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To cite this article: Claire Paterson-Young & Simon Denny (2022) A critical study of alternative education provisions for young people aged 16 to 24 years in the United Kingdom, *Journal of Education and Work*, 35:6-7, 666-679, DOI: [10.1080/13639080.2022.2126971](https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2022.2126971)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2022.2126971>



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Published online: 21 Sep 2022.



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# A critical study of alternative education provisions for young people aged 16 to 24 years in the United Kingdom

Claire Paterson-Young  and Simon Denny

Institute of Social Innovation and Impact, University of Northampton, Northampton, UK

## ABSTRACT

In the United Kingdom, the number of young people (16 to 24 years-old) not in education, employment or training (NEET) was estimated to be c.763,000 in October to December 2019. The purpose of this paper is to explore the experiences of NEET young people attending alternative education provisions that focus on physical and mental health in promoting positive outcomes. Semi-structured interviews with young people ( $n = 18$ ), parents ( $n = 10$ ), and staff ( $n = 8$ ), analysed using Constant Comparative Method, were conducted in an alternative education provision in England and Wales. Analysis led to the identification of themes around motivation, empowerment, and confidence. The findings illustrate that young people in alternative education provisions benefit from an approach that placed health, well-being and confidence building at their core. This paper outlines the implications for policy-makers and practitioners in designing alternative education provisions with physical activity as part of the core curriculum.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 November 2021  
Accepted 5 August 2022

## KEYWORDS

Self-efficacy; Well-being; alternative education provisions; outcomes

## Introduction

The number of young people (16 years-old to 24 years-old) not in education, employment or training (NEET) in the United Kingdom was estimated to be c.763,000 (392,000 males, 371,000 females) in October to December 2019 (ONS 2020). This constitutes an estimated 11.1% of all young people 16 years-old to 24 years-old (ONS 2020). Research shows that experiencing NEET can result in persistent unemployment inequality (Raaum and Røed 2006; von Wachter and Bender 2006; Seddon, Hazenberg, and Denny 2013). Understanding the impact of provisions designed to support young people to secure employment and enable career progression are essential in developing effective and sustainable provisions. Alternative education provisions, in this context, offer fitness training, diet and lifestyle advice, employability skills and vocational qualifications that help to prepare young people for careers. These provisions teach and develop social, psychological, moral, and cultural skills, supporting positive learning through physical activity and sport (Beedy 1997). This paper explores the impact of alternative education provision on NEET young people in England and Wales. The paper makes an original contribution to knowledge by highlighting the role that physical activity has on self-efficacy and well-being. In doing so it extends the literature, which has focused on the impact of NEET and youth unemployment (Raaum and Røed 2006; von Wachter and Bender 2006; Hazenberg, Seddon, and Denny 2014; Schmillen and Umkehrer 2017), by considering the impact of alternative education provisions (with physical activity at the centre of the curriculum). By exploring the role alternative education provisions have on augmenting self-efficacy and well-being,

**CONTACT** Claire Paterson-Young  [claire.paterson-young@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:claire.paterson-young@northampton.ac.uk)  Institute of Social Innovation and Impact, University of Northampton, Northampton, UK

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this paper presents evidence for how education and training provisions can improve the outcomes for young people, whilst also improving their confidence, motivation, self-esteem (Judge, Locke, and Durham 1997) and well-being.

The alternative education provision that was the subject of this research is delivered by a college that operates at multiple locations in England and Wales, offering young people opportunities through education and training. The college is free for young people to join, funded through the Education and Skills Funding Agency, offering an alternative path to traditional college environments. It places physical health and well-being at the core, with young people engaged in physical activity daily. Young people are provided with a uniform consisting of polo shirts, trousers, boots and wet and cold weather clothing. Each day at the college starts with a structured activity (i.e. a parade). The teachers have all served in HM Forces, and have gained civilian teaching qualifications. The progress young people make with their physical activity and fitness is constantly monitored and feedback is regularly and frequently provided to young people and their parents. Young people study English and Mathematics at foundation level in a classroom setting, using individual workbooks as well as instructor-based teaching. The provider is subject to Ofsted inspection and was rated Outstanding at its most recent inspection.

