms reflecting different views about the nature of social research.

**3.7.1 *Validity***

Bell and Waters (2014:120) define validity as “whether an item or instrument measures or describes what it is supposed (or claims) to measure or describe and whether the interpretations follow from them.” Mason (2012:189) suggests that “validity can be viewed as a matter of degree rather than an absolute to be achieved” and used the notion of ‘validity of methods in a broad and detailed way’. This notion was applied in this research study. The validity of the research instruments was tackled in this study by careful sampling, the use of appropriate instrumentation and planning for statistical treatment of the data. It involved me in engaging in questions from the planning and design stage of the research about what the data sources aim to ‘tell’ and how valid this was to address the research questions and provide an explanation. This helped link the research questions closer to the methodology and the methods used to design the research, to ensure valid data was collected.

The small-scale survey produced numerical data that led to descriptive statistics. Rigour was brought to data collection and analysis related to the research questions to ensure validity. The qualitative research yielded data that involved complex interpretation and analysis procedures, because: “With humans, it is difficult, practically or ethically, to manipulate or control all of the variables” (Denicolo and Becker, 2012). It required a demonstration of how interpretations have been reached and on what basis, and how well the sections of data are ‘woven’, such as by the use of cross-sectional themes. Mason (2012:192) argues that “validity of method and interpretation needs to be demonstrated by a careful retracing and reconstruction of the route by which you think you reached them and [taking] some responsibility for strong reflexivity.” The Methodologies section (3.2.3.2, 3.3.2) indicates that the validity of the interview data is affected by the subjectivity of respondents and also the subjectivity of the researcher, which can contribute to a degree of bias. My approach to eliminate undue bias in the research was considered in relation to positionality and reflexivity in section 3.2.2. The validity of method and interpretation is considered in sections 3.2, 3.3, 3.5.2 and the processes involved in data collection, and data analysis and its verification in sections 3.9 and 3.10.

***3.7.2 Triangulation of methods and sample***

Triangulation is a commonly advocated way of checking validity because, “mixed-method approaches are designed, bringing quantitative data into play with qualitative, very rigorous analysis of the qualitative data can result.” (Richards, 2015:259). In this study concurrent validity in the research was established by investigating the same phenomena from different perspectives; different methods and types of participants are used to address the research questions. A rationale for the research techniques used, how they were applied, and what kind of data they were intended to produce is presented in sections 3.3.3, 3.5.2, 3.5.4. The data gathered from an early stage (survey) was used to contribute to what was done at the next interview stage with a different sample. The combination of techniques allowed for triangulation across the data analysis to validate the interpretations of the data, and results. Denicolo and Becker (2012:67) suggest that triangulation of method where “data from a technique are compared with data from one or more other methods increases accuracy.” There was sample triangulation by a different type, scope and size. The data collection enabled “comparisons to be made between two or more sub-groups that are drawn from different levels of the study [managers, learners and policymakers]” (Onweghgbuzie and Leech, 2007:240), and this further supported validity.

**3.7.3 *Reliability***

Basit (2010:70) suggests thatin quantitative research “reliability can be achieved through standardisation of research instruments, by cross-checking data and by using different instruments to measure the same thing.” This provides an indicator of how reliable or accurate the research tools and instruments are and judgements can be made about the consistency with which the instruments produce certain measurements. This indicator for reliability is “based on assumptions that methods of data collection can be conceptualised as tools that can be standardised, neutral and non-biased” (Mason, 2012:182). Qualitative research uses other principles to ensure the accuracy of the methods. This includes demonstrating that data collection and analysis suit the research purpose, address the research questions, and provide the degree of accuracy it claims to be providing, such as ensuring that there has been no misrepresentation of the data, or inadequate recording or analysis of the data. In this study, the presentation of the analysis explained how and why the data was reliable and accurate.

Cohen et al. (2011) place value on ‘participant validation’ as another means used for verifying the reliability of the data in qualitative research. However, participants may change the research data according to factors, such as fear of how their own negative responses might be perceived by relevant others. Basit (2010) and Mason (2012) discount participant validation; therefore, it was not used in this research. Denicolo and Becker (2012:70) argue that in qualitative research: “reliability is not an issue as [researchers] expect respondents to develop their ideas and respond differently in different contexts.” The authenticity of the data is seen to have more importance in terms of its credibility to the participant population and to meet the research aims. The acknowledgement of ‘the personal’ orientates the qualitative element of this research, gives it credibility and promotes its utility, and significance to the participants, and practice. Cohen at al. (2011) stress the need for qualitative research to demonstrate that it is honest, open and accurate in addressing the research questions and does not falsify data. In this study, the research procedure was documented in detail and rigour was brought to record-keeping and reflection throughout the process, as discussed below (3.9 and 3.10).

**3.7.4 *Pilot study***

To enhance validity and reliability, a pilot study was conducted. If an item was not valid, then it may also lack reliability, and it was re-drafted. Piloting trialled the research instruments, and some improvements were made to them. Lessons learnt from the pilot of the survey led to the re-drafting of questions. This ensured that wording and categories of response were sufficiently clear for respondents to produce good-quality data. The categories ‘specialist provision’ and ‘general provision’ formed a new question. This increased compatibility between the numerical data required by the survey and by FE colleges’ data. These categories were used in the interviews with FE managers, and this provided a further lens into the types of provision available. There was also a revision of the interview schedule questions for the senior managers to avoid duplication of content.

The pilots were vital for testing how well the questionnaire and interviews worked for respondents, and whether they gathered the type of data needed to address the research questions. The pilot of the questionnaire was undertaken by two FE Chief Executives in the East Midlands; the same college settings were used to pilot interviews with two FE managers and one focus group. The pilot of the telephone interview questions involved two policymakers: one worked for a Government agency and the other for a stakeholder organisation. The pilot process provided for the scrutiny and refinement of the instrumentation and associated documentation, such as Project Information Sheets. This ensured the research instrumentation was fit for purpose.

**3.8 *Ethics***

Bell and Waters (2014) argue that professional ethical codes of conduct provide guidance and help orientate researchers, but are not able to provide advice for specific research projects because ethics are situated. The researcher needs to develop their own ethical principles or codes and decide whether the research is consistent with these.

**3.8.1 *Ethical considerations***

Ethics is a complex area of educational research and open to interpretation because there are no absolute principles.[[58]](#footnote-58) General systems of ethics with regulatory codes and guidelines for practice exist, such as those of the British Educational Research Association [BERA], (BERA, 2018). These emphasise researchers as having a responsibility to produce and present good-quality research as part of their responsibility to themselves, the participants, and their profession or institution (Richards, 2015).

Mason (2012:202) maintains that it is essential for the researcher to consider the ethics and politics of their arguments, analyses, explanations, and ways of presenting these to a wider audience because: “questions about reliability and accuracy, validity and generalisation are not only intellectual issues but also cast a moral and political hue.” This raises important ethical research issues, such as the integrity of data analysis and whether false or inappropriate generalisations have been made. Ethical regulation exists in the form of legislation; professional associations have codes of practice which provide guidance to researchers, and universities have ethical review committees with a remit to prevent harmful research (through supervisors who approve the integrity of research).[[59]](#footnote-59)

**3.8.2 *Ethical approval***

This research received ethical approval from the Faculty of Business, Education and Law at Staffordshire University in April 2014 (Appendix 13). The ethical research procedures used in this study include necessary information so that participants are made fully aware of the research purpose, and their rights regarding privacy, data ownership, and its retrieval and storage. The following procedures guarantee the confidentiality of data and the anonymity of participants. Taking part in the research was on a voluntary basis and strictly confidential. All participants’ responses were coded (alphabetically) and the data was analysed solely in order to address the research questions. No personal details, real names or settings were required or used in the data collected. Therefore, it will be highly unlikely to trace the findings presented in the dissertation or associated materials, to a participant or their setting. Whilst participants’ comments or responses may be quoted anonymously to support the findings of the research, all the data will remain anonymous.

The research findings will be presented in a written dissertation report to be submitted to Staffordshire University as part of the assessment for the Doctorate award. A reference copy will be available in the University library, but the research report will not be published. No-one will be named or identifiable in any way in the report from the study. All the research data collected and information will be stored securely in accordance with the Data Protection Act and held separately to participants’ Informed Consent Forms in locked storage. It will be kept for 12 months after completion of the research and then disposed of as confidential waste. The subjects involved in this research and its pilot study received information explaining these confidentiality procedures and questions of anonymity in a Project Information Sheet. They were required to complete and sign an accompanying Informed Consent Form to say that they understood that all data will remain anonymous and that confidentiality procedures had been explained.

Ethical considerations were applied at the initial planning stage (appropriateness of topic), the design stage, selection of method (gaining access to the sample), for data collection (guarantees of confidentiality), the research purpose and time (requirements), and were applied to the data analysis in writing up the report and disseminating research findings. The research design has also been interrogated against ethical criteria to: “demonstrate that [the researcher] evaluated the risks to harm to any stakeholder and have sought to treat them with respect” (Denicolo and Becker, 2012:73). Ethical considerations and principles informed the whole research process including judgements made about the validity, reliability and accuracy of the data analysis.

**3.9 *Data collection***

Data collection included decisions about what kind of answers were required to address the research questions, and what variables should be explored. The survey results were collected between February and April 2015, and fieldwork for the interviews took place between June and December 2015 (Appendix 12).

**3.9.1 *Questionnaire, Chief Executives FE colleges – research stage 1***

The sample population for the survey was drawn from 23 FE colleges in the West Midlands out of 348 in England, in 2014-15.[[60]](#footnote-60) An initial approach was made to respondents through a briefing paper that was prepared for the AoC to distribute to Chief Executives of FE colleges (Appendix 9). This aimed to mitigate low response rates associated with the remoteness of the researcher by clarifying any potential misunderstandings (Munn and Drever, 2007). The paper was followed by a Project Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form sent to Chief Executives (Appendix 10), which provided information about completing the questionnaire. Email reminders and telephone calls were made to positively influence the response rate.

The surveys were sent by email to 23 FE Chief Executivesin February 2015, with a specific deadline for online completion and return. The response rate was lower than anticipated. It was affected by an unexpected 24% reduction in Government funding for the FE adult budget in March 2015, followed by further cuts in April 2015. This precipitated structural re-organisation for many of the sample population. Out of a target sample population of 23, seven returned surveys were completed and usable, a response rate of 30.42%.[[61]](#footnote-61) The survey data was supplemented by data-sets drawn from an additional documentary review undertaken in May 2015.[[62]](#footnote-62) This augmented gaps in national and regional data in the public domain for NEET provision in FE colleges. It provided new data-sets emanating from the Coalition changing the NEET data collection methodology (DfE, 2015c).

The questionnaire mainly used closed questions which suited the type of empirical data to be collected. The questions were drawn from themes emerging from the literature critique; this allowed for the categorisation of key areas relevant to the research questions (Appendix 1). These thematic categories were used for analysing the data, summarising results and reporting findings.[[63]](#footnote-63) The questionnaire layout used question types, such as; category, list, ranking and multiple-choice. This facilitated the use of coding, counting responses and grids for data analysis. This procedure addressed the research questions by highlighting similarities, groupings, or areas of significance. The questionnaire contained a couple of open questions, to capture unexpected responses. Response sheets were used to record data and support analysis. The respondents were coded alphabetically A-G, by colour. No real names were used to maintain confidentiality.

**3.9.2 *FE manager interviews* – *research stage 2***

The sample for the semi-structured interviews was approached through the AoC briefing paper, which not only invited Chief Executives to participate in the questionnaire, but also to confirm if they wanted senior managers to be involved in follow-up interviews, and learners to participate in focus groups. Project Information Sheets and Informed Consent Forms for these interviews were sent to Chief Executives who expressed an interest in participating in the follow-on research activity (Appendix 16). I made early contact with nominated managers to discuss and confirm arrangements for these face-to-face interviews to be conducted at FE college locations. The interviews were conducted from June to October 2015. (Appendix 12).

I tried to build rapport and put participants at ease (Mason, 2012). The interview schedule used a pre-determined framework, and the questions were thematically mapped to the research questions (Appendices 5, 6). The questions were ‘open’ and collected qualitative data from participants. A few questions were followed-up with prompts and probes to explain any ambiguity in questions or elicit deeper responses. The questions gathered complex information that was transcribed verbatim into text. The interview participants were coded alphabetically H to L, and by colour, and participants were anonymised and given fictitious names.

**3.9.3 *Learner focus group discussions – research stage 3***

Detailed information about the nature of the focus group activity was sent out to FE college Chief Executives and senior managers participating in the semi-structured interviews, in a Project Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form (Appendices 10, 16). The selection of FE colleges for research stages 2-3 was based on whether they had a pool of learners who had made progression from 16-18 NEET provision (3.6.2). I made early contact with the senior managers to discuss the focus group process more fully, answering any questions and supporting the recruitment of participants. A Project Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form were sent in advance to those learners identified by senior managers as being interested and willing to participate (Appendix 11). Full information was provided about the purpose of the research and guarantees given about anonymity and confidentiality to the learners in advance. Once a senior manager confirmed that they had recruited sufficient participants for a focus group, I made arrangements for the activity to be held at a ‘known’ location in their college. Three focus groups were recruited with a sample of 13 learners, and the discussions were conducted from November to December 2015 (Appendix 12).

Effectively, I acted as “the instrument in the focus group interviews, an expert in interaction and communication to promote an atmosphere so [participants] can feel secure to talk freely” (Kvale, 1996:14). By design, the researcher was the ‘facilitator’ of an interactive group discussion, because the insight and data produced came from the interaction between the participants (Kreuger and Casey, 2011). A Topic Area Guide was developed, and the themed questions devised for the interviews were mapped to the research questions. These drew on themes identified by the literature critique and follow-on issues emerging from the survey results. This framework provided consistency across the sample and allowed for comparison to be made between issues discussed by the groups. The discussions were audio-recorded. The data collected were transcribed verbatim into text. The focus groups were coded alphabetically M to O, and by colour, and participants were anonymised and given fictitious names (Appendix 12).

**3.9.4 *Telephone interviews, policymakers – research stage 4***

I used existing professional networks to approach relevant stakeholders to be interviewed.[[64]](#footnote-64) This ensured that the participant sample of five met the specific purpose of the research activity by virtue of their professional role and expertise (3.6.4). Initial exploratory telephone contact was made with a list of eight policymakers. This presented an opportunity for me to explain in person the benefits of participating in these interviews. It was followed by sending a Project Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form to interested interviewees (Appendix 17). Interviewees were then contacted, and a list of five interviewees was confirmed. The remainder were put on standby in case any of the first five dropped out. The interview dates were arranged in advance, at times to suit participants. The target sample population of five interviewees was recruited over a four-month period, and the interviews were conducted between September and December 2015 (Appendix 12).

Thomas and Purdon (1994) suggest that, as with face-to-face interviewing, the quality of data collected by telephone interviews can depend on the participant’s level of knowledge and interest in the subject matter. Questions were based on the questionnaire results and findings from the senior manager interviews (Appendix 8). These questions were communicated in advance to interviewees, giving them time to prepare their responses. The data collected was transcribed verbatim into textfrom audio-recordings of the interviews. The interviews were coded alphabetically P to T, and by colour, and participants were anonymised and given fictitious names (Appendix 12).

**3.10 *Data analysis***

The question of ‘how the data would be analysed’ was a priority at the design and planning stage of the research, and integral to the instrumentation used. The criteria for choosing which form of analysis to use was governed by fitness for purpose, and to ensure validity, and that the interpretations which followed from this addressed the research questions.

***3.10.1 Questionnaire data analysis***

The questionnaire collected numerical data that provided descriptive statistics about the take-up of 16-18 NEET provision, such as, success rates over a three-year period in a standardised form. This allowed for comparative analysis about the types of programmes available in the surveyed FE colleges. Differences or similarities in the data collected were measurable (empirical) and analysed by coding and counting responses to produce comparisons between variables to address the research questions. The analysis yielded from the questionnaire supports replicability of findings in areas such as types of programmes; resources; and relationships between this provision and Coalition Government reforms (using ordinal data from rating scales).[[65]](#footnote-65)

The questionnaire is used in small-scale research, and it is assumed that the findings would not be automatically generalisable to a wider audience, as with large-scale positivist research (Cohen et al., 2011). Munn and Drever (2007:13) argue that in social science research “the idea of creating a ‘truly’ representative sample is appealing but misleading…it would lead to creating a sample incorporating so many assumptions we are in danger of producing results that ‘prove’ our own expectations.” These authors recommend that the aim should rather be, to clearly define the group (the population) of people the research is interested in and then to select a sample from each group. Natural variations within the chosen population even out and so the sample does reflect the population from which it came (Munn and Drever, 2007). Further, Bryman (2016) concurs that this is the main way to seek a representative sample and it is used in this study (3.6.2). Cohen et al. (2011:264) suggest that researchers endeavour to collect survey data “from a smaller group or subset (sample) of the population in such way that the knowledge gained is representative of the total population.” This is what the current study has accomplished.

There are limitations associated with representativeness and sampling. Munn and Drever (2007) and Cohen et al. (2011) highlight that there is a degree of uncertainty about how far representativeness applies to the population as a whole and estimates of confidence levels increase the larger the sample is. Furthermore, Bell and Waters (2014) suggest that the notion of relatability may be more appropriate than representativeness, in that, a study may be relatable in a way that will enable members of similar groups to recognise problems, and possibly, to see ways of solving similar problems. In my research, a small-scale questionnaire is used to gain numerical data about 16-18 NEET participation in FE college provision. The survey data was collected from a subset of the sample population (FE colleges in the West Midlands). Inferences can be made about the wider FE college population based on the data generated, by the use of descriptive and inferential statistical techniques (Basit, 2010; Cohen et al., 2011). Similarities and differences are quantified in a standardised form, and the relationship between variables is measurable (Richards, 2015). It is acknowledged that there needs to be caution taken with the notion of representativeness. In this research, data are drawn from the survey subset, and from this comparison can be made about similarities, and differences, with other similar groups of subjects. The study does not make claims of generalising to the total FE population.

Thematic topic areas derived from the literature critique were mapped to the research questions (Appendix 1), which enabled the categorisation of key issues for data analysis. The questionnaire design used question types such as category, list, ranking and multiple-choice, which collected a range of data for statistical analysis. Rating scales measured congruence between the existing and the ideal. Reviewing graphs, filters and comparisons were conducted between question sets to identify trends, patterns or relationships. Coding methods such as clustering responses and showing commonality informed the data analysis. The questionnaire had a couple of open questions for any unexpected results, and this allowed a dimension of qualitative data for analysis. The layout and structure of the questionnaire were carefully considered to ensure it was compatible with data entry and analysis.

Munn and Drever (2007:47) argue that: “The number-crunching programs used in large surveys (in 100 out of 200 cases) are mostly irrelevant to the kinds of data dealt with in smaller-scale surveys.” This placed little advantage in using computer processing packages for this small-scale survey which had fewer than 23 possible respondents. The inspection of the data was by use of grids, spreadsheet and notes in the margins of the questionnaire. This was combined with Excel for the presentation of the data; and tables, charts and diagrams were used. The reference to the data and the corresponding numeric value used for analysis is presented in the survey results.

**3.10.2 *Interview data* *analysis***

The interview data analysis provided “more of a reflective reactive interaction between the researcher and the de-contextualised data that are interpretations of a social encounter” (Cohen et al., 2011:427). Bryman (2016) puts forward tactics for generating meaning from qualitative data by grouping textual material from transcribed interviews into categories and themes. This helps to move from the specific to the general in data analysis. A range of techniques was used for the interview data, including clustering, counting frequencies and noting repeated themes. Qualitative data were summarised and analysed by discerning patterns or themes, and using categories to code the data.

It was an iterative process, which required consideration and refinement of coding themes, and categories used to uncover regularities and to interpret the data. Thematic and descriptive coding categories were applied to the interview data (transcript texts) and a process of constant comparison was used across the interview data sets. Cohen et al. (2011:557) maintain that “constant comparison is a major feature of qualitative techniques for data analysis [by which] the researcher compares newly acquired data with existing data categories that have been devised, and which are emerging, in order to achieve a fit between these and the data.” Discrepant and dis-confirming cases can be equally important in assisting emerging categories to fit all the data. By using this approach, data can be compared across a range of situations, such as different participant types and through a range of methods. This resonated with the methodological triangulation associated with mixed-methods, discussed in 3.7.2.

The coding categories identified patterns, relationships and emergent ‘core categories’ (themes and issues), which were catalogued for each interview transcript.[[66]](#footnote-66) A coding catalogue system advocated by Richards (2015), which combines constant comparison with the application of open, axial and selective coding of data, was developed to refine data interpretation and analysis. The interview data analysis was open to emergent themes and issues through the identification of patterns of association in responses. This highlighted links and connections, which conveyed an understanding of the meanings emerging from the perspectives of those involved.

The questions in the interview schedule for the senior managers were ‘open’, and matched to the research questions, and the texts were categorised to seek related patterns. The data analysis and findings initially incorporated cross-tabulation analysis based on the four themes (topics) used in the interview schedule. Working definitions were devised for each category so that they were valid and made sense in terms of the research question. Coding methods included coded themes, cross-matching and grouping. Interviewee statements were also examined to identify common features or distinctive views across the sample. A matrix recorded this information for each interview transcript, and broad coding categories were derived from this data, which were refined into six core categories (Appendix 18). The reference to the interview data and corresponding coding categories used in data analysis was recorded in a Catalogue of Coding Categories.

