



Youth Guarantee Pathways and Profiles Project

AN INTERIM SUMMARY REPORT

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Youth Guarantee Pathways and Profiles Project

Summary Report

Introduction

The Youth Guarantee Pathways and Profiles Project (YGPP) gathers the experiences and perspectives of young people in government-funded Youth Guarantee Fees Free training programmes, and their education providers. The project explores the value of Youth Guarantee Fees Free for young people and whether it contributes to positive outcomes. It also seeks to find out more about the longer-term pathways of young people and their experiences of transition.

Data were gathered from the 2015 student cohort at three education providers; Community College, Unitec and YMCA. The first phase of the project involved the collection of data from Youth Guarantee students through surveys and interviews, and from staff through focus groups. Data on student outcomes were collected from their education providers. The second phase explores young people's pathways and longer-term outcomes after Youth Guarantee Fees Free. A group of young people from the survey cohort were interviewed at the start and end of their Youth Guarantee programmes. We will track these young people for one-on-one interviews until the end of 2018.

As the project develops it has become apparent that Youth Guarantee Fees Free is just one of the many experiences which influence young peoples' transitions and pathways. It had a significant positive impact on the lives of most participants during their engagement with the programme; however, its ongoing impact varies according to the wider context of each individual transition. This report identifies the general characteristics, contexts and experiences of Youth Guarantee Fees Free students at the participating education providers and highlights key themes which influence the transitions of these young people.

Key messages

This is an ongoing project and at this stage we feel that it is not appropriate to make recommendations about what works best for Youth Guarantee students. Instead we present five key messages which, we recommend, should be carefully considered by those involved in the planning and delivery of Youth Guarantee Fees Free and similar foundation education or youth transitions programmes.

- Many of the factors discussed in this report are interconnected and the impact that they have on young people's lives, experiences and decisions is complex and varied due to diversity in individual characteristics, needs and contexts.

- Consistency of support is extremely important. Support provided through educational interventions should be responsive to the diverse needs of the young people in this cohort. This may involve significant pastoral care and in some cases on-going support is needed.
- Qualifications are important to the young people in this study but the pastoral care that they receive from their Youth Guarantee providers, and the ongoing support of their networks, is equally as important and is seen to be essential to their development.
- Participants' skills and capacity for self-development maximise the value of their qualifications. A qualification may open doors for young people but these doors are kept open by the skills and capacity for continued development gained from Youth Guarantee, other education and employment experiences, and from access to consistent support.
- Participants experienced transitions in education and employment as an iterative process rather than a linear series of events. This process was closely linked to participants' identity development and influenced their decisions about education and employment pathways.

1. Project Progress

In the first stage of this project we surveyed 437 young people on Youth Guarantee Fees Free programmes at the participating education providers. Students participated in two online surveys, at the start and end of their Youth Guarantee programme. Sixty three young people from the survey cohort participated in in-depth interviews in 2015; these participants will be tracked until the end of 2018. Four focus groups held between May 2015 and May 2016 with 22 staff at the education providers have provided another perspective on the experiences of young people in Youth Guarantee Fees Free. These focus groups involved staff in a range of roles including teaching, administration, student recruitment and support, managerial and co-ordination roles.

Stage two of this project has involved following up young people for interviews about their education, employment and transitions experiences. In 2016 we carried out third and fourth wave interviews at six months and one year respectively since learners' departure from their 2015 Youth Guarantee Fees Free programme. We were able to contact 46 participants for the third interview and 39 for the fourth interview. The fifth wave of interviews (2 years since departure) was completed in late 2017-early 2018 with 32 participants. The final interview, following up participants 3 years after their exit from Youth Guarantee, will take place in late 2018.

The first published report for this project was the *Youth Guarantee Pathways and Profiles: Profile Report* released in 2016. An updated executive summary was added in late 2017. This summary report will be followed by two final reports in 2019.

2. Project context: Literature

This project is informed by research which views youth transitions in the context of identity formation, and understands transition as a process rather than an event (Munford & Sanders, 2015; Nairn, Higgins & Sligo, 2012; Vaughan, Roberts & Gardiner, 2006). Research in New Zealand and internationally has shown that young people's transitions from secondary school are diverse and non-linear, and transitions can be particularly challenging for young people with low skills and education, who often face other obstacles (Bibbee, 2013 Higgins, 2012; Vaughan et al., 2006). The literature emphasises the importance of understanding transition in the context of the transition to adulthood and the social and developmental changes which young people experience at this stage of their lives (Wyn, 2013).