### ***Young people not in education, employment and training (NEET)***

The number of young people not in education, employment and training (NEET) in the United Kingdom was estimated to be c.763,000 in October to December 2019 (ONS 2020). The research adopts the definition of NEET offered by the Office for National Statistics (Office for National Statistics 2013) that includes young people aged 16 to 24 years-old not in education, employment or training.<sup>1</sup> The terms 'NEET', like other terms such as 'young people' and 'unemployment', are grounded in context (Arnold and Baker 2012) which create subjectivity. Yates and Payne's (2006) critique of the term 'NEET' support this perception, arguing that the term has negative connotations. Issues associated with the term 'NEET' should not be under-estimated however a wealth of literature shows the impact of NEET on young people's lives (Bynner 2001; Pemberton 2008; Bynner 2012; Mirza-Davies 2014). Young people categorised as NEET often experience criticism from the public, with researchers acknowledging that NEET young people are *problematized* (Mizen 2004). This group of young people has received considerable attention in academia (Raaum and Røed 2006; von Wachter and Bender 2006; Hazenberg, Seddon, and Denny 2014; Schmillen and Umkehrer 2017). Indeed, the Global Employment (International Labour Organization 2020, 2020) report shows an upward trend in the number of young people classified as NEET, with an increase from 259 young people in 2016 (21.7% of young people) to 267 million young people in 2019 (22.4% of young people) (International Labour Organization 2020).

Prior research has shown that NEET status often results in persistent unemployment, reduced career prospects, inequality and mental health, with young people being at increased risk of depression (Raaum and Røed 2006; von Wachter and Bender 2006; Schmillen and Umkehrer 2017; Siegrist et al. 2010). Understanding the impact of provisions designed to support young people to secure employment, education or training that enables career progression is thus essential in developing effective and sustainable provisions. Designing services that support young people to search, gain and maintain employment require an evidence-based approach which relies on the identification of sustainable and effective services.

### ***Well-being and physical activity***

Young people experience a wealth of physical and mental health issues, with recent reports (Shah, Hagell, and Cheung 2019) finding that, in comparison to other similar high-income countries, young people in the United Kingdom experience higher rates of obesity for 15 to 19 years-olds; high asthma death rates for 10-to-24 year-olds; and low rates of engagement in exercise. Research exploring the

benefits of physical and mental health activities on young people's lives has been carried out for decades (Hendry et al. 1994; Vuori et al. 1995; Bailey 2006; Kramer, Erickson, and Colcombe 2013; Basso and Suzuki 2016/2017). The benefits of physical activity for young people cannot be underestimated with research suggesting that physical activity benefits different areas of young people's lives including their physical health, lifestyle choices, social networks and cognitive well-being (Bailey 2006). Physical activity results in improvements in young people's self-esteem and confidence through engagement in physical activity (Fox 1998, 2000), contributing to improved psychological wellbeing (Bailey 2006; Basso and Suzuki 2016/2017) and overall physical and mental health (NHS 2016).

Improving the mental health of young people is essential, with mental health problems costing the UK economy an estimated £105 billion per annum (Mental Health Taskforce 2016). Figures published in 2015 showed that spending on young people's mental health services in the UK had fallen by 5.4% (Neufeld et al. 2017), a reduction of approximately £41 million since 2010, despite an increase in demand (NHS 2018). Research (NHS 2018) showed that around 12.8% (one in eight) children and young people aged 5 to 19 years-old had one mental health disorder (assessed) in 2017. This frightening statistic included 8.1% with emotional disorders (anxiety, depression, bipolar affective disorder), 4.6% with behaviour (or conduct) disorders, 1.6% with hyperactivity disorders and 2.1% with other disorders (for example, eating disorders) There has been a significant increase in the demand for mental health services for young people. The number of young people who self-harmed and were admitted to hospitals increased by more than 50% between 2009–10 and 2014–15. The decline in the mental health and well-being of the UK's adolescents comes at the same time as reductions in NHS and local authority mental health intervention services. Mental health and well-being problems represent the largest single cause of disability in the UK; the cost to the economy is calculated to be in the region of £105 billion per year, which impacts on social mobility (Mental Health Taskforce 2016). Understanding the impact of alternative provisions that focus on mental health and well-being can be thus conjectured to be essential in designing effective and sustainable services for young people.