Topic themes from the literature critique and emerging issues from the survey facilitated initial coding of the learners’ responses to questions in the focus group discussions. A matrix was used to record this information for each focus group transcript. Coding methods included the identification of key passages of text, and selecting categories or groupings which showed examples of pertinent issues. Key points were identified with illustrative quotes from the text. A number of broad coding categories were derived from the data, which were refined to form three core coding categories. The reference to the group discussion data and corresponding coding categories used in data analysis was catalogued. Focus group data were analysed one group at a time and also across all focus groups. This tested whether the themes emerging with one group also emerged and were verifiable from other groups (theoretical sampling). There was an analysis of individual focus group data in terms of each group member’s contributions. Matrices for assessing the level of consensus for each group were established (Appendix 19). Overall the group matrices showed a high level of agreement. This reinforced the validity of the consensus from which a category, theme or view was generated.

Transcribed telephone interview data were initially analysed by cross-tabulation, primarily based on four topic themes derived from the literature critique. A matrix recorded this information for each interview transcript, and broad coding categories were derived from this data which were refined into four core categories (Appendix 18). The reference to the interview data and corresponding coding categories used in data analysis were recorded. This process of analysing and interpreting the interview data-sets led to a deeper understanding and provided a thick (detailed) description which gave insight into some previously-unknown or little-understood areas about NEET participation in the FE sector.

**3.10.3 *Summary***

The core coding categories derived from the interpretative data were analysed by a summative matrix, which illustrated commonality across emerging themes and issues (Appendix 18). Comparisons were made between two or more sub-groups that were drawn from different levels of the study, and this provided a further layer of stratified data analysis. By using a mixed-method approach, data from the survey, interviews and group discussions were collated to produce a holistic response to the research questions. This is evidenced by the data analysis in Chapters Four and Five. Critical evaluation of the meaning of findings was undertaken to also identify and examine any mismatch or conflict between findings, arising from the different methods used for the research. The processing of outcomes referred back to the research questions, which in turn were addressed through the research instruments, and this further ensured the validity of the findings.

**Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis 1: FE Provision and NEET Engagement**

**4.1 *Introduction***

The results of the data analysis are presented in Chapters Four and Five. Data from questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions were analysed to provide a holistic response to the research questions. Chapter Four addresses research question one and secondary research questions 1.a-c: factors influencing NEET participation in FE; types of provision, success and destinations, segmentation, services and finance.

**4.2 *Reasons for non-engagement***

**4.2.1 *FE provision context***

All seven survey respondents (coded A-G) provide programmes for 16-18 NEET, but this does not constitute the main 16-18 year old business for any college.[[67]](#footnote-67) Figure 1 shows that different colleges have different types of main business (16-18 provision). This indicates that there may be unequal access to some types of FE provision for 16-18 NEET. This supports previous research by Hayward and Williams (2011) who suggest the existence of restricted access to FE provision options presents a barrier to 16-18 NEET engagement. Descriptive coding for the five FE senior managers’ colleges (coded H-L, in Appendix 20) shows that different types of main business operate at different colleges, and this supports the survey data. Follow-on interviews with five FE senior managers confirm that their FE 16-18 NEET provision options are restricted due to a combination of factors, such as historic provision delivery and business performance or ‘risk indicators’.[[68]](#footnote-68) Business risk considerations may restrict the type of NEET programmes that three colleges (rated red and amber) are able to deliver (Appendix 20).[[69]](#footnote-69) These findings highlight issues about whether there is sufficient access to a range of FE provision options required to meet the heterogeneous characteristics associated with 16-18 NEET status, noted in the literature by Yates and Payne (2006), Simmons, Thompson and Russell (2013a) and by Bynner (2013). The findings lend support to Hutchinson et al. (2016:718) about Coalition Government policy changes resulting in a ‘postcode lottery’ of provision which results in fewer choices for some 16-18 NEET.

**Figure 1: Main 16-18 year old business of the surveyed colleges**

Figure 2 shows that 43% of surveyed colleges describe their 16-18 NEET provision as ‘specialist’, which targets 16-18 NEET operating at Entry/Level 1. Some 57% described it as ‘general provision’, where 16-18 NEET are recruited to main 16-18 year old provision. The general provision category includes Level 2/3 Excel/BTEC vocational awards; GCSE and GCE A-Level (Table 3, Appendix 21).[[70]](#footnote-70) The majority of rural colleges deliver specialist provision whereas the majority of urban colleges deliver general provision. This indicates that, contrary to the definition of 16-18 NEET having few or no qualifications and operating at Entry/Level 1 (DfE, 2012a), some 16-18 NEET are recruited to general provision which caters for those with higher ability. This is particularly the case for urban colleges A, B and G in the survey. This finding supports Maguire(2015) who identifies young people with mainstream (higher ability) operating under the radar of an imprecise 16-18 NEET category. It suggests that varied provision options are required to meet the mixed abilities evident in NEET cohorts. For the same reasons, Hutchinson et al. (2016) argue that Government NEET policy initiatives need to be capable of being nuanced and flexible enough to address this issue.

**Figure 2: FE 16-18 NEET provision category**

In comparison with the survey data, the interviews with FE senior managers reveal that 60%, (three out of the five) of the interviewees’ colleges deliver specialist provision (H, K and L). These three colleges (one urban and two rural) have converted the previous college 16-18 NEET provision to fit the funding requirements for the Study Programme, a Coalition Government initiative from 2014 (Appendix 22). The colleges for the remaining two interviewees I and J (urban) recruit 16-18 NEET to general provision mainly at Level 1, with occasional recruitment to Level 2/3. These two colleges mention that they only recruit learners who can achieve. This reflects the business-focused ethos of their colleges (Appendix 20).

All 13 learners in the focus groups (coded M-O, Appendix 12) were recruited to Pre-Entry or Entry-Level 1 16-18 NEET programmes. Two colleges, M and N (one rural and one urban), deliver specialist 16-18 NEET provision, whilst college O (urban) delivers general provision (Appendix 23). This demonstrates a varied 16-18 NEET provision profile across the survey and case-studies. It is not conclusive whether specialist or general provision is best suited to engaging 16-18 NEET. However, all five senior managers and all five policymakers interviewed regard a Pre-Traineeship at Level 1 as the most suitable provision to engage 16-18 NEET, which fits the specialist provision category.

This emphasises a theme emerging from the data about wide variation in the range and level of provision for 16-18 NEET delivered by the FE colleges. Earlier discussion, above, indicates that such flexibility has some advantages for meeting the mixed-ability needs inherent in the NEET category. In contrast, Hayward and Williams (2011) argue that a plethora of options is a central reason for non-engagement by many NEET young people. Policymakers Geoff and Christine also view the number of FE NEET programme choices as being confusing and an obstacle to engagement. This reinforces provision choice as a key factor influencing 16-18 NEET engagement. Simmons et al. (2014b) and Hutchinson et al. (2016) maintain that both the New Labour and the Coalition Governments’ NEET policies are characterised by the serial introduction of constantly changing new initiatives and schemes and that this is confusing for young people and problematic for providers (2.2.3-4).

**4.2.2 *Recruitment – learner numbers***

There was no data available in the public domain about the numbers of 16-18 NEET learners recruited by FE colleges (DfE, 2015c). Across the surveyed colleges the volume of general provision increased by 70% between 2012-2013 and 2014-2015, and the volume of specialist provision increased by 23% (Figure 3). Despite these over-all increases, some of the sample experienced decreased growth or fluctuating recruitment trends over this period. Colleges B and C, for example, saw a decrease in learner numbers for the general provision category over the three years (Table 6, Appendix 21). Tables 4 and 5 (Appendix 21) show that these two colleges record high increases in competition from other providers of 16-18 NEET provision, combined with decreases in the levels of Government funding.

**Figure 3: 16-18 NEET learner numbers recruited for all surveyed colleges**

This identifies a pattern between the Coalition Government policy driver of increased marketisation, funding reductions and decreasing 16-18 NEET learner numbers for two urban FE colleges. In comparison, urban college G saw the largest increase in learner numbers for general provision (28%), whilst rural college F recorded a more modest increase, from 5 to 12 learners in this category. This confirms varied and complex recruitment trends evident in the survey data. Recruitment trends also varied significantly for specialist provision, as shown in Table 7 (Appendix 21). Tables 6-7 in Appendix 21, show smaller learner numbers are recruited for both specialist and general provision by rural colleges (D, E and F) compared to their urban counterparts (A, B, C and G). The documentary review also indicated a mismatch between high numbers of 16-18 NEET (demand) and low numbers recruited to FE provision (supply) in rural areas, as discussed below.

However, the main theme evident in the survey data is that there is no overall trend in recruitment patterns sufficient to increase understanding about 16-18 NEET numbers. A varied pattern of recruitment was also revealed by the senior managers for the period 2012-2013 to 2014-2015. Three managers experienced a rise in recruitment (David, Lynn and Colleen) due to curriculum improvements or being in NEET hotspot areas. Two managers (Zena and Jim), experienced a significant drop in recruitment and they attributed this to raising the participation age (RPA) or other Government policy changes, such as ESF NEET projects and budget cuts (4.6.1). All five managers expressed concerns about Coalition Government policies, such as increased competition and commissioning having a negative impact on the viability of FE NEET provision (4.2.3). Managers Zena (urban area) and Colleen (rural area) had both converted their 16-18 NEET provision into the Study Programme (4.5.3) but this had not led to an increase in recruitment for either college. In addition, the interplay of individual factors at each FE college, including historical provision trends and business risk management, needs to be taken into account, and to be further investigated to more fully explain the fluctuating recruitment evident in the survey data and the trends apparent in the interview data.

The documentary review (Appendix 15) provided new data about the geographical distribution of 16-18 NEET in 14 West Midlands LAs, for the end of the year in 2014. Perhaps surprisingly, three rural LAs (Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire) are ranked highly: second, third and fifth respectively. Figures 4 and 5 show that rural colleges have much lower NEET recruitment rates than their urban counterparts. This identifies the existence of large rural pockets of 16-18 NEET coupled with lower recruitment trends for surveyed colleges (D, E and F), located in these rural LAs. This finding reveals a mismatch between high numbers of 16-18 NEET (demand) and low numbers recruited to FE provision (supply). This shortfall in the supply chain for FE rural providers highlights a significant gap in knowledge about 16-18 NEET engagement. Urban LAs, such as Birmingham and Wolverhampton, are designated 16-18 NEET hotspots and benefit from targeted Government funding to increase engagement, as highlighted by Spielhofer et al. (2009).[[71]](#footnote-71) This might account for the healthier recruitment trends in urban colleges B, C and G. These findings support Hutchinson et al. (2016) who argue that there are shortcomings in the Coalition Government’s strategic planning due to poor data usage, and poor management of policy enactment to reach its 16-18 NEET target group. These outcomes indicate that the supply and demand of 16-18 NEET provision in local areas require further investigation.

The interviews with five FE senior managers provide further insight into 16-18 NEET recruitment trends. A consensus of all five interviewees reveals that recruitment to 16-18 NEET provision has become more demanding over the three-year period 2012-2013 to 2014-2015. Three interviewees, David, Lynn and Colleen, report some increase in 16-18 NEET learner numbers, whilst two, Zena and Jim, experienced a significant decrease. Zena attributes this decrease to local reductions in the 16-18 NEET rate as being due to the Coalition Government’s implementation of RPA.[[72]](#footnote-72) In comparison, Jim’s college has ceased delivering two 16-18 NEET programmes from 2014 due to funding changes:

We have lost our school NEET feeder provision because of the new Progress Measures introduced in schools and we cannot now run short tasters in vocational areas because there is no Government funding for this. (Jim)

All FE managers felt that the Coalition Government’s policy change in routing ESF funding through LEPS jeopardises recruitment to FE 16-18 NEET taster provision from 2015-2016 (Appendix 22). The majority of policymakers also regard this policy change as presenting significant lost opportunities for 16-18 NEET engagement. This supports the literature which highlights concerns about LEP capacity; for example, Hutchinson et al. (2016), argue that the Coalition Government put the responsibility for addressing 16-18 NEET provision and its strategic co-ordination within an emergent LEP infrastructure. Providers in the localities are now increasingly required to bid for funding on a project basis. This can be precarious for FE providers because there is no guarantee that project funding will be forthcoming.

**4.2.3 *Policy change and recruitment***

Some 70% of survey respondents agreed that there was increased competition for FE 16-18 NEET provision and identified the sources for this, as, rank 1-2 private and social enterprise providers and rank 6-8 sixth form colleges, academies and Free Schools (Table 4, Appendix 21). In May 2010 there were 200 academies: by March 2016 some 2,075 out of 3,381 secondary schools were academies (DfE, 2016c). In contrast to the survey respondents, the Coalition Government’s Academies Programme is viewed by all five senior managers as a keen competitor for the 16-18 NEET market. All five senior managers mention that changes in Coalition Government policy, such as increased marketisation is problematic for 16-18 NEET recruitment. Three out of five policymakers believed that a diversified market has advantages (5.2.1.4).

All the managers also view the Government’s YCS programme as moving funding for 16-18 NEET provision away from FE sector providers (5.3.1). The literature shows that FE colleges did not secure any sole-delivery YCS contracts (DfE, 2013d). Zena and Jim make reference to a dilemma FE colleges face with commissioning bids for Coalition Government NEET initiatives, such as YCS and Traineeships. FE colleges are subject to ‘lagged’ funding and only receive funding for the number of learners they recruit in the year before. Both interviewees feel this presents a financial risk for growing new provision and also constitutes an ‘unequal playing field’ to compete for NEET provision through a commissioning process. Lynn and Jim felt that increasing competition from out of region ‘commissioned’ providers has a negative impact on 16-18 NEET recruitment. This finding is consistent with the recruitment trends shown by the survey data above (4.2.2). It supports FE professionals’ views (FE Week, 2015a), which suggest that the Coalition Government’s increased marketisation policy threatens the future viability of FE 16-18 NEET provision. Zena, Dick and Jim expressed strong concerns about the quality of private sector commissioned 16-18 NEET provision:

Private providers are offering an apprenticeship type of programme and pay £30 a week, when really 16-18 NEET need the infrastructure of the college to support them with other barriers to learning. We are picking them up at college later when they drop out. (Lynn)

Colleen displayed considerable non-verbal frustration when discussing private providers new to the 16-18 NEET market ‘cherry picking’ young people,who were then left ‘high and dry’ when they failed to achieve. Both Lynn and Zena express concern about the Government’s marketisation and RPA policies warehousing 16-18 NEET in a provision which represents short-term measures. This concern is captured in a comment by Zena: “many are then returning to the NEET category or to college at age 17 or later as second-chancers.” These views about commissioned provision are reflected by Maguire (2013a) regarding a warehousing effect where NEET may be engaged in precarious provision of little value for the transition to employment or training. The findings affirm Reiter and Schlimbach’s (2015:145) notion of ‘stopgap solutions’ where young people engage in programmes of poor-educational value or use for the transition to employment; such young people are seen to be effectively ‘NEET in disguise’. In contrast, research by NfER (2012) suggests that FE colleges have the expertise and are skilled at engaging 16-18 NEET ‘second chancers’.

**4.2.4 *Engaging ‘second chancers’***

The group discussions with FE learners illustrate that all three FE colleges for these participants effectively address school failure at 16, and encouraged the focus group members to sustain engagement in FE provision. 10 out of 13 participants had been out of school before they were recruited to 16-18 NEET programmes; these ten participants acknowledged that they had experienced school failure, and viewed joining a college course as being a ‘second chance’ (Appendix 19). These findings confirm those of Pring et al. (2009) and a Government Committee Report (House of Commons, 2010) which identify school failure as one of the key reasons for 16-18 NEET non-engagement. Four out of five members of group M had been ‘out of school’ (Diane is a single parent and Jed, Kai and Vena were bored at school). Two out of three members of group N had also been out of school and the whole group identified with the following view:

I felt that I had failed at school and I was worried about doing nothing, just hanging out with friends. College felt just right, the atmosphere was relaxed and different to school. I have really enjoyed my programme at college because I did not attend school much. (Laura)

All 13 group participants believe that they now have the possibility of getting a ‘proper job’ in the long-term or progressing to a higher level of education or training. They felt that gaining long-term employment is a key factor which motivated them to join their NEET programme (Appendix 19). All members of groups M and N agree that the interest and support of their college tutors helped them to maintain their engagement during their college programme, and they believe that this has made a real difference to their learning. There is agreement by all members of group N that: “The college staff treat you like adults and we have been given a lot of attention by tutors and people cared about what we did.” (Alicia). The majority of participants felt that it took a lot of effort to join their college, but they found their interview to be informal, with warm and welcoming staff. All members of group N agreed with Maria that their course was well explained during their interviews, and that:

Examples were provided about what past students had done after they had completed their 16-18 NEET course; it just made me think: this is something that I could do and it helped me join the course and stay at college. (Maria)

There was a consensus that these examples gave participants ambition or hope (as school failures) that they could achieve and progress in FE. This aspirational aspect is resonant with views expressed by members of group M. For example, Dianne:

I came here because I wanted a better future because I fell pregnant. I thought that coming to college would help me make a new start, by doing studies all over again and doing better, now I have a baby.

Findings from the focus group discussions support views expressed by senior managers, such as Dick, Lyn and Jim, who emphasise the crucial role of FE in providing a nurturing environment with ‘a lot of wrap-around pastoral support’ for NEET learners. Research by the IES (DfE, 2010a) and Robertson (2016) also suggests the value of personal skills development, confidence building and pastoral support for 16-18 NEET engagement. This data affirms the findings by NfER (2012), which maintain that self-belief is an essential element for NEET curriculum. They are congruent with the arguments of Reay, David and Ball (2005) and Oliver and Kettley (2010) who suggest that proactive teacher behaviours facilitate the agency of students.

**4.3 *Success factors and engagement***

**4.3.1 *Success rates***

The completion of the survey question about success rates is low, with 75%-80% completion for both categories of provision (specialist and general). Figure 4 shows that most colleges had lower success rates in 2013-2014 than in 2012-2013 for specialist provision, with all but one college below the national (assumption Level 1) success rate benchmark of 77.9% (SfA, 2015a).[[73]](#footnote-73) The success rates for general provision (assumption Levels 1-3) are also low compared to national benchmarks of 77.9% to 84.3%. The success rates for college A are between 65% and 66%, which is significantly below national benchmarks. Only college C records outstanding success rates above national benchmarks, at 90%-100%.

**Figure 4: Success rates analysis 2012-13 to 2014-15**

Success rates varied widely, and of the 11 ratings, 6 are below national bencharks (Figure 4). This indicates that many of the survey respondents are delivering 16-18 NEET provision which is of poor quality or questionable value to learners.[[74]](#footnote-74) This supports Maguire (2013a), Simmons et al. (2014a) and Reiter and Schlimbach (2015) who argue that 16-18 NEET may be engaged in provision of little value for their transition to further levels of education, training or employment. When asked about the success of 16-18 NEET provision only two out of the five senior manager interviewees responded with actual success rates. Colleen reported 92%, and Dick reported 84%. Both rates are well above the national benchmark of 77.9% for Foundation/Level 1 provision (SfA, 2015a). Some interviewees were not as candid as might be expected about business performance in an increasingly payment-by-results Government-funded FE environment. This finding and the survey results above, highlight a need for further research to benchmark FE 16-18 NEET provision. The results of such research could help to identify good practice across FE 16-18 NEET providers and offer exemplars which might contribute to improvements in provision.

**4.3.2 *Destinations and successful transitions***

Figure 5 below, shows 74% of urban college G’s 16-18 NEET learners’ progress within college programmes; this is a common pattern of progression in the survey data. Rural college F has the highest learner destinations to Apprenticeships recorded at 34% whereas this destination is less than 12% for the rest of the sample. This result is noteworthy, given that Coalition Government Apprenticeship reform is a source of potential funding for FE providers. College F also has the highest destinations to employment at 52%, whilst learner progression within the college is the lowest in the sample at 8%.

Strength in employer-led provision is also evidenced by rural college D and E, who rank second and third for destinations to employment (38% and 28%, respectively). The survey data reveals that rural colleges may have strong local employer links, but as discussed earlier in section 4.2.2, they also have much smaller recruitment, and decreasing learner number trends in comparison to their urban counterparts. Of the urban colleges surveyed (B, C, G) destinations to employment are extremely low and ranged between 0% and 8%. This result combined with the high rate of learner progression destinations within urban colleges (A, B, C and G) supportMaguire (2013a) who maintains that 16-18 NEET are often warehoused in successive years of FE provision rather than being prepared for employment or employment with training (Apprenticeships). While these findings are important, as acknowledged in Chapter Three (3.6.2, 3.10.1), the data drawn from the small-scale survey used in this research has transferability and replicability with similar groups of subjects (FE colleges). The study does not make claims of generalising to the total FE population.

