

The Young People Who Didn't Fail – And the System That Keeps Pretending They Did

Adam Tugwell | 29 July 2026



Every few years, the government announces it is “reviewing the NEET problem.” You can almost hear the sigh ripple across the country when they do. We’ve been here before. We know how this goes.

The same headlines. The same concern. The same promises that this time, finally, something will change.

But anyone who has lived through the last twenty years knows the truth:

The NEET problem was never solved because it was never understood.

The system keeps circling the same question - *“Why aren’t young people engaging?”* - without ever asking the one that matters:

“What exactly are we asking them to engage with?”

Because if you’re sixteen, or nineteen, or twenty-three, and you’re looking at the world you’re about to inherit, the picture doesn’t look like opportunity. It looks like a maze with no exit.

And that’s where the story really begins.

The young people who “did everything right”

You meet them everywhere.

There’s the girl who worked hard at school, got the grades, went to college, took on debt, earned the qualification - and now works two part-time jobs that don’t cover rent. She did everything the system asked of her, and the system shrugged, as if her effort were a footnote.

There’s the boy who was brilliant with his hands, who could fix anything, who learned by doing - but was told that “real success” only comes through exams, essays, and university. He didn’t fall behind because he lacked ability. He fell behind because the system only recognises one kind of intelligence.

And there’s the teenager who tries to revise in a house where the electricity meter runs out, or where caring for siblings matters more than coursework, or where anxiety makes concentration impossible - and is told they “lack motivation.”

None of these young people failed. They were simply born into a system that cannot see them.

And when a system can’t see young people clearly, it reaches for the same old stories to explain away its failures.

The myth that keeps hurting them

Whenever the NEET numbers rise, someone in government inevitably points to a politician who “made it” despite hardship - a story meant to prove that social mobility works.

But these stories often leave out the quiet truths: the family connections, the cultural confidence, the safety nets, the invisible advantages that smoothed the path long before talent or effort had a chance to show themselves.

It's not that these individuals didn't work hard. It's that their success came from a mixture of background and opportunity that most young people today simply don't have.

And yet the system uses these stories as proof that young people who struggle must be doing something wrong.

It's a painful irony:

The people who benefited from background-based mobility are held up as evidence that meritocracy works - as if their story proves the system is fair, rather than proving how uneven it really is.

Meanwhile, the young people with real merit are being shut out.

The world young people are entering is not the world politicians grew up in

This is the part the NEET reviews never acknowledge.

Today's young people are stepping into an economy where wages don't meet living costs, a housing market that has quietly closed its doors to them, and a job market shrinking under automation.

They're navigating an education system commercialised beyond recognition and a society where mental-health pressures are constant. Even degrees - once the golden ticket - no longer guarantee stability.

They are not disengaging because they don't care. They are disengaging because the pathways they were promised no longer exist.

And when the system responds with yet another "training scheme," it feels less like help and more like blame - as if the problem is their attitude, not the architecture around them.

The mental-health crisis is not a youth crisis - it's a system crisis

Spend time with young people and you'll see it.

The quiet panic before opening a bank app. The dread of another rejection email. The feeling of being told "you can be anything" while knowing you can barely afford to be *something*.

The anxiety that comes from trying to meet expectations that no longer match reality. The depression that comes from believing you've failed when you've done everything you were told to do. The hopelessness that comes from watching adults insist the system works when your lived experience tells you it doesn't.

Young people aren't fragile. They're perceptive.

They're simply the first generation to grow up entirely inside a system that has already stopped working - and the only generation being told it's their fault.

So what do we do?

First, we stop pretending the old model can be patched. We stop pretending that more qualifications will fix a job market that's disappearing, or that more training will fix an economy that cannot absorb the people it already has.

Most of all, we stop pretending that young people are the problem. They're not. They never were.

If the old model can't be patched, then we need a new one - not a slogan, not a scheme, but a framework that values people for what they can contribute, not for how well they fit a broken design.

A framework where experiential learners thrive, practical learners thrive, relational learners thrive, environmentally pressured learners are supported, and academically strong learners still have pathways. A framework where dignity is guaranteed, contribution is recognised, community is rebuilt, and opportunity is real.

A framework where young people aren't blamed for structural collapse - they're empowered to help rebuild what comes next.

That's the promise of contribution culture. That's the promise of a system built around capability, dignity, locality, and community. That's the promise of LEGS - not as ideology, but as architecture.

Young people haven't failed. The system has failed them. And the sooner we stop pretending otherwise, the sooner we can start building something that finally works - for them, and for all of us.

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