## Methods

### Background

The data used to form the arguments presented in this paper were collected by the authors between 2019 and 2020. The alternative education provision, delivered at sites throughout Wales and England by a private organisation, was designed to increase the employability and functional skills of young people aged between 16 and 23 years-old. Its core values are based on health and well-being and preparation for skilled employment, with young people engaged in continuous and progressive physical activity as part of the curriculum. The provisions offer young people a flexible programme, with young people attending the provisions 3–4 days per week. Young people receive support to attend the provision with access to the Bursary Fund to help pay for essential education-related costs, and free uniforms. One unique aspect of the programme surrounds its military context, with young people supported to complete Functional Skills in English and Mathematics, and the Preparation for Military Life Level 2 Award (ETC Award Certified), Certificate and Diploma in Preparation for Military Service. Although the programme has a military context, young people receive support to access a range of further education and employment opportunities and there is no obligation to enlist in HM Forces (24.0% of young people enlisted in the HM Forces on leaving the provision). A qualitative approach data collection approach using semi-structured interviews, was employed as it offered young people, parents and staff the opportunity to actively participate in the research (Alderson and Morrow 2004) by sharing information and experiences on their journey from leaving traditional education (which many of the young people had not enjoyed or succeeded in).

## Participants

The paper examines data from interviews with young people (students of the one of the college's sites  $n = 18$ ), parents ( $n = 10$ ), and staff ( $n = 8$ ). Young people and parents were sent invitations to participate in the research using information sheets distributed in selected sites, whilst staff were invited to participate through information sheets sent internally (i.e. sent by administrative staff to all staff). Young people participating in interviews were primarily male (72%) with the remainder female (28%), reflecting the gender make-up of the students. This sampling technique was used to reduce human bias and subjectivity (Bryman 2006) and allowed for data saturation given that a sample of 10–20 was achieved (Onwuegbuzie and Collins 2007; Mason 2010). At the time of the research, the young people were aged between 16 and 24 years-old, with the average young person being 17 years old ( $SD = 1.142$ ). While young people come from five major ethnic groups, the majority identified as White (English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British, 66%). Young people were invited to answer questions on Special Education Needs or Disability, with most young people reporting no diagnosed Special Education Need or Disability (83%) although 17% of young people did report such a diagnosis. Staff participating in interviews were all male and identified as White (English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British). Parents participating in interviews were not asked to provide demographic information.

## Procedure

Interviews, with questions based on a literature review and developed in consultation with Senior Management, were conducted with a random sample of young people ( $n = 18$ ), parents ( $n = 10$ ), and staff ( $N = 8$ ) drawn from four college sites, one in Wales and three in England. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 120 minutes and were conducted in-person at the sites across England and Wales and were audio-recorded (with additional notes taken), then transcribed by the researchers.

Interview schedules were designed to investigate the impact of the college curriculum and ethos on the young people, with the perceptions of young people being triangulated with information gained from interviews with parents and staff. Interview schedules included questions for young people such as, 'Can you describe some of the relationships that you had with people in your life before arriving here?', 'What skills have you learned here (communication, independent living etc.)? How will you use these skills once you leave?' and, 'Do you have any education, training or employment plans for once you leave?', and questions for parents such as, 'Can you tell me a little about your child's time in education before joining the provision?', and, 'What skills do you think your child has learnt here?'. Questions for staff were focused on the delivery model at the provision with question such as 'What are views of the education provision offered to young people?', 'How do you think the centre supports young people for future education or employment?', and 'What would you suggest for developing or improving the services offered'.

## Analysis

Data collected from the semi-structured interviews were analysed using the 'Constant Comparative Method' (CCM) (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lincoln and Guba 1985). This method utilises the recommended five-stage approach; immersion, categorisation, phenomenological reduction, triangulation and interpretation (Yin 1989; Patton 1990; Miles and Huberman 1994). This inductive reasoning approach has been successfully used in research (Seddon, Hazenberg, and Denny 2013) and allows for a clearer understanding of young people's perceptions of alternative education provisions. Transcripts from semi-structured interviews were repeatedly interrogated to identify 30 'units of analysis' (for example, 'motivation', 'self-efficacy', well-being', 'health', 'fitness', 'rejection') (see Table A1). Categorisation allowed for further refinement for these 'units of analysis', with concepts grouped or clustered, together, resulting in 'categories'