With the exception of college G, which recorded no ‘unknown destinations’ all the other urban colleges recorded extremely high percentages for this category. The survey data shows that a substantial proportion of 16-18 NEET FE learners are moving from completion of their programmes to an unknown destination category at the age of 18. This indicates that learners are experiencing difficulties in making successful transitions beyond their 16-18 NEET programme and affirms research by Maguire (2015) which identifies increasing numbers of young people in the unknown category. This supports national trends in the literature critique between 16-18 NEET and over-18 NEET status. For example, whilst the 16-18 annual NEET rate in England decreased from the end of 2012 to the end of 2015, from 9.2% to 7.5%, the NEET rate for 18 year olds ranged from 12.6% to 14.4.% (DfE, 2017b). This 18+ NEET rate across 2010-2015 is confirmed by a government report (House of Commons Library, 2016a). The findings have resonance with research by Simmons and Smyth (2016) which points to a ‘churning’ effect where many 16-18 NEET transition to short-term unsatisfactory employment, but they often return to the NEET category at a later stage.

**Figure 5: Destinations on completion of 16-18 NEET provision in 2013-2014**

The five FE senior managers make reference to strong internal college pathway progression from 16-18 NEET provision to Level 2/3 provision, such as Edexcel/BTEC awards, Apprenticeships and occasionally GCE A-Level awards. All five managers believe that positive progression from 16-18 NEET programmes is largely due to college support systems and the skills and expertise of teaching teams. This is consistent with earlier findings from the learner focus groups (4.2.2, 4.3.3). It reinforces the literature by Hattie (2003) about the role that the expertise of teachers plays in engaging young people in education, and supports a study by Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) which suggests that teachers often challenge learners’ negative self-beliefs and that proactive teacher behaviour may improve outcomes for learners.

Senior managers in the current study are not well acquainted with 16-18 destination data, and this issue is significant given that this is a key performance measure for quality (Ofsted Inspection), and for funding purposes (SfA, 2015b).[[75]](#footnote-75) All 13 learners in the group discussions made the successful internal progression from 16-18 NEET provision to higher level college programmes: one at Entry 3, seven at Level 1, three at Level 2 and two at Level 3 (Appendix 24). It is notable that the two Level 3 learners are now making applications for degree courses. All five members of group M agreed that their 16-18 NEET programme motivated them to stay on and progress at college (Appendix 19), and they identify with the following statement by Jed:

I have had a brilliant experience at college since starting the first course and it has helped me choose to stay at the Centre and go on to Engineering in the next year.

The above findings support Grenfell and James (1998) who maintain that some young people may have high ability but other factors such as social or economic disadvantage, cultural or family issues may have an impact on them achieving their full potential. It corresponds with Carter-Wall and Whitfield (2012) who suggest that many 16-18 NEET have high aspirations in terms of wanting a ’proper job’ and good career prospects but may lack the means (cultural or social capital) of achieving their career goals. The majority of focus group participants in this study view their 16-18 NEET programme as providing the vehicle for their initial and continuing engagement in FE provision and beyond this point (Appendix 19). However, Egdell and McQuaid (2016) and Simmons (2017) argue that the Government also needs to stimulate demand for young people in the labour market and create opportunities for their effective transition into employment.

**4.3.3 *Engagement and success factors***

The focus groups reveal that a range of other factors contributes to 16-18 NEET engagement and success. All five members of group M agree that college vocational courses are more attractive than school, and gave them opportunities to progress in education and training. All 13 focus group participants agree that they receive high-quality careers advice on college programmes (Appendix 19). Each group member was able to articulate clear and informed career plans for the future, together with what they needed to do to achieve their career objectives. All three members of focus group N expressed enthusiasm about how their 16-18 NEET programme has helped them make future career choices. For example:

There is always someone available for one-to-one support and there is time to look at career choices. After being out of school I would never have dreamt that I would now have made a UCAS application or have confidence to do this. (Maria)

These findings are consistent with the priority FE colleges place on careers services for 16-18 NEET cohorts evidenced in the interviews with senior managers (4.6.3). Furthermore, it affirms Pring et al. (2009) and Hutchinson et al. (2016) who maintain that careers services are a key motivational factor supporting 16-18 NEET success and progression. In contrast, these outcomes differ with the view of the five policymakers who believe that poor quality and patchy advice and guidance is provided to FE learners (4.6.3).

**4.4 *Gender, race and disability factors and engagement***

**4.4.1 *Gender distribution***

DfE data for 16-18 NEET as a percentage of the total 16-18 year old population of England for end of year 2012 to end of year 2014 is used to compare the gender balance trends yielded by the survey data (DfE, 2015f).[[76]](#footnote-76) In Table 8 this national data shows a slightly higher proportion of males are classified as NEET than females.

**Table 8: 16-18 NEET - percentage of the total 16-18 year old population of England**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Gender** | **End of year 2012** | **End of Year 2013** | **End of year 2014** |
| Male | 10.1% | 8.5% | 7.5% |
| Female | 8.4% | 7.0% | 7.1% |

Figure 6a shows that for specialist 16-18 NEET provision 2012-2013 to 2014-2015, college G recruited more females than males, and college F maintains an even distribution, whereas colleges C and D consistently recruit more males than females.[[77]](#footnote-77) This varies from 20% to 35% more males than females across this period. The data highlights that the gender balance varies considerably from one college to another, and some colleges have much fluctuation from year to year. Overall, a higher proportion of 16-18 NEET that is recruited to specialist provision each year are male than female, and this contrasts with the more even gender distribution evident in the national DfE data**.**

**Figure 6a: Gender characteristics of 16-18 NEET learners for specialist provision**

**Figure 6b: Gender characteristics of 16-18 NEET learners for general provision.**

In Figure 6b, the gender balance for general provision 2012-2013 to 2014-2015 shows that college G maintains a fairly equal gender distribution, while college B has some fluctuation which represents a swing from more females to males in 2013-2014, but returns to a more even distribution in 2014-2015. College A consistently recruits more males than females, whilst college C maintains an equal gender balance. The situation with gender balance at individual colleges shows variation from one college to another and great variation from year to year in some cases. Overall, unlike specialist provision, general provision recruited a higher proportion of females over the three year period, which ranges from 4%-32% difference and this contrasts with the national data (DfE, 2015e).

**4.4.2 *Ethnicity trends***[[78]](#footnote-78)

For colleges delivering specialist provision the majority of learners are classified as White, ranging from a distribution of 74%-98% over the three years 2012-2013 to 2014-2015 (Figure 7a).

**Figure 7a Ethnicity Characteristics of 16-18 NEET learners for specialist provision**

With the exception of the Mixed Race category, which records 40% by College G for 2014-2015, all other categories for the period range between 1% and 8%. The same trend is evident for recruitment to general 16-18 NEET provision in Figure 7b. The majority of 16-18 NEET learners are classified as White, with the proportion of White learners varying between 69% and 92%. Higher percentages in urban colleges, such as A, B and G reflect higher numbers of ethnic minorities in their geographical locations than is the case for their rural counterparts.

**Figure 7b: Ethnicity characteristics of 16-18 NEET learners for general provision -**

RCU Market Information Data Exchange Service (RCU-MiDES) provides data-sets which represent 77% of all FE colleges in England (AoC, 2015a). In Table 7, for end of year 2014, this data shows percentages of 16-18 year old learners participating by ethnic group:

**Table 9: 16 to 18 year olds participating in FE Colleges England, end of year 2014**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **White (1)** | **Mixed Race (2)** | **Asian/Asian British (3)** | **Black/Black British (4)** | **Other Ethnic Group (5)** |
| 76% | 3.3% | 6.8% | 4.4% | 8.8% |

In comparison, the survey data for end of year 2014 shows White (specialist and general provision) to be at 70% or above; this indicates a confirmatory trend. The Mixed Race populations in specialist provision in colleges D and F are below the MiDES average of 3.3%, as are those for urban colleges A and B in general provision. All the survey responses for Asian/Asian British are below the MiDES 6.8% average. Only urban college C met the MiDES benchmark of 4.4% for Black/Black British. The survey data for Other Ethnic Groups is similarly below the MiDES 8.8% average for both categories of provision. This reveals the under-representation of ethnic classifications 2-5. The ethnic profile produced by the survey data ranks White as the highest classification across all the sample, and all the ‘other’ ethnic classifications are below the MiDES benchmarking data. No further data are generated from the interviews with senior managers to extend understanding of the factors which might contribute to this, such as the adequacy of college marketing strategies or wider equality of access issues.

DfE data for 16-17 year olds in education and training by ethnic group at the end of year 2014 shows the West Midlands is below the England rate for participation for all ethnic groups except White (DfE, 2015f). Some 64% of LAs in the region are below the England rate for Mixed Race, 36% are below the rate for Black/Black British, 29% for Asian/Asian British and 71% for the ‘other’ classification. This is confirmatory of the ethnicity profile for 16-18 NEET learners and the under-representation of ethnic classifications evidenced in the survey data. These findings highlight equality of access issues and constitute an area for further research.

**4.4.3 *Engagement by self-declared disability***

All colleges in the survey sample recruited 16-18 NEET learners with a self-declared disability for year-end 2014-15 (Figure 8). College D recorded the highest percentage of 53% in this category for specialist provision followed by college G with 25%; college G also has the highest percentage of learners self-declared as having a disability for general provision at 23%. Learners with a self-declared disability would accrue high costs in terms of support services. In addition, there may be learners with support needs who have not self-declared as having a disability or not be registered as having a disability.

**Figure 8: Percentage of 16-18 NEET self-declared having disability, year 2014-15**

There is no data in the public domain for 16-18 NEET provision by self-declared disability for the FE Sector. DfE data for participation by SEND[[79]](#footnote-79) for all 16-17 year olds in England for end of year 2014 provides useful comparison (DfE, 20015c.f). This shows 84.8% of 16-17 year olds with SEND (known by LAs) in England for this period participating in education or training, and the figure for the West Midlands is 86.7%. The lowest participation rate by an LA in the West Midlands is 77.5%. The survey data reveals that the highest FE participation rate for 16-18 NEET with a self-declared disability for specialist provision is 53% and 23% for general provision. This showslower participation rates for 16-18 NEET in the survey data compared to the DfE SEND data for 16 to 17 year olds. These survey results for the year 2014-2015 do not fit well with the DfE definition of 16-18 NEET which includes those with disability and health problems (DfE, 2012a).[[80]](#footnote-80)

Since 2011, declining levels of funding have raised concerns about the financial sustainability of FE colleges (AoC, 2017). Keohane (2017) argues that within this climate, business risks to the achievement of output-based government funding makes FE provision for 16-18 NEET with a disability problematic. This type of provision is resource-intensive and, therefore, may be less viable for some FE colleges (NfER, 2012; Widdowson, 2018). All the senior managers felt that the Coalition policy climate focused on a payment-by-results approach and they registered concern about the ability of colleges to meet the high support costs of NEET learners with a disability or complex needs (5.5.1).[[81]](#footnote-81) This indicates FE recruitment trends for 16-18 NEET with a disability as a significant area for further research.

**4.4.4 *Learner segmentation***

The gender balance of the 13 learners in the focus groups is five females and eight males. Focus group M is mixed gender, whilst focus group N is all female, and group O is all male. There is one (White) learner with self-declared disability(Appendix 24), and the ethnic profile is commensurate with the survey data results. This highlights a predominance of White and Male segments and under-representation of ‘other’ ethnic classifications. Whilst the small sample size for the focus groups affects significance, three females progressed from 16-18 NEET provision to ‘traditional’ female vocational areas, and two females progressed to less stereotypical vocational areas. In comparison, of the eight male participants three progressed to ‘traditional’ male vocational areas, and five progressed to less stereotypic vocational areas (Appendix 24). No further data are yielded from the interviews to extend understanding of how segmentation factors may affect 16-18 NEET engagement. There are no national FE sector provider 16-18 NEET data-sets to benchmark trends. No benchmarking data are available for the take-up of FE 16-18 NEET provision type or by vocational area (traditional male/female) to support further comparative analysis. This confirms a dearth of FE 16-18 NEET data-sets evidenced in the literature and the public domain since the Youth Cohort Study reported (DfE, 2011a).[[82]](#footnote-82) These gaps in knowledge identify the need for further research about how segmentation factors may influence 16-18 NEET participation. The findings and limitations in this area underpinned recommendations made in Chapter Six.

**4.5 *16-18 NEET provision delivered***

Survey question 8 provided a set of 12 options from which respondents could choose one or more which they felt to be relevant. All the colleges indicate that Pre-entry and Entry/Level 1 is the major type of 16-18 NEET provision. Six (86%) of the seven colleges deliver Employability and Preparation for Work and Life Skills, and four (57%) provide Pre-Apprenticeship Programmes. All three rural colleges offer foundation programmes with work experience and a mix of vocational skills, personal and social development (Table 3, Appendix 21). This latter finding supports research findings by IES (DfE, 2010a) and NfER (2012) about the curriculum model best suited to engage 16-18 NEET. These results indicate that all three rural colleges, (D, E and F), have stronger employer-linked provision. This supports the survey data (4.3.2), which shows their strength in employer-linked provision compared to their urban counterparts. More than half of the sample, (57%), provide Functional Skills English and Maths (Stepping-stone), whereas less provide GCSE qualifications in these subjects (29%). Achievement of these subjects at grades A-C is a Coalition Government funding requirement for all 16-18 year olds, from 2014 (2.4.1). The findings show that the predominant level of provision for 16-18 NEET cohorts is Entry-Level 1 and this confirms the DfE definition of 16-18 NEET (DfE, 2012a).

**4.5.1 *Provision which best works***

Figure 9 shows that 57% of surveyed colleges favour programmes with vocational skills and work practice and this is consistent with the findings from the learner focus groups and interviews with senior managers and policymakers below (4.5.2-4.5.5).

**Figure 9: Types of provision which work best for 16-18 NEET cohorts**

The survey respondents are least in favour of long programmes (540+ hours) or Functional Skills qualifications in English and Maths. This indicates that whilst these programmes are provided by the colleges they are not viewed as working well with 16-18 NEET. This suggests a gap between what the sample colleges currently provide in these subjects and what they felt should be provided for 16-18 NEET cohorts. Three of the colleges (all rural) favour short taster programmes which give progression to higher level provision, whereas findings for the urban colleges are less conclusive. It is noteworthy that 57% deliver a form of employer-linked Pre-Apprenticeship at Level 1 and this includes all the rural colleges.[[83]](#footnote-83) These results identify the provision which best engages 16-18 NEET contains a vocational element, employability skills, personal and social development, equivalent qualifications in English and Maths and work experience. These outcomes confirm the preferred 16-18 NEET curriculum models identified by literature discussed above (4.5.1) and are consistent with the findings from the interviews with senior managers and policymakers (4.5.4).

**4.5.2 *Vocational and work experience elements***

All 13 participants in the focus groups found that vocational provision and work experience encouraged them to engage in their college programme. Group N mentions that a wider range of courses is available at the college, such as hairdressing and motor vehicle, which are not available at school. There was a consensus in group N that vocational programmes attracted them to college. All members of groups N and O believe that a wider range of vocational choices is more likely to lead to them getting a ‘proper job’. There was a consensus amongst all 13 participants that programmes with practical workshops and work experience are better for them than school courses (Appendix 19). For example, Jed and Tim agreed with Kai that “we have practical workshops time-tabled repairing cars and it’s a good way of learning skills we need to get a job or go on to another course.” Only one suggestion for improvement was offered across all the respondents, and this was by Jed, who felt that practical workshops need more recent motor cars to work on. This indicates broad satisfaction in this area.

Three out of five members of group M felt that they were not ready for external work experience on their 16-18 NEET programme. All members of group N did not experience external work placements on their NEET programme. These findings support the senior manager consensus that 16-18 NEET learners are not sufficiently ‘work-ready’ to undertake external work experience. In contrast, four out of five members of group O did complete external work experience during their 16-18 NEET programme. For example, David went into a coaching role in a sports environment. The college for group O provides an enterprise option to prepare learners for external work experience which suggests that this is an effective measure that other colleges may want to consider. Regardless of being prepared or not, all 13 focus group participants valued work experience whether it is in practical workshops or with external employers, and they all agreed that it develops skills and provides better job opportunities (Appendix 19).

These findings indicate that the Coalition Government’s policy of ‘enterprise education’, which extends work experience to all FE programmes for 16-18 year olds (DfE, 2013f), reflects learners’ views about the importance of work experience. The five policymakers affirm the crucial role of work experience for 16-18 NEET employment (4.5.4-5), with two strong caveats noted: first, that 16-18 NEET cohorts are sufficiently ‘work-ready’; and second, that resource implications to operationalise ‘enterprise education’ policy with 16-18 NEET are addressed by Government, such as tackling employer capacity issues. These findings reinforce employer-engagement and demand-side issues raised by Simmons and Thompson (2011).

**4.5.3 *Profiling provision that works***

A historic overview of 16-18 NEET provision delivered by the senior managers’ colleges reveals similarity in delivery patterns (Appendix 22). Prior to 2014, 16-18 NEET provision delivered by all five colleges included: E2E, Activity Agreements, Foundation Learning, ESF projects and Prince’s Trust. The majority of colleges had delivered a menu of provision organised around Entry/Level 1, which involved a mix of vocational (work practice), qualifications, and short taster programmes, offered on a modular basis throughout the year. There is a strong consensus among the managers that they prefer this curriculum model because it best engages 16-18 NEET. This model is congruent with the survey data and the literature discussed above (4.5-4.5.1). Zena and Colleen have converted their previous modular 16-18 NEET provision into a Study Programme in 2014, to accrue current Government funding. These two interviewees acknowledge this involves taking a business risk for their college, because they may not retain their 16-18 NEET learners, and therefore may not achieve full funding. Three managers, Dick, Lynn and Jim, noted that some colleges are better positioned financially to take a risk to deliver flexible NEET provision modes, than others.

In theory, 16-18 NEET could be recruited to FE provision from Pre-Entry to Level 3, but in practice comments by the five senior managers indicate that the overwhelming majority of 16-18 NEET are recruited to Pre-Entry to Entry-Level 1. Much depends on the flexibility and agency of particular colleges in how they shape provision to fit the requirements of Government funding policy. Dick and Lynn work in a college which operates a 16-18 NEET Foundation at Entry-Level 1 for one year: learners’ progress to a higher level provision in a further year of study. They view this curriculum model as being in the best interest of NEET learners and also being in the college’s interest to meet payment-by-results required for Government funding.

The colleges for Zena, Dick and Jim also cater for higher level 16-18 NEET, but all three believe that, while some 16-18 NEET have high ability, social or economic issues make them high-risk in terms of retention. This is consistent with Perry and Francis (2010) who suggest that cultural, and socio-economic factors influence 16-18 NEET engagement. The senior manager interviews illustrate that decisions about 16-18 NEET provision are often the product of competing demands between the interests or perceived needs of learners, and a particular college’s business interests. This supports the survey results (4.2.1) and research by Pring et al. (2009) which maintains that 16-18 NEET provision choices varied widely between FE colleges. This indicates that business decisions made by FE colleges may restrict access to the types of FE provision which best meet the diverse needs 16-18 NEET have (Chapter 1, 1.2.).

Zena, Colleen and Jim mentioned that they occasionally recruit or progress 16-18 NEET learners to Prince’s Trust (Level 2/3), but reductions in Coalition Government funding have now prohibited this option. These managers felt the situation with Prince’s Trust is a perverse Government funding incentive for 16-18 NEET engagement. All five senior managers referred to tensions arising from constantly changing Coalition Government funding policies. For example, dilemmas for colleges about which provision is achievable to yield funding, and provision which is in the interests of 16-18 NEET. This theme is evident throughout the senior manager interview dialogues, one of whom, Dick, stated that his college secured external funding sources to address the loss of ESF NEET project funding. Another, Colleen, stated, that her college has directly funded short taster provision for the same reasons. This illustrates a commitment to deliver the types of provision which these two colleges have judged, by experience, to be successful with 16-18 NEET learners.

**4.5.4 *The Study Programme***

The five senior managers concurred that the majority of their current 16-18 NEET provision is funded through the Study Programme. Three requirements of this programme are viewed by all the managers as problematic. The first concerns a 540+ hour requirement and the risk-taking involved in recruiting 16-18 NEET to this length of a programme. All five interviewees believe that a shorter programme is better suited to 16-18 NEET. This finding supports the literature by IES (DfE, 2010a) and NfER (2012) and is consistent with the survey results, discussed above (4.5.1). There was a consensus amongst the managers about the second major challenge about embedding the Coalition Government’s English and Maths requirement. Colleen encapsulates this view:

Government policy creates challenging requirements, and this is not working. Many are failing year on year in GCSE A-C English and Maths, and this is a requirement for the 540+ hour Study Programme.

The focus groups with learners show similar results. All 13 participants studied GCSE English and Maths or their equivalent on their NEET programmes, and they understood why they needed to pass this requirement to progress to higher level courses or employment (Appendix 19). The five members of group M found this Government requirement stressful and difficult to achieve and the three members of group N have still not achieved the requirement. The majority of group O is also continuing to study English and Maths on their current programmes, for the same reasons. These findings are consistent with the views of senior managers but are not wholly representative of the views of policymakers. Stewart and Geoff strongly believe that poor curriculum delivery of these subjects is a crucial factor for learner non-achievement:

GCSE Maths and English need to be much more applied to vocational contexts so that young people can see their relevance. I would argue why on earth are we making it so difficult and so boring for everyone? (Stewart)

In contrast, policymakers Alan and Christine agreed with Ruth that:

Many 16-18 NEET have personal or health problems or were facing difficulties in their life and this requirement is hampering the future development of 16-18 NEET. (Ruth)

Alan feels that pressure is being put on FE colleges to deliver the GCSE requirement:

The impact on the college involves losing all of the funding for a whole learner and that is quite a risky strategy because some young people may not be able to attain GCSE.