The YGPP project contributes to a small body of New Zealand research which examines the role of education intervention programmes such as ACCESS, Training Opportunities, Youth Training, and Youth Guarantee Fees Free (Educational Attainment Working Group, 2012; Benseman & Tobias, 2003; Earle, 2015, 2016a, 2018; Gordon, Sedgwick, Grey & Marsden, 2014; Mahoney, 2010; Ministry of Education, 2002).

3. Findings to date

3.1 *Youth Guarantee learner characteristics and experiences*

Student participants were aged 15-19 years, with a good proportion of Māori and Pasifika learners, and slightly more females than males taking part. Most participants lived at home with one or both parents and reported that whānau and friends were their main sources of support. Participants also received support from other services such as Youth Service, counsellors and school careers advisors. There was a change in the types of support services accessed by participants from entry to exit, with fewer school based services reported, and exit survey participants reported accessing fewer services overall. Some participants reported issues with physical and mental health; interviews provided insight into the impact that these issues had on participants' transitions and experiences at school and in Youth Guarantee. Participants' self-esteem, measured through the Rosenberg self-esteem scale, increased overall from programme entry to exit.

The majority of participants did not complete secondary school and reported negative school experiences. Factors identified by participants as positively or negatively influencing their time at school, and their reasons for leaving school were related to issues with learning, relationships and behaviour. Friends and whānau were a positive influence on participants' time at school, while poor relationships with teachers and peers, issues with learning,

bullying, truancy and getting into trouble contributed to negative experiences at school and participants' decisions to leave school. About three-quarters of participants had some experience with employment, and these experiences contributed to participants' decisions about the future. Having a source of income was important to a number of participants, and most reported receiving some form of income. Money from family and wages from employment were the most common sources of income for participants.

It appeared that most participants either had relatively short transitions between school and Youth Guarantee, or were not significantly disengaged during their transitions¹. From the interview participants we learned that a number undertook other education or were employed during their transitions. We also learned that those interview participants who experienced long-term Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) had less access to support overall and tended to report more issues related to drugs, alcohol and transience compared with participants who had not experienced long-term NEET. Participants were motivated to enrol in Youth Guarantee to gain qualifications and skills for employment or further study, most planned to work or continue their education after Youth Guarantee. These plans ranged from well-developed step-by-step plans to vague ideas about possible future pathways.

3.2 Experiences of Youth Guarantee Fees Free

Overall, the feedback from participants about their experience of Youth Guarantee was extremely positive. Participants felt well-supported; they reported positive relationships with their tutors, other staff and students and enjoyed the learning style and environment at their Youth Guarantee providers. They reported positive effects from Youth Guarantee on their confidence, motivation and literacy and numeracy skills, and said that as well as Youth Guarantee staff, friends and whānau had a positive influence on their experience. Bullying, mental health issues, lack of attendance and the misuse of drugs and alcohol had negative effects on participants' experience of Youth Guarantee. A number of interview participants, however, reported that some of these behaviours and issues had improved over time due to their involvement with Youth Guarantee.

Quantitative analysis examined participants' achievement (defined in this study as achieving NCEA Level 2) on the Youth Guarantee Fees Free programme and the factors related to this. This analysis indicated that attending a high decile school, having 14 credits or more on enrolment in Youth Guarantee, and having a plan for their next step, increased participants' likelihood of achieving NCEA Level 2 through their Youth Guarantee programme.

¹ Significant disengagement in this context refers to young people who are long-term NEET (a continuous spell not engaged in education, employment or training for six months or more). Young people often experience short spells of NEET so this is not an appropriate measure of disengagement. (Earle, 2016b; Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2013)

3.3 Findings from staff focus groups

The focus groups with staff were designed to capture organisational perspectives on working within the Youth Guarantee Fees Free framework. Staff were asked about their views of Youth Guarantee and how well it aligned with the needs of their students, with a particular focus on whether and how education providers met their students' educational and employment needs within the Youth Guarantee Fees Free framework.

There were clear themes relating to the value of Youth Guarantee, student needs, the challenges in meeting these, and what is needed to improve the current system. Overall, feedback from staff focus groups aligned with what we heard from Youth Guarantee students in the surveys and interviews for this project. Staff valued that Youth Guarantee gave young people who had not succeeded in mainstream education the opportunity to gain qualifications, personal development and experience educational success. They spoke about the vital role of support and relationships in engaging young people and meeting their needs, and discussed how challenges faced by young people can affect their experience and achievement in Youth Guarantee. Of interest is the strong feedback that while Youth Guarantee fees free is suitable for some young people, its structure is not conducive to achieving success for all young people.