that were further refined in the 'Phenomenological Reduction' stage – with categories grouped into 'themes' (Self-efficacy, Motivation, and Support). This process allowed themes to emerge from the data through inductive reasoning. Interviews were analysed through Constant Comparative Method which allowed for the identification of patterns, categories, and themes within qualitative data (Maguire and Delahunt 2017). The approach allowed researchers to familiarise themselves with data, generate codes, and define categories/themes (Maguire and Delahunt 2017). The themes identified in the research were defined as 'Preparing for the future through motivation', 'Support and empowerment', 'Confidence and self-efficacy' and 'Balancing academia with physical activity'.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations included confidentiality and anonymity; voluntary informed consent from children and guardians; data protection and storage; and the safeguarding of participants, all of which were integral to the research. Ethical approval was received from the authors' University's Research Ethics Committee (REC/ISII/19/08/2019). All interviews with respondents were reported anonymously, with numbers randomly assigned to young people (**YM**), parents (**PN**), and staff (**SM**). Young people were safeguarded, with the researchers undertaken advanced safeguarding training and obtaining updated Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) certificates. Power imbalances were acknowledged by the researchers and data collections methods tested with young people to ensure questionnaires and interview schedules were age-appropriate.

### **Results**

Semi-structured interviews were held between August 2019 to December 2019, with 18 young people, 10 parents and eight staff at four sites across England and Wales. The interviews investigated young peoples' needs and the experience of young people at alternative education provisions. Furthermore, the interviews investigated whether young people received opportunities for development and progression into employment. The following themes identified in the research were defined as 'Preparing for the future through motivation', 'Support and empowerment', 'Confidence and self-efficacy' and 'Balancing academia with physical activity'.

#### **Theme one: preparing for the future through motivation**

Young people discussed their reasons for joining the alternative education provision, with many acknowledging their desire to secure a career in the military.

*I have always wanted to join the military. Even in school, it was all I wanted to do but I had so many problems with my weight and fitness that I never thought it would be possible. I spoke to a careers advisor once at school and he explained the criteria for joining the Army and I was, well, basically I was overweight. I really tried to manage my weight problem but it's so hard and you don't get the right support in school – I had P.E like once a week and got bullied so never really did it. Then I found out about the (name of college) provision and it changed everything. I have lost so much weight over the past 2 years and I aced my military fitness assessment (Y2)*

The statement was reiterated by this young person's mother:

*[Young person] has always been fascinated by the idea of joining the Army. It's one of those things; she has always been very active, quite physically fit . . . And then I think the Army became a bit of a fascination, I think because [learner] was always very close to grandad who died a couple of years ago. He was in the Guards when he was younger and then became a policeman for the rest of his career, so I think that was probably where the interest began. (P2)*

Military careers have stringent fitness requirements which can be daunting for young people, especially young people with weight and fitness problems. The challenges experiences by respondent Y2 were reiterated by Y5 and Y6:

*It was my personal choice to join the (name of college) provision. I wanted to get the fitness. I didn't know much about the provision before I started but had heard about it from Facebook and the Prince's Trust. (Y5)*

Joining the military is evidently a core reason for many young people joining this particular alternative education provider. Teaching staff reinforced the statements made by students and their parents:

*Most of the young people that come to us want to join the military. The military is so diverse so sometimes we get young people say, "I want to join the Marines" and then a week later they have decided that they are more suited to something else – it really depends. What we do here is mostly focused on the Military, but the values are societal, so it doesn't matter if you join the military – you have good values. I mean we have young people that come here and struggle with family, education, well-being and physical health (I mean that is a big one here) and we help them to address these areas. (S1)*

The provider does not solely focus on helping young people join the UK's armed forces, indeed most students go onto civilian careers. Other reasons young people attended the alternative education provision were linked to uncertainty over their future careers, with one young person explaining that she joined the alternative education provision when she realised that she did not enjoy a traditional classroom environment. This was typical of over 50% of the students interviewed, they did not 'do school' and believed they had not realised their potential in the formal education system:

*I started [the provision] in August 2019, I was 17 at the time . . . I had been at a local FEC doing Health and Social Care at level 2 . . . I looked around the classroom and thought that I didn't want to do training at college or university for the next five years. (Y8)*

Dissatisfaction with their circumstances was another reason for young people attending the provision. Young people attending the provision had different experiences with past education and/or training such as bullying:

*I was at secondary school . . . I didn't enjoy it much, every day was a drag, just listening to teachers drone on . . . Too many people at school were dickheads. I got bullied a lot and used to have a lot of trouble. I only had one friend that stuck up for me. I used to get in trouble with the teachers for talking. I was eventually diagnosed with ADHD and have learned to manage it. (Y5)*