Lynn expressed strong concerns about the logistics involved for her college which has more than 600 learners doing re-sits in these subjects that autumn. The anticipated success rate is below 55%, and some learners get caught in a cycle because they find it difficult to achieve this requirement. There is no debate between all the case-study participants about the GCSE requirement being essential for young people’s future careers, but it is acknowledged that for different reasons, many 16-18 NEET have problems attaining this goal. The findings point to a range of underlying factors, such as school failure, cultural, social and economic issues, and poor curriculum influencing 16-18 NEET non-achievement. These same factors and their impact are identified in the literature from Pring et al. (2009) to Simmons (2017).

All five FE senior managers make reference to difficulties encountered within the work experience element of the Study Programme. This reflects issues discussed earlier(4.5.2) about whether 16-18 NEET are sufficiently ‘work-ready’ to undertake placements. Due to the problems experienced with the requirements of the Study Programme, Jim strongly expressed the view that: “This initiative shows that Coalition Government policy was failing 16-18 NEET.” This finding reflects the argument of Hutchinson et al. (2016) that there is reason to believe that Coalition Government policy will lead to young people becoming more entrenched within NEET status.

**4.5.5 *Traineeship initiative.***

FE managers Colleen and Jim deliver Traineeships as part of collaborative provision and view it as suited to 16-18 NEET because it has flexible start dates and work placement. In contrast, Zena and Dick said their colleges would not be delivering Traineeships from 2016-17 to 16-18 NEET cohorts because this programme has produced poor-quality outcomes. Lynn and Colleen refer to ‘cherry-picking’ by commissioned private providers for Traineeships and YCS. Both of these managers provided examples of how these initiatives are not recruiting their 16-18 NEET target group, but are recruiting more able learners, to ensure GCSE English and Maths funding requirements are achieved. Policymaker Christine highlighted research by AoC, (2015c), which shows that Traineeships are recruiting learners who have already achieved Level 2 qualifications.

Other policymakers Stewart, Ruth and Christine have concerns about the grade 2 Ofsted requirement for providers of Traineeships, which prohibits some private providers and FE colleges, who are best placed to deliver them. Ruth and Stewart also felt that 16-18 NEET were much more enthusiastic about the E2Eprogramme because it paid young people and had a strong element of preparation for work. Research with young people engaged in E2E by Simmons, Thompson and Russell (2013a) reveals significant concerns about the preparation for work element and its usefulness for the transition to employment. Furthermore, Ruth suggests that:

We have not seen the take-up of Traineeships in local areas, and we have not seen the progression from it either. It has all been a bit half-baked.

These findings indicate that Government 16-18 NEET initiatives would benefit from having an increased practitioner interface and this reflects a recurrent theme throughout the data analysis. They support Egdell and McQuaid (2016) who highlight tensions between the goals underpinning Government NEET initiatives, such as to gain employment (any job) and the aims of education providers to promote young people’s involvement in their own learning and career choices. A similar view is expressed by Jim (5.5.2) who believes that Government policy takes a short-term approach to NEET initiatives; whereas increasing 16-18 NEET life chances needs a long-term approach in which young people are more than passive recipients of preparation for work programmes.

All five managers mention a need for a more flexible range of Government-funded 16-18 NEET programmes, as discussed earlier (4.5.1). A consensus emerged about the benefits of a national Pre-Traineeship programme which specifically targets 16-18 NEET cohorts. This view is consistent with policymaker Ruth that: “some young people are not yet ready for the challenge of a Traineeship and they need something before this to build their confidence and skills”. All the other policymakers express the same view and believe that a national Pre-Traineeship programme would help maintain quality in delivery and provide a brand name which could help learner progression.

**4.6 *Funding, resource and support***

**4.6.1 *Funding and support* *challenges***

Of the seven colleges surveyed, four (57%) are wholly dependent on Government EfA 16-18 year old funding for NEET provision, and the other three (43%) use ESF, Job Centre Plus or YCS funding, in addition to EfA (Figure 10 below). Four colleges (71%) reported a decrease in the level of Government funding from 2012-2013 to 2014-2015, while it stayed the same for the remainder (Table 5, Appendix 21).

**Figure 10: Government funded provision for 16-18 NEET cohorts**

No college recorded an increase in Government funding for this period. This finding affirms literature which shows the amount the Coalition Government spent on 16-18 education 2013-2014 had fallen by 8% in real terms compared to 2010-11 (Parliament, 2015a).[[84]](#footnote-84)

Survey respondents were asked to score statements about Coalition Government policy reforms on a ‘yes’, ‘no’ or ‘don’t know’ rating scale. Figure 11, below, shows a score of 60% who said ‘yes’ to a statement that general cuts in Government FE funding made support for 16-18 NEET programmes more difficult. Reductions in the Additional Learning Support (ALS) grant are a major challenge identified (100% score ‘yes’), and this is significant given the DfE definition of 16-18 NEET includes those with a health problem or disability (DfE, 2012a). Learners with these characteristics would accrue ALS costs at a time of diminishing levels of Government funding.

**Figure 11: Coalition Government policy makes funding and support for 16-18 NEET challenging for FE providers**

Policymakers Geoff and Ruth believe that changes in Government policy direction signal that FE will need to seek external funding for 16-18 NEET provision in the future. These findings support Alcock and May (2014) who question the future viability of public sector provision.

The survey data shows a ‘yes’ score of 60% that the Coalition Government policy requirement for English and MathsGCSE at grades C is challenging, which reinforces the views of all the senior managers and the majority of policymakers, discussed earlier in section 4.5.4. There is a ‘yes’ score of 60% that Coalition Government cuts in support with travel to study costs for learners is challenging. Learners in the focus group discussions also found this a problem. In comparison, senior managers and policymakers express less concern about this issue, in 4.6.5 below. A ‘yes’ score of 80% shows that the survey sample views the introduction of Traineeships as not being challenging whereas views on the introduction of the Study Programme are inconclusive (38% yes, 38% no, 24% don’t know). The survey results contrast with a consensus by senior managers and a majority of policymakers that both of these Coalition Government 16-18 NEET initiatives present many significant difficulties (4.5.4-5). The Government’s Bursary Fund scores as being less challenging (60% no, 30% don’t know, 10% yes), and this result contrasts sharply with the views of senior managers, policymakers and learners, which is discussed in section 4.6.5.

The managers note a number of situations where Coalition funding changes have a perverse impact for 16-18 NEET engagement, discussed above (4.5.3). All five managers cite the re-direction of ESF 16-18 NEET project funding to LEPS as having a perverse effect for recruitment because funding was not allocated in 2015. Significantly, seven out of the 13 participants in the focus groups were recruited via ESF-funded taster provision (Appendix 19). Policymakers Stewart and Christine also view this change as leading to lost opportunities for 16-18 NEET. A quite different perspective is expressed by policymakers Geoff, Alan and Ruth, who all hold senior roles in Government organisations (Appendix 12). They view the movement of ESF funding to LEPs as creating a gap in the FE 16-18 NEET market, but felt there is no guarantee that LEPs should prioritise FE colleges’ bids for 16-18 NEET provision. These three policymakers welcome gaps in the FE NEET market because it creates more opportunities for competition. These views reflect a commitment to the benefits of the Coalition Government’s marketisation policy. This finding reinforces the theme about the future viability of FE 16-18 NEET provision being questionable.

**4.6.2 *Resourcing ‘hard-to-reach’ NEET***

All five managers mention ‘hard-to-reach’ 16-18 NEET, and two themes emerged. The first focused on substantial resource costs involved, since many hard-to-reach 16-18 NEET present with problems associated with cultural and material deficits, “such as drug misuse, gang culture, homelessness, or are victims of domestic violence and poverty” (Dick). This corresponds with research by Rees et al. (1996) and Bynner (2013) concerning diverse characteristics associated with 16-18 NEET status. Managers Dick, Colleen and Jim, discussed in depth what the range of support services and inter-agency working for hard-to-reach NEET entail for FE colleges.

16-18 NEET are often ‘troubled young people’ with more baggage to carry than others. There is a very different narrative that has to be given to these young people, which is not easy to do in a cost-effective manner. (Jim)

All five managers express concern about whether the support costs for NEET can be met by colleges in the current climate of decreasing levels of Government funding and payment-by-results. A second theme is about ‘whose problem’ NEET should be. Varying viewpoints are expressed about whether it is legitimately the role of FE to deal with the NEET problem, or the role of other agencies, or a responsibility of government to its citizens. Zena comments that:

The very troubled are likely to be the ‘hard-to-reach’ and whilst it does pain me to say this, I think that an FE college might not be the right place for them, and maybe others are better at it.

In contrast, the college for Dick and Lynn has a (business) strategy to avoid recruiting learners who cannot sustain their programme. This ensures that their colleges achieve funding targets: “The College has a discerning market not a 'free for all’. We only run what we can achieve, and our success rates are fine” (Dick). These findings reflect Peters (1967), Pring et al. (2009) and Egdell and McQuaid (2016) who suggest that different assumptions exist about the purpose of education and social justice in society. It highlights tensions between the ethos of some FE colleges and the ideology underpinning Coalition Government policy drivers. The above findings from the current study provide new insight and identify areas for further research into whose problem 16-18 NEET should be, and how their life chances should best be supported.

All five managers stressed the importance of having aspirational facilities, staff with first-rate skills and intensive support services to engage 16-18 NEET learners. Zena and Colleen note that their colleges have dedicated 16-18 NEET resource centres which are equipped to engage this cohort. Dick and Lynn mention how state of the art facilties have increased 16-18 NEET learner numbers. Whilst varying viewpoints are expressed by learners in the focus groups about what attracted them to engage in their NEET programme, discussed earlier (4.2.2), all 13 participants agree that college facilities are extremely important and they were impressed by the specialist vocational equipment available, compared to their school environment (Appendix 19). For example, Ben, Jack and Joe were impressed by the IT facilities and David liked the college sports facilities. College staff are also identified as a key factor for engagement by all 13 participants, from participants’ initial interviews through to support with progression and career choices (4.2.2). This latter finding is consistent with Reay, David and Ball (2005) regarding the role of teacher effect for learner engagement.

Whilst all five managers mention the crucial role played by tutorial support, having first-rate staff and aspirational facilities to engage 16-18 NEET (4.2.2, 4.3.2), they also view these factors as being resource-intensive and costly. Colleen expresses a central dilemma of not having sufficient Government funding to meet the resource and support costs for 16-18 NEET cohorts. David, Lynn and Jim mention tensions about meeting Coalition Government funding outcomes and these are encapsulated in one comment: “we must meet funding targets to meet 16-18 NEET support needs and costs, and students must meet course requirements and achieve success” (Lynn). There is unity amongst the senior managers about increasing pressure between the demands for business effectiveness, the needs of 16-18 NEET learners and the perceived role of FE colleges:

The pressures that we are feeling are forcing us to strike a balance between finance and quality. Doing the right thing by young people does not necessarily secure the outcomes required, but it is the right thing to do by our local community. (Jim)

Concerns about inadequate levels of government resource confirm the conclusions from studies by Egdell and McQuaid (2016) and Hutchinson et al. (2016). They form a recurrent theme which is evident in issues discussed above, for example, the loss of ESF funding (4.6.2), reduced ALS grant (4.6.1) and increased resource costs for IAG services (4.6.4). This is an important part of the availability of FE 16-18 NEET provision story.

**4.6.3 *Services and support***

All the managers believed the closure of the National Connexions Service in 2013 diminished support and resources for 16-18 NEET. (4.3.3). Lynn and Jim felt that it led to declining 16-18 NEET recruitment trends and increased costs for FE to provide good-quality IAG services. There was like-mindedness amongst the policymakers that a system of colleges and LAs shared services, or contracting-out for careers services did not work. Policymakers Alan, Stewart and Ruth raise similar concerns to those expressed by Christine, that some students receive very little service. Policymaker Geoff held different views: he felt that Connexions did not get it right either, because their career advice did not fill employer skills gaps in local areas:

The country cannot afford to have a system in 2018 where young people are not being trained for areas of the local economy with skill shortages. It is always this balance between student choice and the needs of the economy and we have to look at it from the benefit of the UK economy.

Geoff holds a senior post for a LEP and, whilst his views may be influenced by this work context, his comments reflect Pring (2000) who identified tensions between different assumptions, such as the nature of education in society, the role of the FE sector, and the ideology underpinning Government policy drivers.

Policymakers Stewart and Ruth associated the closure of Connexions with the rise of serious problems with shared data services (such as NCCIS) used to calculate the NEET rates in England:[[85]](#footnote-85) “It is difficult getting accurate NEET data in local areas because the Government has got itself in a real mess with this” (Stewart). This view reflects Maguire (2015) who questions the accuracy of national NEET data. Stewart, Ruth and Christine express reservations about the Government’s strategic policy being sufficiently thought through in terms of its impact in practice. These findings support Hutchinson et al. (2016:716) who suggest that ‘short-comings’ in the planning and implementation of the Coalition Government’s 16-18 NEET policy stem from its removal of the infrastructure put in place by the New Labour Government; for example, ESF co-financing, the Connexions Service and EMA.

There was a consensus among the senior managers that EMA was a valuable option for 16-18 NEET learners because they could manage their £30 allowance as they chose and there is less stigma attached with it than with free meals and bus passes (currently available). Policymakers Stewart, Ruth and Christine believe that because EMA was means-tested, the money went where it was most needed. “It took away many social and economic barriers and made participation much easier for them” (Christine). The group discussions show that some learners experienced financial hardship. Participants Ben, David and Jed worked part-time to fund their college studies and all three mentioned that this had a major impact. Ben and David felt they had less study time and could not use the college facilities because they needed to work in the evening. Senior manager Lynn mentions that “25% of 16-18 learners in her college are ‘in care/out of care’ and most of these learners need to have part-time jobs to cover their living costs and this impacts on their college studies.” Jim mentions that to minimise the impact of the loss of EMA, many FE colleges use the discretionary ALS grant to support 16-18 NEET learners experiencing hardship. Dick revealed that 80% of students in his college had been in receipt of EMA, but his college set up its own form of the bursary for 2015-2016. This college has 46 learners with Government Bursaries awarded, but some 3,800 college bursaries have been awarded.

Policymakers Stewart, Ruth and Christine view the Bursary Fund as less effective than the EMA because it is discretionary. Stewart recalls:

We had examples of colleges offering laptops to get their numbers up. It was designed to help disadvantaged young people, but it did not set criteria for the funding, and so this made it ineffective. (Stewart)

This affirms the literature by Summers (2012) which argues that EMA’s replacement is inadequate and under-funded. Policymaker Geoff holds very different views about the closure of EMA:

This was not something that UK PLC could afford. The choice the Government made was to cut EMA, but I think that it’s similar to the choice to cut the FE adult budget by 24% in 2015, it has to come from somewhere. (Geoff)

Stewart also believed that Government expediency led to EMA being stopped:

It was an accounting exercise and an example of unprincipled Coalition Government decision-making that is not thought through and did not have a clear rationale.

It is significant that policymaker Alan (DfE) declined to comment on EMA or the Connexions Service. Perhaps, unsurprisingly to some extent, the views of particular policymakers reflect the goals of their Government-funded employing organisation. Conversely, views and motivations may be contradictory; for example, Alan might be defensive about the EMA, yet he is empathetic towards FE colleges in terms of funding cuts and support costs incurred by 16-18 NEET provision (4.5.4). Levels of resource and services form a recurrent theme throughout the interviews with senior managers and the majority of policymakers. The findings highlight new areas for research, such as notions of budget expediency underpinning some policy changes, rather than policy being informed by pedagogic principles or a practitioner evidence base.

**4.6.4 *Summary***

The findings indicate that a combination of factors influences 16-18 NEET participation in FE provision, such as: Government funding; levels of competition; local provision supply and demand chains; and teacher effectiveness. A range of underlying factors, for example, school failure, social and economic issues, and poor curriculum delivery are also shown to affect NEET engagement and transition. New themes emerged about the quality of NEET provision delivered by FE and that of commissioned providers. The interviews with managers clearly indicate a mismatch between Coalition Government reforms and 16-18 NEET initiatives and the FE practice interface. Tensions are apparent between ideological assumptions underpinning Government policy goals and the ethos of some FE colleges. These findings have significance for improvements in policy and practice, such as policy having an increased FE provider interface to capture the perceived benefits of a 16-18 NEET national Pre-Apprenticeship Programme (4.5.5); and tackling employer capacity and demand-side issues to promote NEET transition to employment (4.5.2).

**Chapter Five: Findings and Analysis 2: Reform Policies and FE Provision**

**5.1 *Introduction***

In this chapter, the data analysis which addressed research question two is presented. It incorporated the four stages of mixed-method research used in this study, which produced a multi-layered response. The analysis encompasses secondary research questions 2.a-b: the impact of Coalition Government reform policies and NEET initiatives; infrastructure changes and the viability of FE provision.

***5.2 Reform policy drivers: increased marketisation***

The survey sample was asked whether there has been increased competition for 16-18 NEET provision from other providers over the period 2012-2013 to 2014-2015. Some 71% of respondents answered yes: and these five respondents selected sources for this increased competition from a set of nine options, and ranked these by high, medium or low indicators; the results are presented in Table 4 (Appendix 21). It is significant that private training providers are ranked as the main source of increased competition, with all five respondents selecting this option. The second-highest ranked source of competition is social enterprise providers in the charitable/voluntary sector, followed by other FE providers. This finding indicates continuity with Thatcherism’s economic model for education which concerns competition and a free market (Ainley and Allen, 2010; Apple, 2017). It is evident in the Coalition Government’s policy of increased marketisation and privatisation of 16-18 NEET provision (Chapter Two 2.2.3, 2.2.4, 2.2.5).

However, some new sources of competition stemming from Coalition Government education reform policies ranked as low competition, included: commissioning partner providers, academies and UTCs. Urban colleges A and B assigned the high-increase category to all the options they selected, whereas rural colleges E and F largely selected the low-increase category. This suggests that urban colleges have experienced heightened competition compared with their rural counterparts. The results demonstrate that the urban respondents experience more non-FE competition. This lends support to the views of senior managers Lynn, Colleen and Jim, and policymakers Ruth and Christine, that Coalition Government funding for 16-18 NEET provision is increasingly being put outside of the traditional FE market. It reflects the literature by Finn (1987), Simmons and Smyth (2016) and Lupton and Thomson (2017) which questions the value of neoliberal Government policy increasing competition between FE, schools and youth training programmes. The findings emphasised the negative impact of quasi-market competition for 16-18 NEET provision (2.2.5), highlighting issues concerning the future viability of FE provision.

**5.2.1 *A diversified provision market***

Three policymakers believe that a diversified 16-18 NEET market has its advantages but for different reasons. Alan favours diversity because it is a means of improving quality for small training providers, who tend to get poor Ofsted grades:

We should encourage providers to come into the education market. If they can bring a good offer, it should not be confined to particular providers because it can lead to improvements in the choice and quality of provision available to young people. (Alan)

Policymaker Christine favours diversity because sometimes 16-18 NEET are not successful on FE programmes, and might need to study elsewhere. Christine felt that Free Schools and academies focus more on academic Level 2/3 provision and UTCs are aligned to STEM subjects, which would not be appropriate for 16-18 NEET. In contrast, Stewart gave examples of NEET provision in Studio Schools and UTCs which are successful because they engage 14-year-olds in vocational programmes (engineering, motor vehicle) which involve high-status work experience in industry, such as Jaguar. These findings provide new information about the provision which might prevent young people from entering the NEET category at age 16-18. It confirms research by IES (DfE, 2010a) which advocates the use of 14-16 vocational provision.

