

“The FE sector plays a key role in raising young people’s aspirations and encouraging them to engage in education, training and employment. Colleges motivate and support them to achieve, by providing effective advice and guidance, personalised learning programmes and support tailored to meet their needs.”

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Chair, 157 Group

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Website becomes a symbol of achievement for disengaged teenagers

A website specifically for teenagers who have left school and have nothing to do is a particular source of pride among tutors at York College.

The website was set up to give support and advice to young people not in employment, education or training (Neet¹) in the North Yorkshire city.

The college is so delighted with the website because it was designed and built by a troubled teenager who turned her life around by taking courses at the college.

Nicola Morgan was 14 and had severe behavioural problems that caused her to be excluded from several schools. She was prone to frequent outbursts of anger. She was destined to become another statistic on the city’s Neet register before the college, in partnership with City of York Council, put a plan in place to give Nicola some purpose and direction.

Two years later, Nicola is studying for a diploma in computing and plans to go to university, having brought her behaviour under control.

She used the computer skills she learned while studying for a level 3 diploma (equivalent to an A-level qualification) to construct the college’s website for young people who are Neet.

York College, working with the Connexions service and City of York, has a number of strategies in place to reduce the Neet rate in York, which is less than half the national average. Between November 2009 and January 2010, around 4.2 per cent of 16 to 18-year-olds left school without finding a job or training course, compared to 9.2 per cent across England as a whole.

1 See the back page for more about the use of the word ‘Neet’.

Why is the Neet rate comparatively low in York?

Lidia Nowicki-Wilson, York College's 14 to 16 coordinator, believes that tackling the problem early, before young people leave school, is crucial to keeping the Neet rate down.

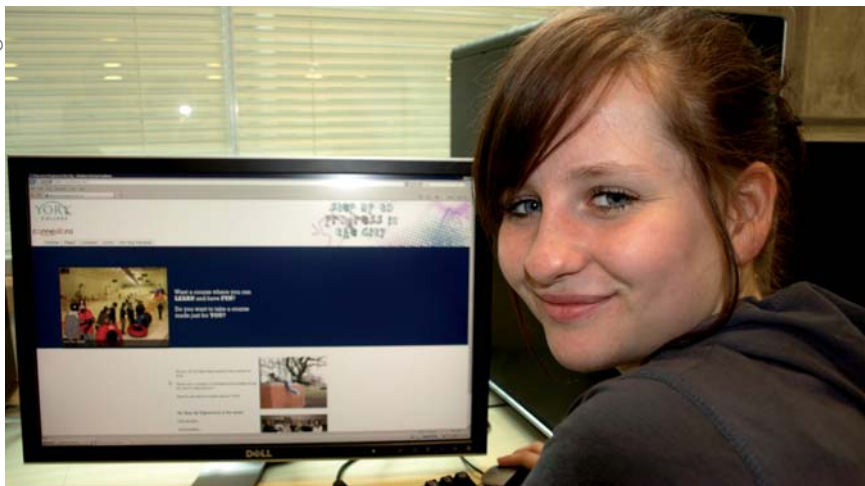
Her view is borne out by a report published in July 2010 by the Audit Commission. The report listed "targeted pre-16 support for those at risk of becoming Neet" as a key factor in getting young people into work or learning.

York College has been running programmes in partnership with City of York Council, aimed at providing progression routes for 'disengaged' school pupils considered at risk of becoming Neet, for several years.

The city council built the £2.4m Danesgate Skills Centre, to provide vocational courses in horticulture, construction, hair and beauty, catering and independent living skills, most of which are delivered by the college. Before Danesgate opened in January 2008, disaffected pupils attended the college for short courses in subjects such as hair and beauty and construction, which offered vocational pathways to college.

"It was very successful," Lidia explained, "but it was felt that if there were a bespoke centre for transition, their behaviour would be modified. At one time, we had a dozen excluded lads. The centre is designed to make it easier for them to move from pre to post-16 learning.

Nicola Morgan



"We do persevere with those who aren't fitting into the school system. We have kids who have been bullied and dropped out, have lost confidence, have family tragedies, are school refusers, the whole range. Some have been bounced out of three schools before they come to us.

"There is a misconception, however, that all Neet young people are problematic, not very bright learners. Many have successfully completed GCSE and A-level courses but have struggled to find employment, especially in this present economic climate."

Nicola Morgan was just one of the many youngsters whose behaviour changed after attending the centre.

"Nicola had a troubled family background and her behaviour was off the wall," recalled Lidia. "There would be five incidents a day when she would have outbursts of screaming and yelling.

"She had intensive support from a Connexions adviser and she came to college at 14. She started by doing a number of short courses in subjects like employability. She has an interest in computing and wants to be a journalist.

"City of York provided a support worker, who helped her with English and maths. She passed her maths GCSE and did maths at AS level. She passed IT at level 2 and moved on to a level 3 diploma. She is now 17 and planning to go to university."

Having passed her AS level maths with a grade B, Nicola is already on track to achieve that ambition. Her mother is astonished at her progress. "She has achieved so much," she said. "She was actually disappointed to get a B in maths because she so badly wanted an A, but I was thrilled. I can't believe it is the same girl."