Experiencing bullying can have a negative impact of physical, social and emotional well-being (Etolen 2012). Research has shown that young people who experience bullying also have lower levels of self-efficacy and self-esteem (Thomaes et al. 2008). The challenges young people faced in traditional education was reiterated by another young person:

*School was terrible, I got bullied a lot, it sucked. But this place, it's just way better because it's exactly like my secondary school but everyone that wants the same thing is here so we all share common interests. Everyone gets along well because we are all here to do the same thing; we're all here to get a job. (Y12)*

The experiences of young people at the education and training provision were heightened by relationships developed with staff and other young people who share common interests. This finding supports earlier research conducted by Beni, Fletcher, and Chroinin (2016) who identified the role of meaningful experiences in physical education in developing social interaction, fun, challenges and personally relevant training. Others (Brown 2008; Hawkins 2008; Kretchmar 2000; McCaughy and Rovegno 2001) have argued that physical education and movement offer meaningful activities for young people that enrich human existence and encourage success (Beni, Fletcher, and Chroinin 2016). These findings are supported by the current research with one of our key findings being that young people expressed a desire for meaningful education as a result of their negative experiences in mainstream education.

### **Theme two: support and empowerment**

Young people spoke positively about the support offered by staff, particularly in supporting them to prepare for their chosen careers. One issue prevalent for some young people was passing the UK military's fitness and medical assessments, with failure to pass these assessments resulting in candidates being referred or, in some cases, rejected.

*I started my application to the Army about a year ago. I did a selection board in February 2019 but failed on fitness. I was offered a pre-conditioning course but didn't fancy it. I saw about the (name of college) provision on social media. My brother was also applying to join the Army and the recruitment office said he should go to the (name of college) provision to get his fitness up. I came along as well and I'm doing Army selection again in January 2020. (Y9)*

Being deferred following military fitness and medical assessments was (inaccurately) described by young people as 'rejection' and resulted in feelings of disappointment and confusion for young people which impacts on their self-esteem. The loss of self-esteem was heightened for young people that were deferred on the grounds of 'mental health':

*Well, I recently got deferred because when I was in secondary school I got bullied and I tried to kill myself. And that's come up on medical record and I wouldn't have known if I was just sitting at home or at college, I wouldn't have known that I was able to appeal for it. But Staff (at name of college) are actually helping me write my appeal and getting the evidence that I need to hopefully send it off to the NRC, so they can continue where I was at in my application. (Y12)*

Young people were supported by staff to deal with deferrals pragmatically, focusing on the next stage in reaching their career goals. This support was viewed positively, with most young people reflecting on the level of support offered by staff:

*I have completed my CV and done how to apply for jobs, communications, and calculations. I like the (name of provision) staff. They are more relaxed than teachers and we (the young people) are old enough to be disciplined. (Y5)*

Staff support young people to develop very practical 'lifeskills' (for example, communication, ironing and care of clothes, self-organisation) which we hypothesise are beneficial, not only if a young person wants to join the military, but for life in general.

*I have learned to iron, how to do my kit, and I am a lot more organized than I used to be. I am always in to the (name of provision) early. (Y6)*

The practical support provided by staff was cited as helping young people to develop the confidence required for personal change (for example, weight loss and improved fitness) and enabling them to pursue their desired careers. Parents reiterated the benefit of support in providing their children practical skills and personalised support:

*"He was at High School, but he had little direction. He was alright at school. He got alright results, including Maths and English, but he was not very dedicated. He didn't love to go to school ... staff [here] push you and he loves the staff." (P6)*

Staff highlighted the dynamic nature of their role, with the delivery of functional skills and physical exercise, coupled with supporting well-being and mental health being the focus of their activity:

*We do functional skills, mostly Maths and English, but we link it to the military. We have really diverse learners here which can sometimes be challenging – some of them already have good GCSEs in English and Maths so functional skills are easier for them. On the flip side though, we have learners that have not got GCSEs and they really benefit from the functional skills. It is definitely a challenge for us. We also have a focus on physical exercise, as you have seen, to help learners with health and well-being – and obviously assessment. Our physical exercise works on a bib system. This basically means that learners receive a coloured bib based on points total (across all the areas of training) and this keeps them together as a team and enables them to aspire to push themselves, to progress. They all want to be in the top grade. What is really great about it, is that all the young people support each other, they push each other to succeed which is so important. (S1)*



The support for young people goes beyond academia and physical education, with staff reflecting on the fact that support is flexible and has to be personal – constantly changing to address the individuals needs of young people:

*To be honest with you, I feel like a father, a teacher, a physical trainer. You put a load of different hats on every day, constantly . . . you've got to tailor to them really. You have people coming from different background races, people coming with a load of different issues, so you are constantly changing your hat, whether you are talking about lifestyle choices, maybe you are talking about safeguarding and family issues or talking about losing weight and stuff like that. You are constantly changing for individual needs really. (S4)*

### **Theme three: confidence and self-efficacy**

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura 1977); whilst it has been related to confidence, motivation and self-esteem. Self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behaviour, and social environment (Bandura 1977). Research (Chen, Casper, and Cortina 2001; Seddon, Hazenberg, and Denny 2013; Paterson-Young and Hazenberg Forthcoming) has shown that self-efficacy augments confidence, motivation and positive experiences (Chen, Casper, and Cortina 2001; Seddon, Hazenberg, and Denny 2013). Young people described the development of confidence and self-efficacy due to the support offered by staff:

*[the provision] will help me find myself a bit more, see a bit more of what my interests are and then I can focus a bit more on it and go to a bit more depth . . . It helps you develop your confidence which is so important for joining the military. And it tests me . . . [After this] I think joining the military and testing my limits on different things will be good for me. (Y1)*

Young people noted the development of skills that have enabled them to develop self-efficacy. This promotes confidence and motivation (Judge, Locke, and Durham 1997) which enables young people to perform positively in life situations (Eden 1988; Eden and Aviram 1993). The importance of confidence was reiterated by another young person:

*The provision has made me more confident. It has explained the Army's standards and values and I can see how the provision fits in with these. I have thought greatly about the Army, and so has the provision. (Y6)*

This was reiterated by parent comments, with one parent reflecting on the fact that mainstream school was not right for her child:

*(My son) has developed at [the provision]. He has grown in confidence; he is far more sure of himself. Mainstream school was not good for (my son). He is dyslexic and could not achieve what he knew he could. He found [the provision], not us. He has flourished there and has developed skills in dealing with people and coping on a day-to-day basis. (P5)*

Improvements in confidence, and self-efficacy, give young people the confidence that they have the ability to advance academically and physically. This is particularly true for young people reporting negative experiences at school (for example bullying). Young people reflected on negative experiences at school spoke positively about how the alternative education provision promoted an environment that helped to improve their confidence:

*I really struggled speaking to people before I came here. I was bullied at school because of my weight and that really got me down. Honestly, if you had asked me to participate in an interview two years ago, I would have said no. But since coming here, I can speak to anyone. I think it's because everyone respects you here, everyone has got your back. (Y2).*

Confidence for young people was not simply related to pursuing their chosen career, but also related to interacting and communicating with other young people; especially for those that had experienced bullying in school. This theme was highlighted by a learner who described the provision as offering space for 'like-minded people':

*The provision is amazing. I came here, it is hard to put into words, I can be with like-minded people, all have a goal and a sense of camaraderie. We get fitness, the uniform, a sense of togetherness, a bond. You make amazing friends ... Here I've got amazing friends, it's just great, the staff are brilliant, so supportive. The staff are great, they have a tough love for us. It's discipline in the right place. We are well prepared for selection. (Y8)*

Developing a positive environment enables young people to develop their fitness and academic ability in an environment with 'like-minded' people with similar goals (Beni, Fletcher, and Chroinin 2016). Self-efficacy enables young people to, not only develop their fitness and academic level, but develop life skills.

#### **Theme four: balancing academia with physical activity**

Predominantly, young people and parents viewed the college provision positively. However, some concern was expressed about the balancing of academic subjects with physical activity. Some young people, particularly those that had done relatively well in school, viewed the classroom-based learning activities negatively, and placed greater importance on the benefit of physical activities.