**5.2.2 *Diversification and capacity***

Policymaker Ruth favours a more diversified 16-18 NEET provision because many private training providers have recently gone out of business. Her local network of private training providers has reduced from 40 in 2013 to 15 in 2015, whilst FE 16-18 NEET providers have reduced from 10 to 6. Two changes in Coalition Government policy are linked by policymakers Stewart and Ruth to the reduced network of training providers and capacity difficulties experienced in their local areas. First, is the Coalition Government’s requirement for these providers to have a minimum amount of business (£1M). Ruth notes that: “training providers had to let staff go, let premises go and the provision has gone as well, and it’s all very difficult.” Stewart believed that small training providers have a crucial role in the recruitment of 16-18 NEET who are often not wanted by other providers:

Training providers have success stories, and those kids then move into what I would call more mainstream provision. Why would you want to shut that door, I ask? (Stewart)

To address the diminishing pool of 16-18 NEET training providers, policymaker Geoff recommended the establishment of ‘preferred provider’ networks. This notion echoes elements of the Youth Resolution for local areas put forward by Simmons et al. (2014a). Geoff noted that FE colleges are not currently rated in the top five providers for his local LEP area and he felt strongly that “Colleges need to tighten their belt and provide more apprenticeships.” The second change in policy concerns ESF 16-18 NEET project funding not being allocated to FE providers in September 2015, which is consistent with the interviews with FE managers discussed earlier (4.5.3). None of the senior manager participants have been allocated ESF funding for NEET taster provision in 2015-16. They all expressed strong disappointment about this change in policy and view it as having a negative impact that directly results in lost opportunities for 16-18 NEET participation:

ESF project funding has been hijacked by local LEPS for their skills priorities, ‘captains of industry’ don’t know about 16-18 NEET and have a narrow agenda for skills [which has led to] unmet opportunities for many 16-18 NEET. (Colleen)

This supports Keohane’s (2017) argument that the localisation of funding through LEPs means that purchasing decision-power has moved in the market and this makes 16-18 NEET provision problematic for FE providers. Senior managers Zena and Jim felt that in many cases LEPs are allocating ESF funding to adult skills rather than to 16-18 NEET projects: “some LEPs are made up of small numbers of employers with quite rigid views, but these are not always indicative of the wider views within a local area” (Jim). This issue about Government funding not reaching its 16-18 NEET target group is evident with Traineeship provision, as discussed in 4.5.5. This situation is perceived by all the FE senior managers and a majority of policymakers to be contributing to a 16-18 NEET planning blight in local areas. It resonates with the literature by Hutchinson et al. (2016), which argues that Coalition policy is not always sufficiently worked through in terms of its implementation; for example, the respective roles of LEPs, FE and training providers are largely uncharted. Finn (1987) and Ainley and Allen (2010) raise similar criticisms of the Conservative Thatcher Government policy and the respective roles of the MSC, private training providers, FE and LEAs which were left unexplored.

**5.2.3 *Policy implementation***

The findings above reveal that two Government policy changes are felt by FE managers and policymakers to lack a thorough approach to implementation, such as an effective ‘risk assessment’ of their potential impact on the local 16-18 NEET market. The policymakers provide new knowledge about what provision is affected and who is delivering it, but overall they provide a variable picture of what is happening on the ground with 16-18 NEET provision. There appears to be no central resource which accurately stores and shares information about 16-18 NEET provision with providers, LEPs and other stakeholders. It is unclear why information, which would be highly relevant for local provider and stakeholder business planning, is not readily available in a more diversified 16-18 NEET market. These types of functions had formed the remit of LEAs before FE incorporation (1993) and subsequently the LSC before its closure in 2009 (Chapter Two, 2.2.4, 2.2.7, 2.3.2).[[86]](#footnote-86) Hutchinson et al. (2016) suggest that it may have been purposely fragmented to pave the way for the Coalition Government’s neoliberal policy of privatisation for this market. The findings highlight the potential for the development of a shared information resource. Such a resource might also prove a valuable means to develop the quality improvement strategies mentioned by Alan, above (5.2.1). It might be of use for Government NEET policymaking. This gap in knowledge indicates an area for further research.

**5.3 *Coalition Government 16-18 NEET initiatives***

The survey sample was asked to identify which of the three Coalition Government 16-18 NEET initiatives introduced from 2013 they are providing, and the response is highly varied. Only one college is providing the employer-led Youth Contract Scheme (YCS), while four are providing the Study Programme and five are providing Traineeships (Figure 12). Only college A is providing all three initiatives, and college C is not providing any of the three initiatives.

**5.3.1 *YCS 2012-15***

The survey indicates that little FE and employer partnership work has occurred with commissioned YCS provision. Furthermore, it illustrates the Coalition Government’s movement of funding for 16-18 NEET provision away from the FE sector to private training providers. This reinforces findings of private training providers being a major competitor for the traditional FE 16-18 NEET market, as noted above (5.2). It affirms the literature about Coalition Government funding for 16-18 NEET provision being increasingly fed through employer-led commissioning, such as YCS £127M for 2012-2013 and £340M via the UKCES EOP pilot in 2015 (BIS, 2103a; BIS, 2014a).

**Figure 12: Coalition Government 16-18 NEET initiatives provided from 2013**

Senior managers Lynn and Colleen strongly criticise the Government for channelling substantial amounts of funding to newer 16-18 NEET providers who may not have the track record, or capacity to deliver programmes. Both managers cite examples of the misuse of public funding by some YCS providers, as noted earlier (4.2.3). Colleen expressed deep concern about abuse by YCS private training providers.

The views of Lynn and Colleen affirm research by IES (2014) about commissioned providers of out-sourced public funding seeking to achieve easy outcome-payments by routing young people onto courses of low rigour (the Coalition Government phased out YCS from March 2015). Similar concerns about the proliferation of poor quality government training provision which failed to equip young people with the skills needed for employment are raised by Finn (1987) and Rees et al. (1996). Ramsden et al. (2004) and Panchamia (2012) argue that such provision created perverse incentives and led to many private training providers ‘unit-farming’ learners to trigger outcome payments.[[87]](#footnote-87) This was a major problem for the MSC, TEC and LSC (NA0, 1996; NAO, 2008). Jim criticises the YCS for being “another short-term fix of no use, just like so many other Government 16-18 NEET initiatives over the years.” This view supports Maguire (2013b), Simmons et al. (2014a) and Reiter and Schlimbach (2015) who suggest that Governments’ 16-18 NEET policy is characterised by the introduction of initiatives providing short-term, or stopgap training schemes over the past decade.

**5.3.2 *The Study Programme and Traineeships from 2013***

A number of questions about the suitability of the Coalition Government’s Study Programme initiative for 16-18 NEET cohorts are highlighted in the previous chapter (4.5.4). For example, all the senior managers, policymakers and learners view the GCSE English and Maths requirement as presenting substantial difficulties. Some 60% of survey respondents also record that this requirement is challenging (4.6.1). These findings overwhelmingly show that this Coalition Government policy requirement constitutes a major barrier for 16-18 NEET engagement. Senior managers Zena, Lynn and Jim propose that the Government relax the GCSE and 540+ hours length of programme funding requirements of this programme, for 16-18 NEET. Zena and Colleen mentioned that they have overcome these issues in their delivery of the Study Programme by designing a flexible 16-18 NEET programme with in-year modules. They acknowledged that not all providers are willing or able to take business risks, because some learners may not complete the full 540+ hour requirement, and this would result in a funding loss for a college.

The majority of senior managers view Traineeships as being more suited to the 16-18 NEET market than the Study Programme due to the strong partnership between employers and trainees. In contrast, Jim (Interview L) questions whether 16-18 NEET are the best target group for Traineeships because it puts trainees into the workplace too early before they are sufficiently work-ready:

I think put the NEET into an employing organisation at 16 that has its own culture and its own ways of working, that’s a big ask. (Jim)

Policymakers Alan and Stewart also note that the work experience element of the Traineeship is difficult in terms of getting employers to take ownership of the training of young people. Policymakers Stewart and Christine felt there was a real need for a 16-18 NEET Pre-Traineeship Programme to develop young people’s work skills, similar to the Work-Rite Programme in Scotland. The preferred provision for 16-18 NEET mentioned by all senior managers is also some form of Pre-Traineeship to develop work-ready skills (4.5.5). This supports the survey data (4.5.1) which shows that provision best suited to 16-18 contains vocational, personal development and work-ready skills. This preferred provision is inherent in the modular Study Programme delivered by Zena and Colleen and is something which all other senior managers aspired to provide (4.5.3). It reflects key elements of the curriculum model for NEET, advocated by NfER (2012) and Simmons, Thompson and Russell (2013a). These findings highlight tensions between Coalition Government 16-18 NEET initiatives and the preferred curriculum of the senior managers and policymakers.

There was a consensus amongst the managers that Traineeships are failing to reach their 16-18 NEET target group. Colleen felt that “a ‘political game was going on’ when Ministers announced funding had been committed to new 16-18 NEET initiatives because it never reaches its target group.” Policymaker Stewart criticised the Government for extending the choice of programmes for talented young people whilst providing fewer choices for those without qualifications. This comment supports Hutchinson et al. (2016:709) who maintain that Coalition policy has in effect created dual pathways for the ‘over-educated’ and the ‘under-skilled’, with emphasis being placed on promoting the value of the former pathway for mainstream learners and the latter (employability skills provision) for 16-18 NEET. It reflects criticisms of government training provision (YOPs and YTS) raised by Finn (1987) and Rees et al. (1996).

Policymakers Alan and Ruth believed that Traineeships needed time to become established and improve in their quality. In contrast, senior managers Dick, Lynn, Colleen and Jim felt that Traineeships are not beneficial due to poor-quality outcomes. Consequently, these three senior managers are not offering Traineeships in 2016-2017. This supports research findings by IES (2014) about poor-quality and low-outcomes to target being largely evident in commissioned 16-18 NEET provision. All the managers and the majority of the policymakers refer to the Study Programme and Traineeship not being fully thought through in terms of how they were going to work, or how to ensure they would be properly managed. Similar concerns are raised by Ainley and Allen (2010) about the Conservative Thatcher Government’s introduction of output-based funding and market mechanisms for 16-18 education and training programmes, such as YTS (2.2.4). This also affirms Szereter (2012) and Lupton and Thomson (2015) who caution about problems resulting from the rapid payments-by-results approach implemented by the Coalition Government; and ineffective management and administration systems to monitor programme outcomes.

**5.3.3 *Commissioned provision***

The majority of senior managers felt they had adjusted their 16-18 NEET provision or ‘conformed’ to new Government initiatives (Study Programme and Traineeships) and other policy requirements, such as GCSE, to secure continued Government funding of NEET provision. Great reluctance is expressed by senior managers Dick, Lynn, Colleen and Jim about entering into poor-quality commissioned partner provision and the negative impact of this for learners, and their colleges’s reputation. In contrast, policymaker Ruth views the UKCES EOP pilot delivery of the Traineeship programme positively.[[88]](#footnote-88) It has been included in her LEP two-year Skills Strategy delivery plan and negotiations are in progress with Aston Martin to deliver an EOP 16-18 NEET Traineeship.

Three policymakers commented that they had no knowledge that the Coalition Government had commissioned £340M to the EOP pilot during 2014-15. This included Alan (DfE):

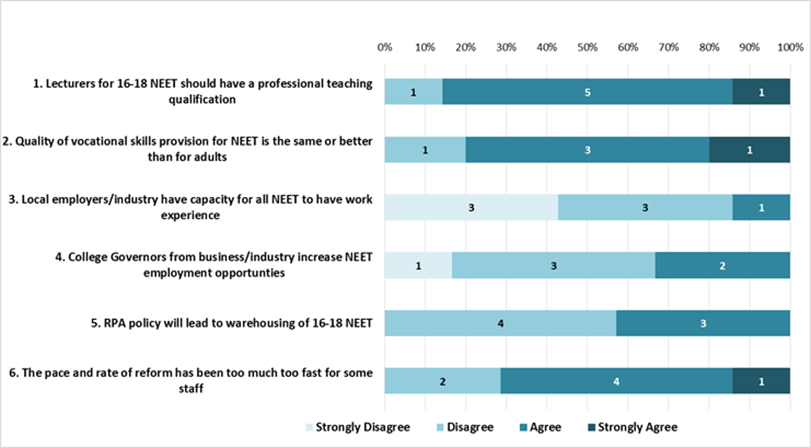
I have not even heard of them being providers of 16-18 NEET provision, and you could say they have not advertised it very much. This might also say something about the take-up or success of this provision.

This ties in with issues about a lack of shared information sources as discussed above (5.2.3). Significantly, Christine noted that the EOP pilot was to be phased out from 2016, but there is no indication whether this might be due to a Coalition Government policy reversal due to expediency, such as budget cuts. This emphasises the speed and pace of changing Government 16-18 initiatives. This recurring theme is evident in the literature (Hayward and Williams, 2011) and in the interviews with managers, above (5.3.1). It reinforces comments by Jim about there being a succession of short-term 16-18 NEET initiatives rather than the Coalition Government taking a long-term approach to planning. These findings support Reiter and Schlimbach (2015) who argue that serial Government initiatives provide stopgap solutions to tackling the 16-18 NEET problem.

**5.3.4 *Impact of wider Coalition Government reforms***

Survey respondents were asked to rate their college (on a 1-4 agree/ disagree scale) in relation to statements about a range of reform policies introduced by the Coalition Government from 2011 (Figure 13).

**Figure 13: Agreement with statements about Coalition Government reforms**

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There was strong agreement that lecturers for 16-18 NEET learners should hold professional teaching qualifications, which echoes the views of senior managers and policymakers that highly skilled FE staff are an essential resource for 16-18 NEET programmes (4.6.2). However, the teaching qualification requirement was abolished in 2013. Figure 13 shows 71% of respondents agree that the pace of the reform programme is very difficult for FE and its staff, and this confirms the findings above (5.3.3.). The survey results are not conclusive about a potential warehousing effect, resulting from the Coalition Government implementing RPA policy (a New Labour policy).[[89]](#footnote-89) The results are not conclusive about policy to recruit more FE governors from business, so as to increase 16-18 NEET employment opportunities (BIS, 2014b).

The survey data reveals that the majority of the sample did not think that employers have the capacity to provide work experience or placements for 16-18 NEET learners (Figure 13, statement 3), which affirms the views of policymakers, discussed above in 5.3.2. [.]This raises questions about the feasibility of the policy to ensure that work experience is part of all programmes of study for all 16-18 year olds (DfES, 2013i). The findings show that all the managers, policymakers and learners value external work experience and acknowledge its importance for the transition to employment or further education and training (4.5.2). This reinforces the arguments of Ainley and Allen (2010) and Simmons (2017) about a critical need for the Government to address the demand-side and to secure employer engagement. Other feasibility issues are identified in the findings. All the managers and the majority of policymakers expressed concerns about 16-18 NEET not being ‘work-ready’ to undertake external work experience (4.5.4), as did the majority of learners in the focus groups (4.5.2).

**5.4 *Reform infrastructure changes, benefits and improvements***

**5.4.1 *Local Area infrastructure***

The survey participants were asked if they agreed or disagreed with a statement that LEPs now holding funding to develop local skills strategies, will improve opportunities for 16-18 to engage in FE provision. There is no consensus: the survey responses show 14% agreed, 43% disagreed and 43% were unsure. Four out of seven of the sample are actively engaged with LEPs either by aligning their strategic business planning with LEPs Skills Plans, or FE college Board members sitting on LEP Committees for joint planning about the supply and demand of local provision (three out of seven). All senior managers view LEPs as a major infrastructure change which affects future plans for FE 16-18 provision. The majority of managers express reservations about LEPs, for example, Colleen and Jim view their concept of skills demand as being narrow, and they view LEPs’ skills priorities as reflecting the dominant views of whoever is leading a LEP or local powerholders. These two interviewees felt that FE providers could be put in the position of training people for very specific skill-sets to meet LEP skill priorities. Both managers believe that LEPs lack knowledge about NEET provision, as noted above (5.2.1). Dick and Jim mention that the focus of different LEPs can vary significantly, and some FE providers are at the geographical interface of three LEPs. This presents confusion for some FE colleges because they need to respond to three sets of different LEP policies and skills priorities. Lynn felt that FE needs to enable the LEPs to more fully understand the business and purpose of FE. This comment reflects the view of the majority of managers, as is the notion that FE is much more than some LEPs or Government understood it to be.

The majority of policymakers raise concerns about overlap or tensions between stakeholder functions and the role of LEPs. Alan mentions conflicts between SfA and LEPs over the transfer of skills provision and work that was previously SfA’s domain. Alan, Stewart, Ruth and Christine felt that it is not clear how LEPs fit with the new combined regional authorities (introduced by Government from 2015) or fit with ‘safe areas’; there is also friction between some LEPS and LAs. Stewart felt that LEPs did not have a clearly defined strategic mandate and views LEP and local area policy changes as:

Well, we will just change the landscape again, and we will have this, but this creates another set of issues. You then get into all kinds of difficult issues.

All the policymakers agree that the local and regional education and skills landscape is in a state of flux. Alan, Stewart and Christine felt there is a power void at a regional strategic level, because LEPs are essentially local skills organisations. Policymakers Alan and Stewart work professionally with LEPs and felt there are capacity concerns for these new local organisations to take on all the work the Government is devolving down to them, such as technical expertise in education.

In contrast, Geoff and Ruth (LEP executives) acknowledge that the LEP structure, in comparison to former Regional Development Agencies and the LSC, does not seem to have a whole regional strategic view, but they believe there will be a set of combined authority regional priorities instead. Ruth saw two key issues for LEPs in the future: positioning and power negotiations over the combined authorities’ submissions made to BIS in 2016. Geoff’s key issue is the future of the FE sector following the Area Review process in 2017. Christine felt it is vital that FE colleges are represented at LEPs as ‘provider of choice’ and to ensure the needs of 16-18 NEET are met; Geoff, however, views a market of providers being the vehicle to achieve the LEPs’ priorities to grow the UK-economy. Geoff also felt that student choice drives provision at the moment, but in the future, this will be different:

I think the student choice bit is going to get ditched because if they are not choosing the right thing then employers are going to get more of a say.

In contrast, Christine felt that local skills shortages may not fit a young person’s aspirations. She felt that young people should have wider opportunities to make their own career choices. This mirrors issues raised by Egdell and McQuaid (2016) about whether freedom of choice is factored into the Government’s policy for 16-18 year olds within a dominant habitus of human capital for the UK economy.

Geoff and Ruth acknowledge that a central challenge for LEPs is the future supply of provision and how to manage transition over a period of time when some providers will no longer exist, such as some training providers and FE colleges. These views illustrate that there are uncertain times ahead in the education and skills sector. The interviews reveal that the LEPs’ strategic role is not fully scoped, but neither is the role of the FE sector following the Area Review process in 2017. The findings support Hutchinson et al. (2016) who argue that Coalition policy has resulted in confusion about who holds responsibility for the duty to support 16-18 NEET and it has created tensions between LEPS, LAs and FE colleges over the local skills agenda. Such infrastructure factors strongly influence the viability of FE 16-18 NEET provision and ultimately impact on opportunities for NEET participation.

**5.4.2 *Learner support infrastructure***

The 13 learner participants in the focus group discussions felt that joining a college 16-18 NEET programme is beneficial because it gives more opportunities and better support to progress in education and training or to get a better-paid job (earlier discussion 4.2.2 and 4.3.2). There is a consensus by group M and N that more could be done at school (IAG) to encourage others to engage in FE 16-18 NEET programmes and this is reflected by a comment made by Tim:

When young people come to make choices about whether to stay at sixth form or college, a lot of people just stay in school sixth form. The college environment is better than school, and I chose not to go back to school.

All 13 learners are career-sure, and they all articulated clear career plans and had high aspirations about where they intended to progress to during the group discussions. These findings are particularly impressive given that 10 of the group had been out of school and were ‘second-chancers’. The 13 participants believed they have received good-quality career information and guidance at college (Appendix 19). This resonates with the views of FE senior managers and confirms the priority FE colleges place on IAG for NEET learners (discussed above in 4.6.3). It affirms the studies by IES (DfE, 2010a) which emphasise the importance of IAG as a key motivational factor supporting 16-18 NEET engagement and progression. A consistent concern is expressed by all the senior managers about the resource costs for FE colleges to provide good quality IAG services at a time of funding cuts and the Careers Enterprise Company (CEC) not yet being in place.

In contrast, the majority of policymakers view school and college IAG services as being of poor-quality. This reflects research by Barnardo’s (2013) and a Select Committee Report (Parliament, 2015a), which identify gaps and declining services for 16-18 year olds since the closure of Connexions from 2013. The Conservative Cameron Government launched the CEC in 2016. This multi-million-pound social enterprise programme aims to broker a partnership between employers, schools and colleges by establishing a national network of Enterprise Advisors through LEPs (DfE, 2016d). It reflects a continuation of the privatisation of careers services by the Conservative Major Government and Coalition Government’s neoliberal policy agenda (Chapter Two, 2.3).

**5.5 *FE Viability, future trends***

**5.5 1 *Enhancing engagement***

The survey respondents were asked for five measures that could increase 16-18 NEET participation in FE. In Figure 14 a pattern is discernible in the data which identifies a concern about decreasing levels of government funding and the distance between preferred FE curriculum models for 16-18 NEET provision and those of the Coalition Government’s NEET policy interventions. This confirms that there had been little change since Hodgson and Spours (2011) criticised Government policy for not being well-informed by a practice evidence base, and little change since research by Pring et al. (2009), in terms of the Coalition Government maximising resources for FE 16-18 NEET provision.

**Figure 14: Statement options to increase 16-18 NEET provision in FE**

**5.5.2 *Resources and viability – a practitioner focus***

The majority of senior managers believed that 16-18 NEET programmes need more Government resources. Zena expresses a typical view that:

The government needs to give FE the freedom (funding) to be able to put 16-18 NEET programmes together with flexible starts, vocational choice and small group size.

However, all the senior managers felt that the Coalition Government’s policy climate is focused on a payment-by-results approach and funding cuts. Concerns about FE providers’ ability to meet the high support costs of 16-18 NEET learners with complex needs and/or disability are consistently expressed by all the managers. This supports research by Yates and Payne (2006), Spielhofer et al. (2009) and Finlay et al. (2010), regarding the existence of a range of 16-18 NEET groups and sub-groups which entail significant resource costs for NEET provision. Lynn put forward another perspective which is also largely shared by the all the managers:

Government policy does not seem to recognise that many young people are not NEET because they are unable to achieve academically, but because they have unseen social or cultural issues.