A number of challenges to the delivery of qualifications and skills through Youth Guarantee were identified by staff. Staff reported that these stemmed from a lack of alignment between the needs of their students and the Youth Guarantee framework. The main criticism was the lack of flexibility within Youth Guarantee to meet the needs of a diverse group of young people. Specifically, the lack of flexibility in the time that students have to achieve on Youth Guarantee Fees Free, and the narrow definition of achievement which does not capture all of the personal or educational gains made by students. Another concern was the lack of ongoing support for young people. Staff said that young people required more support in transitions out of Youth Guarantee. They reported that there was a gap in provision after Youth Guarantee, in terms of the available education options at Level 3, and ongoing support and development for young people. While staff did their best to prepare students for their next step after Youth Guarantee, and in many cases continued to support students after their departure, this often went above and beyond their roles within their education organisations, and beyond the scope of Youth Guarantee provision.

From these focus groups, and the feedback from surveys and interviews with young people it is clear that success in Youth Guarantee is greatly contributed to by the efforts of staff and their organisations to make the system work for their students. The staff who participated in focus groups felt that changes to the Youth Guarantee fees free framework are needed to create a system that is student-centred and supports staff to meet student needs. Staff expressed a desire to be more involved in the development of these changes and wanted more flexibility to create programmes which benefitted young people.

3.4 Pathways after Youth Guarantee Fees Free

Interviews with participants six months, one year and two years after their departure from their Youth Guarantee programme found them pursuing diverse pathways, and a number had changed direction at least once. Most participants were engaged in some form of education, training or employment and a few had become parents. The majority of the participants who were not currently engaged in such activities were looking for work and a few were looking for education options. These participants were committed to their search and wanted to be engaged in a meaningful activity. In conversations about future pathways, participants' plans continued to range from well-developed plans to vague ideas. Most participants were optimistic about their futures and their ability to achieve their goals, and were keen to convey a sense of forward momentum, development and control. They reported that support from others, their skills and qualifications and their own motivation were the main elements which had helped, or would help them succeed. A few participants were struggling to find a suitable pathway or to access their desired path. A combination of factors contributed to this including low self-confidence, lack of networks, information and appropriate support, and difficulty identifying, applying and developing the necessary skills.

Some participants reported experiencing challenges during their transitions. The types of challenges they encountered and the impact of these varied according to individual context and the degree of support available to participants. A number of participants reported issues related to accessing support and knowledge about education and employment, and had trouble navigating systems, for example student loans or allowances, higher education entry criteria and processes. Many participants reported that it was difficult to find employment, and said that their lack of experience, as well as the limited options available in some locations acted as barriers. For those who had found work, a number were in seasonal, short-term employment or were on call, which made it difficult to develop longer-term plans. Some participants identified themselves as a potential barrier to future success; this was mostly related to a lack of motivation, confidence and time and self-management. A few participants continued to face issues related to alcohol and other drugs, transience, unstable living situations, physical and mental health and crime; although most reported that they felt more equipped to manage these².

3.5 Key themes in participants' transitions

Although, in the earlier interviews, many participants spoke of their intention to follow a linear pathway through education or employment upon exiting Youth Guarantee, very few actually did so. Participants experienced transition as an iterative process which was influenced by a range of factors. The effects of these factors on participants' experiences and pathways varied according to individual contexts and challenges. Thematic analysis of interview data grouped these factors into five key themes; *Self-development, Control, Fit,*

² It is important to note that some participants who reported these issues were no longer part of the sample at interview 5 due to loss of contact. It is possible that these challenges continue to impact the transitions of these young people.

Networks and Support and *Direction and Stability*, which encapsulate the iterative process of transition and development experienced by the young people in this project. The theme of *Self-development* recognises participants' desire for growth and access to opportunity, *Control* is about being an active participant in transitions and *Fit* acknowledges participants' need for belonging and their search for alignment between self, current context and planned pathways. *Networks and Support* act as a stable base for participants' transitions and development while *Direction and Stability* provide a sense of purpose and a framework to guide these transitions. Understanding these themes can give insight into what helped and hindered participants during their transition, and how these experiences shaped participants' longer-term pathways.