*The classroom work at [the provision] is pretty boring as it is aimed at people at a lower level than I am. I already have the qualifications, so classroom work is much less difficult than it should be. (Y6)*

Young people with good qualifications from school (GCSE Maths and English, or equivalent) felt there was room for expanding on the functional skills to challenge them. The academic provision is designed to address the needs of young people with lower achievements, with young people with good school qualifications viewing it as 'easy':

*Yes, yes that's what it is. We've been given work and you can only do a couple of pages, which is not a problem, I'll do them. But because at my level - and everybody has different levels - I'll be completing the work no problem and then I'm sitting around for a couple of minutes because you can't go any further. ... which is understandable, but I would like more challenge. (Y1)*

This issue was reiterated by parents:

*[My son] is quite an academic lad anyway so he got all his results. He achieved quite a high level in his statutory Maths and English. So, I don't think he's had to do a lot of course work there because he's already obtained the qualifications really that would put him in in good stead, so to speak. I don't think he's done as much work there as some pupils would have done, if that makes sense. (P9)*

The views of young people and parents were sometimes contradictory, with some young people wanting additional education and others wanting additional physical activities. These different learning goals creates a challenge for staff in balancing the academic needs of young people with physical activity. Resource issues impact on opportunities for balancing academic needs with physical activity, with staff members reflecting on staffing issues:

*Resources is the main thing. Every single person you speak to will probably agree, and we always say the same thing, resources is the main thing; resources is the biggest challenge, the biggest ... They've (the college) introduced a Lone Worker Policy so that if ever one Staff is sick his section, or his class as such, is stood down, sent home. So, if one Staff member is sick, the 20 kids or the number of kids that he's got in his class will be sent home for that day or for the duration that that Staff member is away. (S3)*

## **Discussion**

Young people engaging in the college's alternative education provision in England and Wales had a range of different experiences in mainstream education. While some young people had 'done well' at school and had joined the college as they believed it would help them with their career ambitions, most young people had not enjoyed their schooling and felt they had not

performed to their potential. The number of young people (16 years-old to 24 years-old) not in education, employment or training (NEET) in the United Kingdom was estimated to be c.763,000 in October to December 2019 (ONS 2020). This constitutes an estimated 11.1% of all young people 12 years-old to 24 years-old, with 392,000 men and 371,000 women (ONS 2020). Research (Raaum and Røed 2006; von Wachter and Bender 2006; Seddon, Hazenberg, and Denny 2013) shows that NEET status has significant long-term consequences. These consequences are far reaching, not only on education and employment, but on obtaining a professional career in the future.

Gaining qualifications and succeeding in, training and employment requires a level of confidence and self-efficacy. Findings from this research suggesting that young people, especially young people who had been bullied in school, place great importance on developing confidence. Self-efficacy describes the process of mastering skills by trial and error (Bandura 1977). Research (Chen, Casper, and Cortina 2001; Seddon, Hazenberg, and Denny 2013) shows that self-efficacy augments confidence, motivation and positive experiences. Improving confidence is an important indicator in understanding young people's progression into employment (Judge, Locke, and Durham 1997). Furthermore, confidence plays a central role in helping young people to develop relationships (Bandura 1977) with adults and other young people. These relationships are essential for helping young people deal with unexpected and unwelcome life outcomes (for example failing to pass military fitness tests the first time; a deferral).

This research has found that experiencing a 'deferral' can have a negative impact on young people with feelings of disappointment and confusion impacting on self-efficacy (Bandura 1977). Young people were supported by staff to deal with deferrals pragmatically, focusing on the next stage in reaching their careers. Staff helped to empower young people through acknowledging the challenges and offering structured support (i.e. healthy eating plans). These consistent and supportive relationships enable young people to obtain positive outcomes. Staff at alternative education provisions need to show interest and concern in young people lives through open and honest dialogue (Fletcher 1993; Baldry and Kemmis 1998; Bell 2002; Morgan 2006 and McLeod 2008). Our findings support earlier research conducted by Beni, Fletcher, and Chroinin (2016) has shown that relationships can develop organically in environments offering physical activity as young people are encouraged to learn through social interaction, fun, challenges and personally relevant training.

Physical activity as a core part of the curriculum allows alternative education provisions to develop a fun and encouraging environment (Beni, Fletcher, and Chroinin 2016). Physical education and movement offer meaningful activities for young people that enrich human existence and encourage success (Brown 2008; Hawkins 2008; Kretchmar 2000; McCaughtry and Rovegno 2001; Beni, Fletcher, and Chroinin 2016). However, balancing physical activity with academia is complex. Young people with good qualifications from school (GCSE Maths and English or equivalent) viewed academic provisions as redundant and 'easy', which could lead to frustration. The academic aspect of the provision is standardised and therefore not entirely effective in meeting the diverse needs of young people. Research has shown that young people benefit from tailored programmes that acknowledge individual abilities, interests and aspiration (DfES 2002; Maguire and Rennison 2005; Seddon, Hazenberg, and Denny 2013). Thus, developing effective and sustainable provisions that balance physical activity with academia requires dedication from the organisation in providing the appropriate resources for staff.