This confirms the literature by Grenfell and James (1998) and Perry and Francis (2010) about wider cultural factors needing to be considered to overcome the effect of the unequal distribution of capital in society (Simmons, 2017). It also supports the argument of Egdell and McQuaid (2016) who suggest that Government policy needs to address structural, social and economic disadvantage in society to more effectively tackle the NEET problem.

All the senior managers register concern with the curriculum involved by Government NEET initiatives. This affirms the literature critique which shows that the curriculum models recommended in evaluations from a number of NEET pilot activities, such as IES (DfE, 2010a), NfER (2012), IES (2014) and IES (DfE, 2015b) do not appear to have informed subsequent short-term Government 16-18 NEET interventions. This is encapsulated by Jim:

Government policy takes a short-term approach to 16-18 NEET interventions, and this is a false economy. To increase NEET life chances needs a longer-term view. A five-year cycle to beat the burden of dependency.

This supports Hutchinson et al. (2016) who suggest that there are serial Government 16-18 NEET initiatives based more on ideological assumptions than an evidence base. It highlights areas for further research, such as the justification for Governments’ funding for a number of initiatives and the costs in terms of lost life chances for generations of 16-18 NEET.

**5.5.3 *FE sector role***

There is a consensus amongst senior managers that the work of the FE sector and its role as a community provider is not widely known, and that the Coalition Government does not understand the FE sector (5.4.1). This view, and that governments in general, do not understand FE, is consistent with Keohane’s (2017) and Widdowson’s (2018) arguments. Lynn and Colleen view FE as having a wider purpose than meeting local skills priorities, such as preparing citizens and benefitting the local community. Dick, Colleen and Jim felt that more should be done to promote success in the FE sector, to redress common narratives being received about small numbers of failing colleges. Jim states, more than once that:

The Government has missed the story of FE: it provides financial value. If they spent more time in colleges talking to colleges then they would understand the diversity of what we do.

A need for more recognition of FE’s role and its business focus by LEPs forms an emergent theme from the interviews with managers. These issues are felt to be particularly important by the majority of policymakers because LEPs are key players in the FE Area Review process. Whilst all senior managers stated that they will be working more closely with LEPs in terms of sharing the education and skills agenda in local areas (5.4.1), they said less about the nature of the power dynamics involved or local mechanisms established to support joint working. These findings provide new insight into Coalition Government policy changes affecting FE provision in local areas.

**5.5.4 *The future landscape***

The senior manager interviews took place at the time of the launch of the Area Review process for FE colleges: views range from optimism to apprehension about the outcomes of this process in 2017. The majority of managers made reference to endemic change now being part of everyday life [.]. This theme of change was related to the Coalition Government’s policy constantly changing and FE colleges continually seeking effective responses to such change. The majority of managers view FE as being an adaptable and dynamic sector, yet varied views are expressed about the viability of 16-18 NEET provision or the future of the FE sector. Dick predicted that the legacy of Coalition Government policy will lead to a radically diminished FE sector. A more optimistic, or naïve, outlook is expressed by Colleen:

I believe strongly that if you keep the learners at the centre of everything you do, then by default everything else will come good. Whether it is the quality measures or the funding, it will come good as long as you keep them at the heart of it.

An optimistic view is voiced by Zena when discussing the lead role her college has taken in the formation of an FE network to share practice about their modular 16-18 NEET Study Programme. This finding supports the literature critique (2.2.3) and Hutchinson et al. (2016:715), which suggests that the Coalition Government’s ‘bonfire of the quangos’ dismantled the QCDA and LSIS by 2013: this reduced scope for curriculum guidance or improving practice activities across the FE sector to enhance quality in NEET provision. This relates to all 16-18 NEET provision, whether it is commissioned or delivered by academies, schools or UTCs. The quality of NEET provision can be seen to influence the learner experience, their achievement and progression opportunities, and ultimately their life chances.

Policymakers Alan and Stewart make reference to the 17.5% reduction for 18 year olds in FE in the Coalition Government’s Letter of Grant 2015. This funding was historically used for FE ‘second chance’ learners. Alan (DfE) presents a rationale for the reduction in funding based on his view, as an insider:

We had to make budget cuts and chose to do it from there because there was a legal requirement to fund and teach 16-18 year olds but the Government is not legally obliged to deliver or fund provision once a young person is 18+.

Alan believes that the Coalition Government needed to make a cost saving but could not reduce other budgets, such as healthcare. For the same reasons, Stewart regards this cut in funding for 18 year olds as FE’s turn ‘to be battered’. Geoff also acknowledges that FE was in ‘the firing-line' for cuts the Coalition Government needed to make following a Comprehensive Spending Review. These views indicate that many Coalition policy decisions might be due to budgetary expediency rather than having a clear policy rationale. Similar views about budgetary expediency are evident in the Coalition Government’s closure of the EMA and Connexions (4.6.3). All the policymakers believed that FE has a central role to play in the future, but Geoff and Ruth (LEP executives) felt that FE colleges need to ‘up their game’ and to engage much more with employers. Geoff felt that FE had been too generalist in the past and has not even done that well enough, and this has undermined FE in the opinion of the public. Stewart believes that there will be a real problem after the Area Review process about what is left for FE and what its role will be:

We will regret some of the decisions that are being made today. When we have to put them back in, in days to come, it will cost more than it would do to keep them in place.

This comment indicates that further adjustments to the Coalition Government education reforms, or reversals in some policies, are not wholly unanticipated. Policymakers Stewart and Christine view FE as being vital for 16-18 NEET provision because it is flexible enough to capture and offer wider opportunities for ‘second chance’ NEET young people, those who have experienced school failure, and also to provide ‘first chance’ opportunities for many young people. These interviewees believe that FE with the right type of provision could be massively inspiring for 16-18 NEET young people.

**5.5.5 *Summary***

The findings illustrate reservations about a number of Coalition Government education reforms and whether they can effectively contribute to reductions in the 16-18 NEET rate. The Coalition’s NEET policy is seen to be characterised by ‘serial evolutions in practice’ evident in the regular introduction of new initiatives (Hutchinson et al., 2016:715). The enactment of this policy presents many challenges for FE colleges, who feel that they are constantly adjusting provision and ways of working. The interviews with professionals reveal some confusion about responsibility for the 16-18 NEET agenda in local areas. The findings increase knowledge about the viability of FE NEET provision and the future of the FE sector. They accentuate **the repercussions of Coalition Government reform policy 2010-2015 and** its legacy to successive Conservative Governments from 2015 to date.

**Chapter Six: Conclusion**

* 1. ***What has been achieved***

The central aims and objectives of this study focused on addressing the research questions set out in Chapter One (1.4.1). These aimed to extend the knowledge base about the efficacy of the Coalition Government’s education reforms for increasing 16-18 NEET participation opportunities. This important area for study concerns the life chances of generations of 16-18 NEET. The findings confirm that the research aim and objectives have been achieved. Seven years on from the inception of the Coalition Government reform policy drivers and associated political rhetoric, this research project has produced compelling new and original knowledge in this field. Unique insights have been gained from FE practitioners, learners and policymakers about what is happening on the ground in a fast-changing policy environment. The research has highlighted key messages which can serve to refresh ideas on the subject and suggest where improvements could be made in both practice and policy.

**6.1.1 *Revisiting the research journey***

The literature review (Chapter Two) critiqued existing research to establish any gaps in knowledge. It examined the background of the policy drivers underpinning the Coalition Government’s education reform priorities. Chapter Two considered theoretical concepts and the ways in which assumptions made by researchers or Government influenced 16-18 NEET policy development and provision. Different views in the literature about the characteristics of 16-18 NEET status are informed by various assumptions, and these factors are shown in this study to affect the range and types of provision available for 16-18 NEET (4.5.3). Chapters One and Two discussed ideological distinctions and continuity between the 16-18 NEET policy approaches of different governments evident in the literature (1.3-1.3.2, 2.2.1-6). The original research questions stated in Chapter One were examined*;* about how the Coalition Government’s education reforms may be affecting FE provision for 16-18 NEET, and whether reform will increase opportunities for participation, or make NEET provision problematic, and less viable for FE providers. Contributory factors were considered, such as neoliberal elements of the Coalition’s reform policy – notably the emphasis on individualism, choice, and privatisation in education provision (Biesta and Lawy, 2006; Ainley and Allen, 2010; Lupton et al., 2015).

Themes drawn from the literature critique (Appendix 1) informed the research design (Chapter Three), and the formulation of this study’s research questions. Additional emergent themes supported by evidence in Chapters Four and Five provided new lenses to interpret the data, extend knowledge and identify areas for further research. This study used a mixed-method approach which yielded multi-layered data to answer the research questions. The research rationale in Chapter Three (3.5.1-2) substantiates how the research methodology fits the research aim and objectives, set out in Chapter One (1.4.1). The data handling and management process placed emphasis on building, testing and reflecting on the data at each stage of analysis. The data analysis in Chapters Four and Five is supported by the responses provided by the participants. A consistent ‘log trail’ was maintained to justify interpretations made at each stage of the interview data analysis (Richards, 2015:50). These procedures ensured robustness, which reinforces the validity of the research findings and the credibility of the conclusions reached. The data management procedures and records were handled to reliably address the research questions. This ensured that the research results have relevance and are worth hearing.

This research journey began with reflections about why the annual 16-18 NEET rate in England has fluctuated at 7-10% between 2000 and 2014 (DfE, 2014a) and whether Coalition Government reforms were sufficient to lead to a reduction. This is encompassed in the statement of objectives and research questions. This final chapter refers back to those questions and identifies implications for practice, policy and future research. This study has been a journey in the pursuit of answers; not just those of the original research questions but also to those new themes and issues which emerged from the data. The investigation opened with questions about the viability of FE 16-18 NEET provision but ended questioning the future viability of the FE sector itself, such has been the pace, and severity of the Coalition Government’s policy changes.

**6.1.2 *Setting***

The context within which the research has been set is considered in Chapter Two. The data analysis showed that FE colleges are varied organisations which made largely individual responses to a number of Coalition Government policy reforms and initiatives relating to 16-18 NEET provision (4.6.1-3, 5.3-5.4). For some FE colleges, Coalition Government policy change and funding cuts have been particularly difficult in 2014-2015 (4.6.1). The implications of rapid Coalition policy change were, therefore, considered not only in relation to the original research context but also to a heightened pace of policy changes. During and since the completion of this research project, some FE manager participants have been affected by restructuring and redundancy, resulting from the Conservative Cameron Government’s introduction of an Area Review process for FE colleges (DfE, 2015g).[[90]](#footnote-90) Varied views were expressed by the managers regarding the future of the FE sector. These ranged from pessimistic and optimistic to naïve outlooks (5.5.4). The questions addressed during the research process were therefore examined within an accelerating Coalition reform policy environment, and established what has and has not been achieved by the research.

* 1. ***Research relevance***

**6.2.1 *Data analysis***

The relevance of the research findings to the research questions and the purposiveness of the themes drawn from the literature critique at the start of the investigation are reviewed in this section. Comparisons are made with the data analysis in Chapters Four and Five to bring together key themes and issues and connect up key messages (6.3). Analysis of the research data initially focused on existing themes then new penetrating themes started to emerge.[[91]](#footnote-91) For example, it was found that a combination of factors influenced 16-18 NEET participation and the types of FE provision available, which might not have been otherwise known (4.2.1, 4.5.1 and 5.3). The original objective of providing FE provider and stakeholder perspectives is achieved, and the data provided insights from the lived experience of learners who successfully progressed from 16-18 NEET FE provision.

**6.2.2 *Key themes and issues a-f***

Themes and issues were drawn from the data analysis. The main focus of themes a-c is research question one and, for d-f, it is question two.

**a. Provision context and access**

This was a central issue: whether the same type of FE provision was available to all 16-18 NEET, or if there are restricted opportunities to access some provision. The data analysis revealed that varied curriculum models and programmes are provided by FE colleges (4.2.1, 4.5.1-3). Reductions in Government FE funding combined with declining recruitment trends and increased competition were found to be key risks to 16-18 NEET provision (4.6.1, 6.3.1). This was particularly evident in rural areas with high 16-18 NEET populations. FE managers and policymakers consistently voiced concerns about the comprehensiveness of the evidence base underpinning the Government’s 16-18 NEET initiatives, as well as concerns about data sources (5.2.1-3). LA data identifying areas with high 16-18 NEET numbers were not matched to local supply (4.2.2). FE colleges made little use of success or destination data for business planning or to rigorously market provision to increase 16-18 NEET participation (4.3.1-2). This contributes to knowledge (3.6.1 Key message 2 and 3).

**b*. Use of data***

This theme focused on FE 16-18 NEET segmentation analysis (gender, ethnicity, and disability) and equality of access issues. The survey results revealed an FE 16-18 NEET learner ethnic profile where the non-white classification was under-represented, in comparison to RCU MIDES benchmarking data (4.4.2) and learners with self-declared disability had low participation rates in FE NEET provision compared to a West Midlands participation rate (4.4.3).[[92]](#footnote-92) FE managers provided little information on 16-18 NEET segmentation data or its deployment in business planning (4.4.4). These findings suggest that there may be equality of access issues affecting 16-18 NEET participation in FE provision. The findings also indicated that national and regional data sets for 16-18 NEET participation in FE are not comprehensive and this affirms the literature in Chapter Two.[[93]](#footnote-93) Concerns about the accuracy and usefulness of national data-sets were a recurring theme, with policymakers attributing this to the Coalition’s closure of the Connexion Service in 2013(4.6.3). This indicated that Government planning and FE college business planning may be hampered by the ineffective data usage. It reinforced a new theme about the thoroughness of planning undertaken by the Coalition Government (4.6.3, 5.5.2). This supports shortcomings identified by Hutchinson et al. (2016) resulting from policies often lacking sufficient data or evidence about how they will work in practice. This contributes to knowledge (6.3.1 Key message 1 and 2) constituting an area for further investigation (6.5.3).

**c. *NEET status***

The survey data (4.2.2) showed urban colleges mainly recruited to general provision (Entry-Level 3) and rural colleges to specialist NEET provision (Entry-Level 1). This indicated that not all 16-18 NEET learners operate according to the DfE definition at Entry-Level 1 and that FE colleges used different definitions of the characteristics of NEET to inform their curriculum models (4.2.1, 4.5.3). It highlighted equality of access issues, such as specialist provision (Level 1) being the main type of provision available in rural colleges. The quality of FE provision and what best suits 16-18 NEET learners formed a consistent theme throughout the interview data (4.5, 5.2). This was reflected in the views of FE managers regarding the cost of substantial support services required to meet the complex needs of 16-18 NEET (4.2.4, 4.6.2-3, 5.4.1).

Senior managers wanted to share expertise in successful curriculum strategies used with 16-18 NEET experiencing school failure (4.2.2, 5.5.4). This reflected research by Pring et al. (2009) who suggest that active dislike of the experience of school required the development of specialist curriculum to secure 16-18 NEET engagement. It also indicated that little improvement in the curriculum had resulted from Coalition Government 16-18 NEET initiatives. This affirms a cautionary note by Hutchinson et al. (2016) about Coalition Government policy leading to young people becoming more entrenched within NEET status. There was a consensus amongst managers and policymakers for the need to re-model existing types of NEET curriculum: in particular over the perceived benefits of a Government-endorsed Pre-Traineeship programme geared to the complex needs of 16-18 NEET (4.5.5, 5.3.2), and by developing a network of NEET providers to improve the quality of provision (5.2.3, 5.3.3, 6.3.1). These curriculum issues extend knowledge and form areas for further research (6.5.3).

**d. *Quality – FE services and support***

The survey data showed that 57% of the provision was below the national success rate benchmarks for the FE sector for 2013-2014 (4.3.2). Destination data revealed substantial numbers in the ‘not known’ category. Of those that were known, learner progression within FE colleges was the highest destination. This indicated that a number of FE learners may not be making a successful transition to employment. Studies by Simmons, Thompson and Russell (2014b) and Maguire (2015) showed that some learners progress from poor-quality 16-18 NEET programmes to short-term employment but frequently return to NEET status, often to repeat the same provision. Managers and policymakers felt that whilst Coalition reform policy led to an increasing variety of 16-18 NEET provision (4.5.1), this had occurred at a time of prohibitive reductions in FE funding (4.6.1, 5.4.1). This identified a new theme around perverse Government funding incentives preventing FE colleges from extending NEET provision (4.5.3, 5.2.1).

All the senior managers expressed disappointment about the Coalition’s rapid marketisation of 16-18 NEET provision (4.2.2, 5.2.1) and provision being progressively commissioned outside the traditional FE market to social enterprise providers. Quality concerns about commissioned provision were often cited by senior managers, where it failed to recruit to the 16-18 NEET target group (4.5.5). This highlighted issues about the future viability of FE NEET provision and the capacity of other providers to deliver quality provision (5.2.1, 5.2.2). Quality was a prominent issue with managers and policymakers about the loss of support services for 16-18 NEET learners, due to the Coalition’s closure of the Connexions Service and the EMA (4.6.3). Additional high-support costs accruing to FE NEET programmes and inadequate funding were identified as prohibitive by all the senior managers (4.6.1, 5.4.1). This recurrent quality theme (6.3.1 Key message 4) was voiced by the majority of policymakers and formed an area for further investigation (6.5.3).

**e. *Government reform policies***

The findings revealed that the Coalition Government’s reform policies presented many problems for FE 16-18 NEET provision, such as reductions in additional learner support funds (ALS), the GCSE requirement and the work experience policy for 16-18 year olds (4.6.1-4.6.2, 5.3.5). This extended knowledge which was captured by the following new themes: First, tensions between Coalition initiatives and practitioners’ experience of the provision that best meets the needs of 16-18 NEET (4.5.3, 5.2.2, 5.5.1). This accentuated a shared perspective that Government initiatives lacked a practice evidence base. Second, poorly planned Coalition initiatives had a detrimental effect, for example, the introduction of the Bursary Scheme (4.6.3). Thirdly, the fast pace and range of Coalition policy changes were felt by managers and policymakers to be indicative of major issues on the horizon for the viability of FE NEET provision and the FE sector.

Data collection occurred at a time of (policy and infrastructure) change when the future role of LEPs was not known, and the future role of the FE sector following the Area Review process was not known (5.4.1, 5.5.2). In this respect, interviews with managers and policymakers revealed overwhelmingly pessimistic views about the future role of the FE sector (5.5.4). This reinforced a perspective about there being uncertain times ahead for the FE colleges. Difficulties with the Area Review process reported by FE Week (Burke, 2018b) included the collapse of a number of college mergers and mishandling of Area Review procedures. This reinforces the views expressed by the interviewees. It also lends support to the theme that Government policy may not always be thoroughly planned (6.3.1 Key message 5 and 6).

**f. *Reform infrastructure change***

Some 71% of the survey respondents agreed that the pace of Government reform was ‘too much, too fast’ (5.3.4). This was confirmed by all the senior managers, citing examples of endemic change. Considerable apprehension was expressed about infrastructure changes, as discussed above. Some interviewees wanted to see probing new research around Government spending on short-term 16-18 NEET initiatives (5.3.3, 5.5.2). This supports European-wide research which concluded that 16-18 NEET required long-term interventions and commitment by governments to multiple solutions (Coles, 2014).

**6.3 *Contribution to knowledge***

Provision for 16-18 NEET has importance for young people’s life chances, yet the literature revealed gaps in knowledge about how many 16-18 NEET are engaging in FE provision, and with what success (2.6.1-2). There was also little knowledge available about the effectiveness of the Coalition Government 16-18 NEET initiatives from 2010. The research has addressed these gaps in knowledge at the cutting edge of policy change. It has provided vital provider and learner perspectives which have shed light on FE NEET provision and the implementation of the Coalition’s policy changes at the practice level. This research considered the implications of Coalition Government reforms and initiatives for those involved. By investigating the interface between FE practitioners, learners and policymakers, the research generated knowledge which would not have been otherwise known. The findings revealed novel insights into this under-researched area of education policy.

The research findings are summarised in six broad key messages which encompass the themes and issues generated by the data analysis in section 6.2.2 a-f. These messages show how the research contributes to knowledge and discovers new areas of knowledge.

* + 1. ***Key message – extending current knowledge***

1. The disjuncture between the evidence base underpinning Coalition Government 16-18 NEET initiatives and the practice interface indicated that many government interventions are not sufficient to increase participation.
2. National and regional 16-18 NEET data sets are not comprehensive for FE provision. There are inadequate shared information resources available to providers, stakeholders and Government for strategic planning.
3. A wider analysis is required about multiple factors contributing towards 16-18 NEET status including the characteristics of NEET groups and sub-groups (Yates and Payne, 2006; Spielhofer et al., 2009). Clear identification of the drivers and barriers for NEET participation and successful transition (supply and demand) are required so that resource can be more effectively targeted.

***Key message – new areas of knowledge***

1. Perverse funding incentives impact on the availability of 16-18 NEET provision; FE budgets are clearly decreasing at a time of increased Government funding of private and social enterprise providers. Financial viability and best value require further investigation.[[94]](#footnote-94)
2. Infrastructure changes are affecting the education and skills landscape. There is uncertainty about the role of stakeholders and the impact of policy change on the viability of FE 16-18 NEET provision.
3. The rationale for many Coalition policy decisions is not clear to stakeholders, and policy is not always thoroughly planned. Representative policy forums would benefit the practitioner and Government policymaking interface and lead to long-term 16-18 NEET strategy.