3.5.1 Self-development

Participants reported that self-development; including skill development helped them do well during and after their Youth Guarantee programmes. For participants, self-development was about growth, change and ensuring future success. This involved gaining practical skills for employment and further education, changes in mind-set and behaviours, and academic achievement. Skills that participants reported as particularly useful in their transitions included communication and interpersonal skills, skills for employment, study skills and life skills. Communication and interpersonal skills helped participants gain and succeed in employment, were useful in new education contexts and their daily lives. Participants felt that these skills, and their Youth Guarantee experience, had made them more understanding of diverse perspectives and improved their interactions with others. Those who entered employment reported that knowledge about CVs, cover letters, interview techniques and employer expectations was particularly useful. Participants who continued in education said that study skills, in particular self and time-management contributed to their success. Many participants also reported benefits from these skills in their daily lives and said that other life skills, such as cooking and personal presentation had a positive impact for them.

Although participants' main focus for self-development was increasing access to, or success in, education and employment, personal growth had an integral role. Participants' capacity to increase access and success was enhanced through their personal growth and improved personal skills gained through self-development. Whether attained from Youth Guarantee, other education, employment or personal experiences, participants said that the confidence gained from self-development created positive momentum for continued development. This was an iterative and self-reinforcing process; participants reported that the confidence gained from learning new skills and achieving in education prompted them to see themselves and their futures in a different light and encouraged further development. As participants' capacity for self-development increased, they began to evaluate their current skills and consider which skills they could develop to increase their chances of success. They also sought opportunities for development which were directly connected to their desired pathway and assessed the value of particular pathways according to their potential for future development.

3.5.2 Control

Participants' desire to have control over themselves, their choices and decisions which involved or affected them was a strong and consistent theme in interviews with young people for this project. For these young people, control was about independence, self-responsibility and forging their own path. They used control to gain and maintain independence, to access opportunities, and to reject situations which undermined their sense of self-efficacy or identity. The role of control in participants' experiences varied according to their individual needs, aims and contexts. Most participants used control to ensure future independence through developing themselves, their skills, and choosing pathways that provided stability and/or flexibility. Some reported choosing a course of study or a career that offered diverse pathways and opportunities for progression. Others employed control to achieve immediate independence and stability, for example finding a job to pay for living expenses, which sometimes resulted in a narrowing of options in the longer-term.

As participants experienced success in various contexts they appeared to become more proactive in setting their future direction, accessing their networks to support their transitions, and searching for education or employment that met their needs. A number of participants reported that self-development enabled them to take control as it increased their confidence and gave them the skills they needed for independence and self-responsibility, for example time-management, communication and interpersonal skills. Overall, most participants were keen to gain independence and relished the chance to take control of their choices; however, a few reported feeling uncertain about making decisions and were afraid of making the wrong choice.

3.5.3 Fit

Finding fit was a central part of participants' education, employment and transition experiences. Participants mentioned two types of fit, one was related to belonging in their physical environment; being accepted and valued, and feeling confident and competent when carrying out tasks. The other was about participants finding alignment between their current activity and planned path and how they saw themselves now and in the future. Most participants who experienced physical fit reported feeling engaged and confident about their future choices. Those who had found fit with a pathway also reported engagement and confidence, as well as a sense of purpose. In both cases, fit provided stability which allowed participants to focus on self-development and explore future options. Participants used their experiences of fit, or a lack of fit, to assess the likelihood of fit in other contexts. Positive experiences of fit tended to broaden the future options considered by participants as these increased their self-efficacy and provided stability to explore a range of pathways. In some cases, participants' strong sense of fit with a particular pathway restricted their future options as they did not consider other possible pathways. Negative experiences of fit could limit or broaden participants' future options. Some participants reported that negative experiences led them to re-evaluate their trajectory and seek alternative pathways. Others ruled out certain careers, industries or activities, for example continuing in education, after

experiencing a lack of fit. Regardless of whether they had a desired path, participants who lacked networks or knowledge to find alternative pathways when they experienced a lack of fit faced limited future options.

3.5.4 Networks and Support

Networks and support, in particular whānau and friends, were a strong influence on participants' education, employment and transitions experiences and their future decisions. In addition to general support, networks were an important source of information about current and future pathways and could facilitate access to education or employment. Participants reported that networks and support provided them with a foundation to search for suitable activities or pathways, influenced their ideas about what was possible and practical for them and were a source of motivation. As well as whānau and friends, some participants reported receiving ongoing support from their Youth Guarantee provider, while others were supported by their new education provider, employers and work colleagues or other support services, for example Youth Service or Work and Income. We observed that participants received two types of support from whānau, friends and other sources. Some participants received 'active support' for example, a parent helping them create a C.V. or signing up to an education programme with a friend. Moral support, i.e. general encouragement, was received by most participants and was an important source of motivation. However, this was not always enough to help participants do well in education or employment, or successfully navigate their transitions. In these cases, the skills and personal motivation of participants played a more significant role.