Nicola said, "The tutors who had to put up with all my screaming and carrying on have given me the chance to

do something positive with my life. Having missed two years of school, I can't believe I now have a good chance of going to university."

A further indication of her progress is that she is one of a group of students invited to visit Los Angeles to work with Microsoft in Silicon Valley. "That is an amazing step for her," said Lidia.

Ben was another young person who changed after attending the centre. "He wasn't doing well at school," Lidia said. "His attendance and behaviour were terrible, but he had a burning desire to be a bricklayer. He took some courses in our construction department and was awarded the student of the year prize."

Lidia said that the college also works with schools across the city in developing a vocational curriculum. "Schools provide Asdan pathways as well as applied GCSEs. We previously sent our vocational tutors out to schools and we have seen exclusions coming down."

For those who do become Neet after leaving school, the college offers a free programme for 16 to 19-year-olds called Step Up to Progress in the City. The programmes lead to National Open College Network (NOCN) qualifications.

"Since Step Up started in February 2009, we have had six cohorts of between 12 and 20 students," she said.

"It is the first accredited course that gives students the currency to move on. We have 100 per cent achievement. Some have progressed into employment with training, most into FE, some have continued to build up the steps until they are ready to progress.

"Step Up is also a fantastic way of removing the isolation experienced by some young people who don't find a job on leaving school. They left school believing there was work out there and lost self-confidence after being rejected for everything they have gone for. Students get the chance to meet new people, share experiences and make new friends. They also get a taste of the world of work through work placements."

Delphine Clough, a placement officer on the programme, negotiates with employers to provide opportunities for students. She said, "We have done a series of brilliant workshops on preparing for work with companies like Aviva, Network Rail, Corus Rail and York Press. That has been really successful. It was initiated by the employers and we now have more employers wanting to come on board. Employers have also offered shadowing placements.

"Two of our girls have gone into business administration, studying at level 2. When these young people move on to further study or into jobs, we give them support in the first six weeks of transition.

Dr Alison Birkinshaw



"That is vital. That is exactly when they drop off as they feel overwhelmed by their new environment."

Dr Alison Birkinshaw, principal of York College, said, "An Audit Commission report recently highlighted that young people not in education, employment or training at 16 to 18 have poorer life chances than their peers and are more likely to be a long-term cost to the public purse. It estimates that the 2008 Neet cohort will cost about £13 billion in public finance costs and £22 billion in opportunity costs over their lifetimes. The Neet reduction programmes we run will reduce this cost and provide value to the taxpayer in the long term.

"But actually, what really matters is the difference we make to the lives of individuals. We have seen so many students from a real variety of backgrounds make fantastic progress, gaining the confidence and skills that they really need to be successful. It's wonderful for our college to be able to contribute to this."

What do we mean by Neet?

The acronym 'Neet' has been around since 1999, when it was used by Geoff Mulgan, a former head of policy in the prime minister's office, to describe young people 'not in education, employment or training'. Despite some criticism, the word is now commonly used to refer to this particular group of young people.

The cohort of young people who are Neet is not a static, homogenous group. Young people can be Neet for varying lengths of time and for different reasons. 'Neet' describes a young person's current situation, rather than a set of defining characteristics.

Some groups of young people have higher Neet rates than the general population:

- young offenders
- young care leavers
- teenage mothers
- young people with learning difficulties or disabilities
- young carers.

Department for Education (DfE) figures in May 2010 showed that 927,000 16 to 24-year-olds were classed as Neet in the first three months of the year, representing a rise on the previous quarter, but down from the record high of 1.07 million recorded in the third quarter of 2009.

The August 2010 Labour Force Survey disclosed that many who were Neet had achieved A-level qualifications and even studied degrees at university.

The statistics can be misleading, however, as they include young people who are carers, as well as those doing a gap year, perhaps taking up volunteering opportunities and contributing positively to their own career development and to their local communities.

Many have expressed their concerns about the use of the word 'Neet'. The Welsh education minister, Leighton Andrews, said, "There is no one solution which will encourage young people to engage with education, or to help all of those out of work to get back into the labour market. One thing we do know is that labelling them and categorising them without consideration for their individual needs is not going to help them have a prosperous and successful future."

This case study is one of seven showing examples of how 157 Group colleges are working to help young people – many of whom have not had positive educational experiences – to engage in education, employment or training, and so improve their life chances and future economic well-being.

About the 157 Group

The 157 Group was formed in 2006 in response to paragraph 157 of Sir Andrew Foster's report on the future of further education colleges, in which he argued that principals of large successful colleges should play a greater role in policymaking.

157 Group members

- Barnet College
- Bedford College
- Birmingham Metropolitan College
- Bournemouth and Poole College
- Chichester College
- City and Islington College
- City of Bristol College
- City of Sunderland College
- College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London
- Cornwall College
- Derby College
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- Highbury College Portsmouth
- Hull College
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- New College Nottingham
- St Helens College
- Stoke on Trent College
- Sussex Downs College
- The Manchester College
- The Sheffield College
- Warwickshire College
- West Nottinghamshire College
- York College

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Dr Alison Birkinshaw, principal,
York College