The research findings incorporated in the key messages contributed to the understanding of the subject. They demonstrated unique aspects of this research and its capacity to affirm or extend existing knowledge. They identify those elements of the findings which make innovative contributions to the professional discussion (6.3.2) and take forward investigation (6.5.3). The findings provided a synthesis that has not been made before; for example, quality issues concerning provider capacity and provision viability are revealed. Creativity in ideas for further investigation was illustrated by an unforeseen outcome of the research which proposed developing a curriculum quality network for NEET providers (6.3.1c). Accordingly, this study fits the definition for original research put forward by Basit (2013:215) which “pertains to creativity, innovation and freshness of ideas and practices in research.”

**6.3.2 *Wider professional debate***

Oliver and Kettley (2010) question whether teachers act as ‘unconscious gate-keepers’ rather than ‘facilitators’ of learners’ educational opportunities. The interview data shows that the FE learners made positive career decisions and successful progression within education (4.3.2). All the learners developed their career aspirations during their NEET programmes, and there was a consensus among all 13 participants that their course provided the means to confirm these aspirations (Appendix 19). The senior managers identified FE provision as a vehicle for encouraging 16-18 NEET investment in career decisions and for learners’ continuing progression. These findings are in contrast to the Nuffield/Rathbone EYE (2008) which revealed negative teacher attitudes towards pre-NEET pupils. This contributes to professional discussion, but further longitudinal research would be required to investigate whether long-term employment destinations are secured by the 13 participants, or if they return to NEET status at a later age (Maguire, 2015).

In Chapter Two the literature indicated that neoliberalism evident in the Coalition Government’s reform priorities had a powerful influence on shaping strategic education policy. The interviews with managers and policymakers affirmed that the Coalition Government had increased commissioning for NEET provision to private providers or social enterprise cartels (5.3.1, 6.2.2.d-f). The interviews with senior managers (5.3.4) revealed that Coalition 16-18 NEET initiatives do not incorporate the curriculum that managers, in their experience, viewed as best suited for NEET cohorts (4.5.3, 5.3.2). Furthermore, Government initiatives did not reflect the curriculum recommendations made by previous research (commissioned by Government) by IES (DfE, 2010a) and NfER (2012). This takes forward professional debate based on the view of all senior managers that the Coalition’s 16-18 NEET initiatives from 2010 consisted of short-term schemes, focused on skills for the UK-economy, which lacked a practice evidence base and often lacked planning or evaluation evidence (5.3.1-5, Key message 6).

These views were consistent with the arguments of Finn (1987), Maguire (2013a) and Reiter and Schlimbach (2015) which suggest that many 16-18 NEET experienced short-term and poor-quality training initiatives, of little value for the transition to work or education. Paramount within further professional discussion should be consideration of the notion that “Education is not ethically neutral. We cannot avoid the tricky question as to what values and whose aims should prevail” (Pring et al., 2009:21). The findings of my research suggest that there are other assumptions involved in FE NEET provision rather than solely implementing neoliberal Coalition Government policy changes. This contributes to continuing professional discussion about the purpose of education. It is reflected by social democratic notions of a general education (Clift and Tomlinson, 2002) as opposed to economic individualism evident in the market-based approach of Thatcherism (Ainley and Allen, 2010) and the continuation of neoliberalism by New Labour and the Coalition Government (Biesta and Lawy, 2006; Simmons and Thompson, 2011).

Perry and Francis (2010) point to social and economic disadvantage resulting from the long-term structural change in society as factors leading to 16-18 NEET status. Pring et al. (2009) question whether education and training can provide a solution to meet the social and economic needs of society. These issues were evident in the interviews with managers, who raised concerns about the role of the FE sector in society, its responsibilities to serve economic well-being in local communities, and the complex life situations presented by many 16-18 NEET (4.6.2, 5.5.3). These findings indicate that further professional debate would be beneficial, as advocated by Pring et al. (2009:22), into the notion that, “education reform must be accompanied by more radical increasing of social and economic transformation.”

**6.4 *Limitations***

A full rationale for the research methodology used for this small-scale study is provided in Chapter Three (3.3.3, 3.5). The sample for the survey and the interviews with managers and learners were drawn from FE colleges. It would not have been practical in terms of time and resource limitations, given that this was a small-scale study, to include a large number of the 348 FE colleges in England in the survey, or to interview large numbers of participants across various regions (AoC, 2014b). As acknowledged in Chapter Three (3.6.2, 3.10.1), the data gathered and analysed from the small-scale survey used in this research has transferability and replicability with similar groups of participants (FE colleges). The study does not make claims of generalising to the total FE population. The data collection phase coincided with unexpected reductions in FE Government funding and the introduction of an Area Review procedure for the FE sector in spring 2015. These unforeseen policy changes affected the survey response rate, which was lower than anticipated (3.9.1). The survey data was therefore supplemented by additional data-sets drawn from a documentary review undertaken in May 2015 (Appendix 15). The documentary review enabled newly developed data that became available in 2015 to be harnessed.[[95]](#footnote-95)

The study was limited in a certain respect by the lack of FE benchmarking data for 16-18 NEET by ethnicity, gender, disability, and other vulnerable categories. This was the case both regionally and nationally; indeed there has been no national Government research conducted in this area since the LYSPE & YCS Final Study in 2010 (DfE, 2011a). The research showed that FE managers faced similar problems when engaging in business planning and there was poor data usage (4.3.1). This area of factors influencing 16-18 NEET participation in FE provision could not be fully investigated by this study. These limitations may affect the usefulness of the findings in this area, but they also indicate important areas for improvements in national information services and FE practice. This informs the recommendations for future research (6.7.2).

**6.5 *Implications of the research***

**6.5.1 *Policy impact***

This research is of relevance to policymaking and could be used to contribute to current decision making. Serial short-term Government 16-18 NEET initiatives, such as YCS, were viewed by the majority of practitioners interviewed as a poor-quality provision which was failing 16-18 NEET (5.3.1). Bell and Stevenson (2006) suggest that different forces shape policy, such as human capital theory, citizenship, social justice and accountability, and that policy needs to be anchored within an evidence base that is grounded in empiricism. The lack of an evidence base for much Government policy suggests that many findings from this study could well be used, this is especially the case since government policy in this area seems to be continually changing and under review (6.2.2f). The interview findings showed that the Coalition Government reform policies present many challenges for 16-18 NEET participation in FE and for the financial viability of provision in the FE sector (6.2.2a.e.f). The Government’s FE Area Review had the potential to disrupt the education and training sector further. Although the Coalition Government had put increased resource into 16-18 NEET initiatives, it had often been diverted outside the FE sector, which also coincided with reductions in FE budgets (6.2.2a.e). This raised issues about FE provider capacity in a fragile 16-18 NEET market and best value (6.2.2b.c.d).

The literature critique illustrated that the Conservative Cameron Government (2015-2016) and the Conservative May Government (2016 onwards) have continued with many of the Coalition Government’s education reform priorities and maintained its policy drivers, such as education for the economy, increased marketisation and privatisation (2.2.3). The May Government has retained a commitment to existing 16-18 NEET initiatives, such as RPA, Traineeships, Apprenticeships, and the Work Programme (House of Commons Library, 2016a). It has increased NEET SIB funding targeted at 16-18 NEET, through the introduction of the L-CF and YIF schemes and the Careers Enterprise Company (1.3.1, 2.2.4, 2.2.6). Discontinuity in policy is evident in its recent closure of the UKCES Pilot for Traineeships in 2017 (2.2.1) and the pledge of the Prime Minister reported by Asthana and Campbell (The Guardian, 2017) to reverse the New Labour Government’s 1998 ban on new grammar schools from 2020. This indicates an area of continuing debate concerning the assumptions underpinning different Government policy approaches.

The findings of the current study are equally relevant and fit with successive Conservative Government policies and 16-18 NEET initiatives. They encompass many of the same underlying policy drivers and motivations which are still evident and indicate areas for further research regarding discontinuity of policy approach. This highlights the significance of the current study and its original contribution to knowledge, policy and practice.

**6.5.2 *Practice interface***

The research found that there is little involvement of FE providers or their learners in 16-18 NEET policy development and little consideration of the impact of Government policy on practitioners and learners. The findings revealed noteworthy practice dimensions which bridge the absence of mechanisms to contribute to policy renewal; it may benefit all those involved to consider ways to improve engagement opportunities for 16-18 NEET. The findings identify significant potential areas for improvement around FE recruitment strategies, curriculum models and support services (6.2.2a.b.c). Early impact analysis pinpoints new areas for investigation, such as identifying excellence in 16-18 NEET curriculum delivery by developingprovider networks to promote quality improvement strategies (6.2.2c.d). The challenges for 16-18 NEET participation in FE posed by some Coalition Government initiatives suggested that policy needs to be more closely aligned to the complex needs of 16-18 NEET evident in NEET sub-groups identified by Yates and Payne (2006) and Spielhofer et al. (2009). The findings revealed knowledge that was not previously known about the evolving role of FE due to infrastructure changes and a distance between many Government policies and the realities of the FE practice interface which is relevant to current policy development. (6.2.2d.f).

**6.5.3. *Areas for further research***

A strength of the findings is their propensity to contribute to knowledge (6.3) and for informing professional discussion (6.3.2). Areas leading to further research and investigation are identified in sections 6.2.2-6.3.1. The key areas which underpin the recommendations are presented below.

The survey findings accentuated that further research for equality of access to FE NEET provision would be of benefit (6.2.2b). Consistent concern was expressed in the interviews with senior managers and policymakers about 16-18 NEET data inadequacies which suggested business planning might be hampered (4.3.1, 4.4.4, 6.3.1 Key message 2). This informed a recommendation for further investigation into creating a shared information resource on a local basis (6.5.3). It has application for providers, policymakers and stakeholders.[[96]](#footnote-96) All the managers reported quality concerns in an increasingly competitive 16-18 NEET provision market (5.2.1, 6.2.2d, 6.3.1 Key message 4). The findings indicated that a best value study of Government spending on 16-18 NEET provision (FE and other providers) would be of benefit (4.5.1, 5.3.3, 5.5.2, 6.2.2d.f). There was a consensus amongst the managers and policymakers for a re-modelling of 16-18 NEET curriculum: and the perceived benefits of a Government-endorsed Pre-Traineeship programme geared to 16-18 NEET (4.3.1, 4.5.5, 5.3.2). Curriculum scoping formed a key area for further research (6.2.2c).

Two further areas of investigation were identified during data analysis. The first, concerned learner destinations from FE 16-18 NEET provision, the transition to employment and demand factors. For example, to investigate if long-term employment destinations are secured by the 13 learner participants in this study, or if they return to NEET status at a later age (6.3.2). Second, 71% of the survey respondents agreed that the pace of Government reform was ‘too much, too fast’ and ‘endemic change’ was confirmed by all the managers (5.3.4). Apprehension was expressed about the role of LEPs, and the future role of the FE sector after the Area Review process was completed (5.4.1, 5.5.2). The impact of Government infrastructure change formed a new area for research (6.3.1 Key message 5).

**6.6 *Final points***

The key messages discussed in 6.3.1 encapsulated the meaning the research findings have for the field and the direction in which debate can be taken forward. They demonstrated application to FE practitioners and policymakers and have potential to contribute to improvements in 16-18 NEET engagement. Original knowledge based on a unique benefit analysis of the impact of Coalition Government education reform policies on the FE 16-18 NEET context were identified. These outcomes addressed the research aim and objectives, and the research questions (1.4.1). The research did not cover all areas within the 16-18 NEET context but with a broader scope more could be achieved.

What still needs to be researched has been identified, and is reflected by the direction in which future research might go, from where this study ends (6.5.3). The next crucial step is to take forward the key messages from this research. Early dissemination of the findings is a priority for me because they have a usefulness and application to FE practice and policy. This could well contribute to improvements in 16-18 NEET opportunities for engagement in education, training and employment, leading to enhanced life chances. This makes this research study worthwhile.

**6.7 *Reflexivity, recommendations and dissemination***

**6.7.1 *Reflexivity – an insider and outsider***

Maintaining a reflexive approach was a central part of the research process since the start of this study in Chapter One (1.1.1). This acknowledged the reality that “you yourself are part of what you are studying and this is central to the research project, and you cannot rectify it…this is your agency” (Richards, 2015:51). I engaged in continuous self-critical-analysis to examine my own subjectivity and biases, and the impact of these on choices made during the research process. Reflexivity started at the outset with self-analysis about ideas for the topic, preconceptions and prior work experience. This continued with reflection on my own relationship to the research questions and the data. It enabled robust methods to be used in gathering, and handling the data, and the path taken to analysis and interpretations. Reflexive logs and memos kept during the research process recorded awareness of these issues and the part I played in them. In this way, relevant data was collected to be able to answer the research questions. The data records were handled with skill and in a reliable manner.

Chapter One (1.1.1) identified my subjectivities and sets out my own positionality. Matthews (2015:143) maintains that it is essential for researchers to, “engage in a critical self-reflection and deconstruction of their embodied subjectivity and [as an ‘insider’] to attempt to critically ‘see’ one’s own socially constructed world through the eyes of the ‘other’.” Awareness of my positionality has strengthened my continual critical reflection and actions to test for bias or undue influence in the research process. In Chapter Three, particular attention was given to ‘entering the field’ and ensuring that interview questions would be adequately answered by interviews conducted by me as an insider. Much consideration was given to my role in the qualitative interviews, where understanding was sought about participants’ situations, from their own accounts of their views and perceptions. It was essential to reflect on preparatory work about the ways to ‘enter into the world’ of those participating in the study and to reflect about how I may influence the situation or the data created from the situation. As an insider, reflection and preparatory work were less time consuming for the FE manager interviews than for the interviews with policymakers where I felt more of an outsider. Both as an insider and outsider within the interview situations, reflexivity has been a valuable tool to build into the research design which supported the validity of the research.

**6.7.2 *Research recommendations***

The main benefit of this research is its capacity to provide insights and contribute to new and original knowledge in an area that was little-known: the Coalition Government reforms and FE 16-18 NEET provision. The following recommendations have been made based on the research findings:

1. This study has shown that it is crucial to effectively target support for 16-18 NEET so that Government initiatives are adequate and enough to increase participation, and do not fail these young people or lead to disengagement after negative transition experiences (Key messages 1 and 2). To combat ineffective targeting, the Government should take into account NEET sub-groups and the wide range of situations young people experience, when they are developing policy solutions.
2. This study has identified that data for 16-18 NEET provision are not comprehensive, and inadequate information sources were available for providers to match supply with demand (Key messages 2 and 4). To better inform providers’ business planning and NEET strategic policy development, it is recommended that Government develop a dataset of, for example, FE 16-18 NEET participation rates, segmentation analysis, and destinations, which should then be promoted as a shared resource.
3. The study has revealed that the curriculum requires re-modelling to better meet the needs of 16-18 NEET (Key messages 1 and 3). To make improvements, the Government should consider measures to create a nationally recognised curriculum to enhance the quality, such as a 16-18 NEET Pre-Traineeship.
4. The study has shown increasing funding for the 16-18 NEET provision through social enterprise initiatives and decreasing FE funding (Key messages 4 and 5). To ensure high-quality provision, it is recommended that the Government consider best value measures for 16-18 NEET provision and its success amongst providers.
5. The study has illustrated that the rationale for many Government NEET interventions has not been clear to FE providers or stakeholders (Key messages 5 and 6). To lessen the distance between the policy interface, and the practice level, it is recommended that the Government develop broader forums to take into account FE providers and learners.

**6.7.3 *Professional development***

Completing this doctoral programme has extended my professional development. It has enabled me to conduct an in-depth enquiry into issues derived from my work experiences and enhanced my professional practice through the development of skills in advanced study, and their application (CRAC, 2010). The thesis has been a process of continual professional development and reflection; to learn, question and to practise (Schon and Rein, 1996). Earlier discussion showed that the use of critical self-reflection during the research process played an essential part in my personal and professional development (6.7.1).Central to this process were professional discussions engaged in through becoming part of an academic community of practice within the university and the wider educational field. Engagement in professional discussion about the research involved participating in critical review forums with peers and importantly with my EdD supervisory team and the wider academic community.[[97]](#footnote-97) This collaborative exchange of perspectives developed my professional knowledge and the capacity for this research to develop other professionals in the field.

The dissertation programme supported the development of my broader professional competencies; generic research skills, transferable skills and personal skills, which are important for communicating the research recommendations. The recommendations identified ways in which the research findings might contribute to those at the interface of the NEET context to bring about greater understanding and to help those involved to consider potential improvements. From a practice perspective of the learner, the FE college and managers, the central outcome of the research is that it highlighted important considerations about how to better support 16-18 NEET participation in learning and improve life chances. In terms of policy and stakeholder organisations, the research suggested closer alignment is required between Government NEET policy approaches, resource and local area infrastructures.

The research contributes to the professional development of others by indicating implications for researchers in the field. These included developmental issues around the ideological assumptions of different governments, the ethos of different FE colleges and the expectations of managers, policymakers, authors in the field and those of 16-18 NEET themselves. There are other developmental implications, such as inconclusive notions about the characteristics and needs of 16-18 NEET, the comprehensiveness of data sources and the speed of policy change. The research recommendations encompassed these areas, and the process of dissemination requires facilitation to promote further exploration of these ideas. This is important because it is seven years on from the Coalition Government’s initial reform agenda and its legacy for subsequent Conservative Governments. This research puts forward possibilities which may serve to be of use to current policy (6.5.1) and practice (6.5.2) and increased capacity to develop other professionals in the field.

**6.7.4 *Dissemination***

A crucial goal for this study was the generation of knowledge about the impact of Coalition Government policy for the FE 16-18 NEET provision context and its dissemination to those who may benefit from it, such as policymakers, FE practitioners and their learners (6.5.1-2). This goal is imperative given the fast pace of the Coalition Government reform agenda (6.2.2f) and its legacy to successive Conservative Governments, as discussed above (6.5.1, 6.7.3). The research findings have significance for the life chances of 16-18 NEET, of whom there was an estimated cohort of 134,000 in England between January to March 2017.[[98]](#footnote-98)

The literature revealed continuities with the policy approach of the Coalition Government to 16-18 NEET interventions and those of previous Governments (Chapter Two). Biesta and Lawy (2006:7) suggest that the tensions of reform policy stem from the ideological underpinnings reflected by “the neo-liberal ideology of individualism, choice and market rights (compared with) the old social democratic ideology of collectivism, solidarity and social rights.” Simmons and Thompson (2011: Preface xi) suggest that the NEET category itself is a construct of policy approaches over the past years and “it helps to highlight deep-seated problems facing young people, whose origins go back much further.”

Governments’ from 1997 can be seen to have used the NEET category to develop a strategic policy to address declining levels of social capital, rising youth unemployment and social exclusion (DWP, 2013a). Allen and Ainley (2010:135) argue that neoliberal policy approaches lead to ‘no jobs but work schemes and low paid insecure work’ whereas there is a need for state regulation to create more jobs for NEET in the labour market (a social democratic position). Further discussion of the Coalition 16-18 NEET strategy policy and continuity with those of the successive Conservative Governments (July 2015-present) was presented in Chapter Two (2.5.2). The research findings supported a position of continuity with many Coalition neoliberal policies (6.2.2a-f, 6.3.1, 6.5.1). This is exemplified in 16-18 NEET initiatives, such as Traineeships and YEF. The findings indicated that commissioned and social enterprise provision, may not sufficiently meet the diverse needs of 16-18 NEET or support transition to employment. This typifies how the findings from this study contribute to the body of knowledge and generate areas for further investigation which are relevant to current policy and practice (6.5.1, 6.5.3, 6.7.3).

A range of activities is planned to disseminate the research findings to appropriate audiences. Membership of research forums such as BERA and SRHE has provided opportunities for me to present my research at conferences. I have also presented at seminars, regional and national events. These experiences provided valuable ‘critical-friend’ networks to test, examine and review the emerging research findings and conclusions since the outset of the research. The networks also acted as a vehicle for future dissemination within academic communities, to encourage professional discussion and debate. In this way, the study has been ‘heralded’, and future dissemination by these research networks is anticipated to occur during 2018. I will disseminate the research in writing by publishing papers in refereed academic and practitioner journals.

The AoC West Midlands regional coordinator acted as a critical friend in the pilot study for the research 2013-2014, and the AoC approached me to contribute to dissemination activities with FE college governors. This professional organisation for the FE sector is keen to take forward appropriate research findings through their policy development function. It was noteworthy that all the policymakers and managers interviewed expressed the view that they would welcome a joint dissemination workshop. This will be organised at a mutually convenient time. Other workshops with stakeholders and Government agencies, such as DfE and LEPS, will also be arranged through my own professional networks. These dissemination activities should provide an effective conduit to take forward the key messages from this study, refresh ideas and stimulate debate which will potentially contribute to shaping future policy.