This research is not without limitations. Young people participating in the research were, largely, from a homogenous group (i.e. identify as white and male) which means the findings are not necessarily attributable to a wider population. Future research in comparing the outcomes of this provision to other provision designed to help young people who are not in employment, education and training, and to further identify what are the key success factors in this provision would be beneficial.

## Conclusion

NEET status has long-term effects on future employment and career progression (Raaum and Røed 2006; von Wachter and Bender 2006; Seddon, Hazenberg, and Denny 2013), with research (Karsten and Moser 2009; Hazenberg, Seddon, and Denny 2014; Seddon, Hazenberg, and Denny 2013) on the impact of NEET suggesting that it can have a negative impact on health and wellbeing. Being NEET has a pronounced impact on health and well-being, with young people at an increased risk of depression (Siegrist et al. 2010). Young people gain meaningful experiences in physical education such as social interaction and fun (Beni, Fletcher, and Chroinin 2016) which enrich human existence and encourage success. Developing education and training provisions that improve confidence and well-being is essential in improving outcomes for young people. This research shows that, in provisions with appropriate resources and experienced staff, improvements in confidence and well-being can be achieved by balancing physical activity with academia. Such programmes acknowledge individual abilities, interests and aspiration (DfES 2002; Maguire and Rennison 2005; Seddon, Hazenberg, and Denny 2013). Young people in the study found that being fit mattered, helping to improve self-esteem and confidence. Although the findings cannot be generalised to all young people and adults, there is clear evidence that this type of provision can be beneficial in improving the self-efficacy, well-being, and relationships of some young people. Developing these life-skills is critical to success in future education, training and careers.

## Note

1. This definition of 'NEET' is adopted by the organisation for inclusion/exclusion criteria for the programme.

## Disclosure statement

The funding for research was from the research focused organisation however the author(s) conducted the research with transparency and professionalism.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Motivational Preparation College and Training;

## Notes on contributors

*Associate Professor Claire Paterson-Young* BA MSc PhD is a researcher at the Institute for Social Innovation and Impact (ISII). A key feature of her research is the development of social impact measurement frameworks that aid organisations to identify the positive and negative, intended and unintended outcomes of interventions and activities. She has over 10 years practice and management experience in safeguarding, child sexual exploitation, trafficking, sexual violence, youth and restorative justice. She consults nationally with local authorities, police forces and national organisations to develop Child Sexual Exploitation services. Claire is a member of the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner Ethics Committee, NHS Research Ethics Committee and the University of Northampton's Research Ethics Committee. She is a trustee of the National Association for Youth Justice (NAYJ), Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) and Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (HEA).

*Professor Simon Denny* BA MA PhD & the Queens Award: Simon Denny served in the British Army from 1976 – 1986. He left in the rank of Captain. He gained experience of the military justice system and was a board member on courts martial. He held the post of Executive Dean: Research, Impact and Enterprise at the University of Northampton, retiring in late 2018 and now working as an independent researcher and consultant. He now works as an independent researcher with affiliation to ISII and has experience of working in prisons, with the Metropolitan Police on crime reduction programmes and at Goodwill Solutions CIC (which supports veterans on probation or released from prison). Simon has run an accredited enterprise programme at HMP Wellingborough, and also organised a programme at HMP Rye Hill. He has worked with the Metropolitan Police on crime reduction programmes. He is a director at Goodwill Solutions CIC which successfully supports veterans on probation or released from prison. Simon has extensive and current high-level involvement with the Armed Forces through his work at the Defence Academy of the UK, and as military liaison officer for one of the Livery Companies of the City of London. Simon is a holder of the Queen's Award for Enterprise.

## ORCID

Claire Paterson-Young  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7927-7878>

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## Appendix A

Table A1. Units of analysis.

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1. Motivation	16. Goals
2. Confidence	17. Family support
3. Mental Health	18. Belonging
4. Citizenship	19. Optimism
5. Chances	20. Development
6. Unemployed	21. Support
7. Education	22. Self-esteem
8. Health	23. Weight
9. Fitness	24. Disadvantage
10. Offending	25. Assessment
11. Regrets	26. Desire
12. Well-being	27. Skills
13. Benefits	28. Training
14. Military	29. Fun
15. Rejection	30. Positivity

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