Networks and support emerged as strong themes in both quantitative and qualitative data, and each have a significant role in participants' transitions. Networks were particularly important when participants were moving between activities or assessing options for their future. As participants gained confidence and independence they began to think about how existing networks could guide their transition and leverage opportunities, and they sought to access or create new networks. Support helped participants succeed in their chosen activity and guided their overall transition and future outlook. Participants reported that ongoing supportive relationships where they felt valued, respected and their needs were understood enabled them to achieve in Youth Guarantee and, later in their transitions, in further education and employment. After leaving Youth Guarantee, participants who continued to do well often had access to ongoing support through whānau and friends and experienced supportive relationships with employers, work colleagues or staff at other education providers.

3.5.5 Direction and Stability

Participants reported that having stability and a sense of direction supported their transitions. They gained stability from a variety of sources including a stable home and personal life, ongoing supportive relationships, finding fit with a particular employment or education pathway, and having a sense of direction. Overall, participants who lacked stability struggled

to find or maintain direction as their energy was concentrated on finding stability and managing their lives. For participants, direction was about forward momentum, and could involve a next step plan, a longer-term goal or idea, a clear plan or path, or a general sense of moving towards 'the future'. Having direction in any form had a positive impact on participants' transitions. According to participants it supported self-development, provided motivation and contributed to their self-confidence, their sense of purpose and stability. In many participants' experiences, direction and stability were closely linked. Throughout their transitions, participants found that having stability allowed them to focus on finding direction. A number of participants reported that having stability in their Youth Guarantee programmes allowed them to plan their next step and develop the skills to achieve this. Post-Youth Guarantee, stability came from following an education pathway, finding a job and having a general sense of direction. Some participants reported that having direction provided stability as it guided their choices and brought meaning to these. In these cases, direction was used as a framework to help participants judge the usefulness of certain activities, pathways, networks and self-development. Over the course of their transitions, most participants gained stability from a variety of sources, and changed direction at least once. These changes in stability and direction were closely connected to changes in fit, self-development, and identity development.

Final comments

Overall the findings from the quantitative data and qualitative interviews are well aligned. Both emphasise the importance of support, development and having a future direction, and highlight the diversity of participants' experiences. These findings are consistent with literature on youth transitions and the impact of educational interventions for early school leavers. The literature has shown that access to ongoing individualised support, and caring, respectful relationships throughout transitions can provide a secure base from which young people can develop themselves and their skills, and consider possible pathways (Munford & Sanders, 2015; Kendall et al., 2003). This aligns with the experiences of participants in this project, who reported that support from others, especially family, was a key factor in positive transitions experiences. Family is often a significant source of support and influences young people's future pathways both in terms of shaping ideas, and providing access to information and opportunities (Higgins, Vaughan, Phillips & Dalziel, 2008; Wyn, Lantz & Harris, 2011). Other networks that young people have access to, for example, education providers, also contribute to young people's pathways and decisions during their transitions (Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012; Educational Attainment Working Group, 2012).

Research regarding education interventions and transition programmes for young people, particularly those not in education or employment, has identified that the experience of achievement, belonging, and exposure to a variety of career or education pathways contribute to positive outcomes for young people (Kendall et al., 2003; Wyn, Stokes and

Tyler,2004). This is in line with the feedback we received from participants, who told us that these factors were important to them in their wider transitions, and in education settings. Participants also reported that having control over themselves and decisions which affected them contributed to positive transition experiences. This is consistent with research regarding young people's use of agency during transitions. This work acknowledges the importance of independence and control for young people and notes that this can be affected by individual circumstance (Stokes & Wyn, 2007; Threadgold & Nilan, 2009).

As we begin to understand participants' experiences over time, it is becoming clear that there is tension between the view of transitions on which the Youth Guarantee policy is based, and the narratives of our participants. The policy is informed by a linear view of transition in which the educational intervention sets young people on the 'right' path for the future. We have found that our participants' transitions experiences are not linear, and in many cases involve young people trying out multiple pathways as they search for a route which matches their current needs and ideas about who and/or what they want to be. This finding, combined with the complexity of the challenges faced by participants, indicates that it may be unrealistic to expect a one-off intervention such as Youth Guarantee Fees Free to produce a sustained positive outcome. The young people in this project experience Youth Guarantee as part of their own process of self-development rather than as a one-off event which determines their future direction. This does not change the overall findings in relation to what helps and hinders young people in their transitions and the impact of Youth Guarantee on these. However, it does indicate a disconnect between policy and the experiences of our participants.

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