**Word Count: 54,956**

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1. In this thesis the term NEET refers to young people who are not in education, employment or training, and the term 16-18 NEET refers to 16-18 year old NEET young people. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. RPA policy was launched in a New Labour Green Paper *Raising Expectations: staying in education and training post-16* (DfES, 2007a) and it was also set out in the New Labour strategy document, *Reducing the Number of NEET 2007* (DCSF, 2008b). Whilst RPA was introduced in the *Education and Skills Act* (DCSF, 2008a), it was never implemented due to the 2010 general election, and the policy was reaffirmed by the Coalition Government in 2013. A letter from the Minister for Skills, Matthew Hancock, affirmed RPA until 18 years of age becoming a requirement from 2015 (DWP, BIS and DfE, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In this study a classification of the most important ideologies to analyse public policy is used to encompass positions of the state/free market continuum: Liberalism, Democratic Socialism, Conservatism, New Right and Neoliberalism drawn from George and Wilding (1994) and Alcock and May (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. From the 1920s public policy to education was influenced by the socialist thinker R. H. Tawney who advocated ethical socialism and was the editor of the Labour Party policy document, *Secondary Education for All 1922* (Clift and Tomlinson, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In 1988 unemployment benefit was only made available after two years of national contribution payments and this effectively excluded those under 18 years of age. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The NEET category stands for not in education, employment or training. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. PSA NEET targets were set with Local Authorities (LAs), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the Connexions Service. The 16-18 NEET cohort was classified as Priority Area 1 by local Connexions. Services and annual targets were set to reduce the 16-18 NEET rate in local areas [by 5-10% in 2004-2005] (Hogarth and Smith, 2004). The EMA for young people was a national pilot in 1999 that was extended to all Local Authorities from 2000-2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The DfES Research Report RR607 (Hogarth and Smith, 2004), focused on services for young people at risk of underachievement and disaffection and ways to improve local area target setting for at risk 16-18 NEET groups. The second phase of the report interviewed a sample of 280 young people at risk of being NEET and/or 16-19 NEET. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hogarth and Smith (2004), define ‘school resisters’ as young people with poor records of attendance at school, truancy or multiple exclusions from school. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Youth Cohort Study was combined with the LSYPE statistical series from 2003 by DfES. It is based on a cohort of young people who were in Year 9 for the academic year 2003-2004. The research is designed to monitor the behaviour and decisions of representative samples of young people aged 16-19, as they make the transition from compulsory education to FE or HE (data includes family environment, attitudes to school, risky behaviours, engagement, attainment and participation and NEET segmentation). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. These characteristics identified were informed by the qualitative phase of this study which consisted of 40 interviews with NEET (Spielhofer et al., 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In this thesis governments subsequent to the Coalition Government (2010-2015) are referred to as: the Conservative Cameron Government (2015-2016) and the Conservative May Government (2016-2017) or (2017 to present). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A Select Committee Report acknowledged NEET as a negative term that risks stigmatisation and that it is a residual category that encompasses a range of very different young people but accepted the use of the term as a first step in understanding the 16-18 NEET issue (Parliament, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The term heuristic is defined as the use of an artificial construct to assist in the exploration of a social phenomenon to provide analytic clarity and explanatory value as a model (Oxford University Press, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Giddens (2001) views the Third Way as a restatement of the concept of a mixed-economy and distinguished the Third Way from both neoliberalism (political right) and ‘traditional’ social democracy (political left). With the state abdicating responsibility for the creation of work (1990s) and thus the elimination of poverty, wealth generation and the creation of employment passes to entrepreneurs (rather than redistributive government policies). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The terms social capital, and cultural capital used in this study are derived from Bourdieu (1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Economic individualism, derived from Adam Smith in the 19thcentury, focuses on self-reliance rather than state intervention, and reflects free-market ideologies and notions of laissez-faire capitalism. Giddens (1998:7) argues that Thatcherism or neoliberalism (New Right) reflects strong economic individualism. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The Coalition Government’s 16-18 NEET strategy policy and those of the successive Conservative Governments (July 2015-present) are discussed further in Chapter Two (2.2.5). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The research draws on models of knowledge put forward by Bernstein (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The term viability is defined as “ability to work as intended or to succeed” (Cambridge Dictionaries, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. September Guarantee data for 2016 shows 94.5% of 16 and 17 year olds received offers of a place in education or training and this provision was mainly within the FE sector (DfE, 2017b). The Coalition Government and successive Conservative Governments from 2015 to date have retained the September Guarantee policy intervention. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The Participation Statistical First Release (SFR) provides the DfE’s definitive measure of participation at ages 16-18, and sets recent changes in the context of historical trends. It is used to monitor progress against the DfE’s objectives of raising participation and reducing the number of NEET young people. These data sets are seasonally adjusted and weighted to take account of census data published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2015). The DfE publishes Quarterly SFR briefings which set out the latest statistics available on 16-18 NEET in England derived from the DfE Participation SFR. It also provides the Labour Force Survey (LFS) NEET data which is compiled by ONS, and regional NEET figures from Local Authorities’ (LAs) Client Caseload Information System (CCIS). The CCIS data includes 16-18 year olds in the ‘not known’ category. From 2016 the DfE requires LAs to collate NEET Score Card data only for 16-17 year olds, and the CCIS data from the ‘not known’ category is not used as a source for the Participation SFR. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The UNICEF Office research report NEET rates are defined as the proportion of young people aged 15-19 years old who were not in education, employment or training (this data is not directly comparable with UK 16-18 NEET estimates). This is the standard Eurostat definition, and the EU Labour Force Survey data is used to calculate the NEET rates. Eurostat research is predominantly for the 18-24 age range. (Discussion, Social Policy Specialist, UNICEF Office of Research, Innocenti, Florence, Italy, 26 October 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The OECD publishes NEET data by age group – though these are not directly comparable with UK 16-18 NEET estimates because they are based on an age range of 15-19 year olds. The UK NEET rate of 8.4% was the eighth highest ranking NEET rate out of 38 countries and the third highest rate for developed countries [Italy 9.4% ranked one, and Spain 8.7%, ranked two], (OECD, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Gamble (2001) suggests that European social democracy has been influenced by neoliberal ideas, but this does not mean that it has become simply an expression of neoliberalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The Big Society was the flagship idea of the 2010 Conservative Party general election manifesto which informed the legislative programme of the Coalition Government (DfE, 2010b; Conservative Party News, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. A speech, given by Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan in Ruskin College Oxford on 18 October 1976, is widely regarded as having begun 'The Great Debate' about the nature and purpose of public education and the relationship between school and work. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The New Labour 16-19 Reform Programme built on the proposals from Sir Mike Tomlinson’s Working Group on *14-19 Reform of Curriculum and Qualification*s (DfES, 2004a). The 16-19 Reform Programme included Foundation Learning to provide a broad curriculum offer with a mix of vocational and academic qualifications for learners operating at Entry to Level 1 and to target NEET young people (LSC, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. This shows that Hong Kong and Singapore, ranked as two of the most successful countries in the Programme for International Assessment (PISA league tables), have high levels of school competition. Freedom is also cited as a driver for excellence successfully used in Sweden’s free schools and autonomous schools in USA (OECD, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Initially, sponsors were required to provide contributions to the capital costs of academies, but these requirements were abolished for universities and high-performing schools sponsoring academies. Long (2015) maintains that the academies were established and managed by sponsors, but mostly funded by the central government. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. UTCs provide 14-18 full-time technically-orientated courses sponsored by a university and specialise in subjects such as construction. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Simmons and Smyth (2016) draw on a model for capitalism put forward by Habermas (1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. As discussed in Chapter One (1.3.1) the term SIB refers to Social Investment Bond funding. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. The MSC was introduced by the Conservative Heath Government in 1973. It was the first of many Non-departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs). It was superseded by the Training Agency from 1987 which was superseded by the launch of TECs from 1989 (Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 2018), which in turn, where superseded by the LSC in 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Prior to 1992, FE colleges received public funding in the form of annual block grants received in advance from local authorities based on their expected number of student enrolments, irrespective of performance or outcomes. The White Paper *Employment for the 1990s* (1988) and the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) introduced two funding streams for 16 to 19 education. The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) funded FE provision, and TECs funded work based training. These agencies were replaced by LSC, a single funding agency, in 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Unit-farming refers to entering learners for extra qualifications to increase funding unit payments or prioritising the recruitment of learners who will attract the greatest number of funding units. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. New Labour piloted the EMA from September 1999 with 15 LEAs and then extended to a further 41 areas in 2000-2001 before it was implemented nationally in 2004-2005 (Deardon et al., 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Respondents in the research conducted by NFER (2010) were asked if they agreed with the statement ‘I would not have done a course or training if I had not received an EMA.’ The not sure/disagree attitudes breakdown was not published. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. An impact evaluation of the Bursary Fund (DfE, 2015h) concluded it had a relatively modest effect on participation and attainment in the first two years of implementation, but it disproportionately affected low-income young people. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. The government PSA target for the Connexions Service was to reduce the proportion of NEET young people by 10%. By 2003 there were 47 regional Connexions Partnerships. Each partnership established a joint NEET Action Plan working with LAs and the LSC which set annual 16-18 NEET rate reduction targets for particular local areas (Chubb, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. The Chair of the CEC is a senior member of a French multinational professional services and business consulting corporation. The Cameron Government CEC start budget was £120M with subsequent funding including £20M for an employer mentor scheme (Burke, 2018a:2)**.** [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. A NEET Scorecard system was introduced in 2016 which features headline NEET and not known figures for 16-17 year olds, collected from LAs (DfE, 2018c). The Participation Statistical First Release (SFR) is the DfE’s official definitive annual measure of participation by 16-18 year olds. LA data for 16-17 year olds in the not known destination category reported in the NEET Score Card data are not used as a source for the Participation SFR (DfE, 2018b.c). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. David Miliband (Minister of State for School Standards) launched personalised learning in 2004 as a key approach to build educational capacity and to tackle underperformance (DfES, 2004b:24). Personalised learning was advocated in a number of subsequent New Labour Government education policy documents, based on Leadbeater (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. This Ofsted survey report reviews the current pattern of disadvantage and educational success across England from 1993-2013. It draws on test and examination data, inspection outcomes, and published reports and research. The report aims to make proposals that would make a difference. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. The research draws on models of knowledge put forward by Bernstein (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Disguising socially undesired status is regarded by Reiter and Schlimbach (2015), as supporting the hegemonic ideological system and qualifies as an act of system justification, as defined by Jost and Hunyady (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. The equity analysis model used to assess the impact of this policy change is based on data for all 16-19 year old learners and does not provide a specific 16-18 NEET disaggregation (DfE and EFA, 2012:24). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. A National Audit Office Report (2016:32) confirms that LEPs have been unable to commit funding to a large number of skills-related projects due to structural challenges and uncertainty as the FE sector awaits the results of the Government’s area-based reviews of post-16 education and training institutions in 2017. Projects have been postponed or cancelled since 2015-2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. A Government Committee Report (House of Commons, 2010) identifies school failure as one of the key reasons for 16-18 NEET non-engagement. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Appendix 2 sets out the mixed-method sequence. The survey collected quantitative data from FE Chief Executives and presented a broad picture of the NEET problem being investigated. Participants were then chosen to follow-up the findings (pertinent issues) revealed by the questionnaire in case-study instances – interviews with FE managers, policymakers and group discussions with learners. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Further discussion and a justification for the mixed-method research strategy and design is provided in 3.2.3.3 and 3.3.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. The survey produced numerical data that led to descriptive statistics – factual data. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Punch and Oancea (2014) argue that a central criterion in the validity of research is to ensure that methods follow from the questions to be addressed. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. The mixed-method research sequence is discussed in section 3.5.2. It includes a survey (questionnaire of FE colleges) and case-study instances (interviews with FE managers and policymakers, and focus groups with learners). [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. It is a condition of government funding that all FE colleges return annual data information about learner participation, success and achievement rates. This data also informs Ofsted and the FE college annual self-assessment process. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Using a probability sampling method provided access to each respondent in the population from which the sample was drawn, and each FE college in the West Midlands providing 16-18 NEET provision had a similar opportunity to respond to the questionnaire. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. The AOC represents and promotes the interests of over 95% of the FE sector. It provides members with professional support services which includes governance and teaching and learning. It influences government and its agencies on policies affecting colleges and their students and staff at national and regional levels. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. There are varying views in the research literature about ethical behaviours and these range from the Deontological view concerning a duty to treat people as an end in themselves; to Virtue Ethics where the pursuit of the good, or excellence, is simply an end in itself (Howe and Moses, 1999; Bright et al, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. UK Data Protection Act 1984 and 1998 concerns the principles of data collection and the rights of data subjects. In research situations, the subject has no right to access personal data provided the data is not in a form that identifies the individual. Data can be held indefinitely for research and the use of data for research purposes may not be disclosed at the time of data collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Earlier discussion in section 3.6.2 shows that a sample of 23 was chosen because only these FE colleges in the West Midlands provided 16-18 NEET provision. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. An overview of the survey data is set out in Appendix 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. A documentary review was undertaken by the researcher in May 2015. It harnessed new data-sets, such as RCU MIDES data (AoC, 2015a), Ofsted Dashboard data (Ofsted, 2015) and EFA NEET Scorecard Data (DfE, 2015f). An overview is set out in Appendix 15. A National Pupil Database (NPD) request was submitted to DfE for data about students in FE colleges in England and pupils in schools, such as prior achievement and attainment data. No further data was made available. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. The same thematic categories used in the survey were used in the interview schedules and topic areas, and for analysing the data, summarising results and reporting findings. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Senior strategic manager Government education policy organisation, national lead for 16-18 qualification and curriculum development, senior manager Government funding agency for 16-18 and adult provision. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. In this research, the route taken to representativeness is discussed in section 3.6.2. It is based on the approach put forward by Munn and Drever (2007), Cohen et al. (2011) and Bryman (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Transcripts for the interviews with senior managers, policymakers and group discussions together with associated catalogues (matrices) of coding are available as an additional information source. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Descriptive coding in Table 2 (Appendix 21) sets out survey respondents by employment status and Table 3 indicates the types of programmes provided for 16-18 NEET. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Appendix 20 provides the characteristics for the employing colleges of the interviewed senior managers. It includes business risk indicators, such as the effectiveness of provision for Ofsted Inspection and success in meeting Government funding targets for financial health. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. The college for each FE senior manager participant shows that one college rated red for the risk indicators (Ofsted Inspection and financial health), two are rated amber and two are rated green (Appendix 20). [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Feedback from the pilot of the survey led to a distinction made between ‘specialist’ provision which targeted 16-18 NEET operating at Entry/Level 1, and ‘general’ provision where 16-18 NEET are recruited to main 16 to 18 year old provision e.g. GCSE/GCE, apprenticeships, Edexcel/BTEC awards (Chapter 3, 3.7). [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. 16-18 NEET Hotspot areas in urban LAs with high volumes of 16-18 NEET were identified in 2000 and have been the focus of subsequent governments’ funded interventions to reduce high 16-18 NEET rates e.g. Activity Agreement programmes, E2E and 16-18 NEET projects. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. In 2012 the Government introduced new LA duties relating to raising the participation age policy (RPA) in commissioning the delivery of education and training provision for NEET (DfE 2012b). RPA policy implementation heightened from 2013-2014 (Hutchinson et al, 2016:718). [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. SfA sets national benchmarks which are used as business performance quality indicators for the FE sector for Ofsted Inspection purposes and continued public funding of provision and these range from: 77.9% for Level 1, 78.2% for Level 2 and 84.3% for Level 3 provision (SfA, 2015a). [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Three of the surveyed FE colleges had been in interim management arrangements in years prior to 2014-15. This would indicate poor Ofsted Inspection results with below benchmark success rates. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. SfA Performance Indicator Data – FE Choices, provides a measure for continuing Government funding of FE provision, (SfA, 2015b). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. This section draws on additional data sources from a documentary review undertaken by the researcher in May 2015 (Appendix 15). It includes DfE Transparency data for 16-18 NEET and NEET Score Card data (DfE, 2015f), and data drawn from the NCCIS [a national LA data system used for NEET rate calculations], (DfE, 2017e). [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Figures 6a and 6b provide data for general and specialist provision under the same numerical heading for ease of analysis. This is also the case for tables 7a and 7b. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. The ONS Summary classification of White, Mixed Race, Asian or Asian British, Black or Black British

    or Other Ethnic Group was used for this question (ONS, 2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. SEND is an acronym currently used to denote learners with special educational or complex needs and disability. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. SEND data measures the percentage of disabled 16 to 17 year olds participating. The survey data measured the percentage of all 16-18 NEET participating with self-declared disability. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Continuing reductions in the Additional Learner Support (ALS) grant was of particular concern to this context – a government funding grant, annually allocated to FE colleges. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. The LYSPE & YCS (DfE, 2011a) is a longitudinal research designed to monitor the behaviour and decisions of representative samples of young people aged 16-19, as they make the transition from compulsory education to FE or HE (data about family environment, attitudes to school, risky behaviours, engagement, attainment and participation – and NEET segmentation data). This research has not been commissioned since 2010 by Government. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. A range of awarding organisations offer qualifications in Work Skills, Work-Rite, Employability and Personal Development at Entry and Level 1-2 such as ASDAN. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. A Public Accounts Committee Report (Parliament, 2015b) shows that in September 2014 Government reduced the basic rate of annual funding for an 18-year-old, from £4,000 to £3,300. Further funding cuts followed in 2016 such as 25% in the FE adult budget and 17% in the 16-18 budget (Widdowson, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Connexions introduced for the first time a national Local Authority data base known as NCCIS used as source for NEET Score Card data and by DfE for calculating 16-18 NEET rates in England. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Emphasis on matching supply with demand is evident in the LSC’s regional skills plans but as indicated in Chapter Two (2.3.2) there has been a local skills vacuum since LSC was closed (until the emergence of LEPs in 2012) and a regional skills vacuum since RDAs were abolished in 2012 (until the emergence of combined regional authorities is 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. The term ‘unit-farming’ discussed in Chapter Two, refers to reports that some private providers recruited high-ability learners to ensure that outcome funding payments are achieved, rather than recruiting to a NEET target group (mainly Level 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. In 2014-15 the Government commissioned UKCES to deliver Traineeships through an Employer Ownership Partnership which was established as a pilot initiative, as discussed in Chapter Two. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. The Coalition Government implemented the RPA policy (DWP, BIS and DfE, 2013) which was initially introduced by the New Labour’s Education and Skills Act (DCSF, 2008a). This policy has continuity with prior governments’ RSLA policy which is discussed in Chapter One 1.2.1, and Chapter Two 2.2.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. The Area Review process (DfE, 2015g) seeks to rationalise the FE sector through mergers, as discussed in Chapter Two. The interviews with senior managers occurred at a time of uncertainty for the FE sector and uncertainty about the continuing employment of some of the participants following college mergers and restructuring. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. A matrix of themes derived for the literature critique and used in the mixed-method research design and the data analysis is available in an additional information document. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. The DfE (2012a) definition for the 16-18 NEET category identified those with a disability as a significant component. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Chapter Two showed that there is no national segmentation data or data in the public domain about the number of 16-18 learners recruited to FE NEET provision (DfE, 2016c). This supported Coles (2014) and Maguire (2015) who identified inconsistencies in data-sets. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Best value was introduced by the Conservative Major Government in a consultative document *Modernising Local Government: Improving local services through best value* (HMSO, 1998). This set out the duty to secure economic, efficient and effective services with continuous improvement. Best value was implemented in England and Wales by the New Labour [*Local Government Act* (HMSO, 1999](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Local_Government_Act_1999&action=edit&redlink=1)) and came into force in April 2000. The aim was to improve the cost and quality of local authority functions, such as education, social services, housing and planning. Best Value is a system of audit and measurement of performance, with the expectation that costs can be reduced and quality increased. Local Best Value Performance Reviews (BVPRs) are undertaken using statutorily determined performance indicators (BVPIs). The data is audited annually by the Audit Commission, and the findings are disseminated through Performance Plans (BVPPs). The BVPIs cover four dimensions of performance: Strategic Objectives — why the service exists and what it seeks to achieve; Service Delivery Outcomes – how well the service is being operated in order to achieve the strategic objectives; Quality – the quality of the services delivered, explicitly reflecting users' experience of services; and Fair access – ease and equality of access to services. Each year Government Departments set performance indicators for the next year aligned with the financial year (1 April to 31 March) and any revisions to Government policy (NAO, 2001). This framework has been widely adopted by the public sector for regularity impact assessment and benefit analysis evaluations of service provision. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. The documentary review included new data which became available in 2015 (Appendix 15), for example, RCU MiDES data (AoC, 2015a), Ofsted Data Dashboard data (Ofsted, 2015) and EfA NEET Scorecard data (DfE, 2015f). [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. There has been no national Government research in the public domain conducted for FE NEET participation in areas of segmentation analysis since the LYSPE & YCS Final Study reported in 2010 (DfE, 2011a). An overview of available benchmarking data sets is provided in section 4.4.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. I have taken opportunities provided by the EdD programme to raise my profile as a researcher in addition to participating in a number of national conferences and seminars for professional associations, such as BERA, SRHE, regional events and university forums, workshops and seminars. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. This compares to a cohort of 121,000 for the same period in 2016, and 134,000 in 2015 (DfE, 2017a). Issues concerning the accuracy of national data-sets is a recurrent theme in the literature and the interviews with senior managers and policymakers. For example Coles (2014) estimated the cohort size at 250,000-400,000. Maguire (2015) also noted inaccuracy in national data sets and hidden numbers of 16-18 NEET in the unknown category. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)