

Civil society approaches to tackling youth unemployment: a sub-state analysis of the UK

UK unemployment has [risen](#) to its highest in two years this month, from 3.9% in March to 4.1% in September. Young people aged 16-24 have been hit hardest, and July 2020 saw a 122% [increase](#) in young people claiming unemployment related benefits, that's 241,700 more young people since March 2020. To date, one-third of 18-24-year olds (excluding students) are unemployed or furloughed as a result of Covid-19, compared to one in six of 25-40-year olds. To add to this unease, 35% 18-24-year olds are now earning less than they did before March 2020, compared to 23% of 25-49-year olds. Currently youth unemployment in the UK stands at 12.7%. Here, you will see small but significant intra-country differences in response to this crisis.

The Civil Society response to this youth unemployment crisis has been well publicised. Umbrella organisations across the UK – such as [Youth Employment UK](#), [YouthLink Scotland](#), [Young Scot](#), the [Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services](#), the [Ethnic Youth Support Team for Wales](#) and [Youth Action Northern Ireland](#), to give just a few examples – are leading on youth-centred policy responses, engagement sessions and offering employability resources for young people. Other organisations continue to firefight on the ground by providing practical support such as [laptops](#) for young people, assistance with benefit claims, housing, mental health and support for a host of other youth unemployment issues arising and compounded by the Covid pandemic.

In the [previous blog](#) I showed some variation in size and geographical classification between civil society organisations working in youth unemployment in the four nations of the UK. Here you will see the different emphasis the same organisations put their work and support in the context of Covid-19. To frame the findings I have drawn on a study by Hobbins, Eriksson, and Bacia (2014) looking at [civil society strategies](#) under different welfare regimes across Western Europe. As I mentioned in the previous blog, no other study has applied these frameworks to the UK's unique devolved arrangements. Addressing this knowledge-gap is the purpose of my two and a half year, ESRC funded research [project](#).

Hobbins, Eriksson, and Bacia's study finds that civil society organisations in countries with more social democratic welfare regimes, mainly the Nordic countries (Sweden in the study), frame unemployment as a societal or structural problem, while liberal welfare regimes (Poland in the study), tend to focus on the individual and what they can do to increase their 'employability'. In policy terms, Corporatist welfare regimes (Germany and Italy in the study) also shy away from framing employment as an individual problem, but many civil society organisations in these countries have taken on advocacy and lobbying roles to defend social rights against a new policy emphasis on active labour markets and flexicurity (which means combining labour market flexibility with security for workers); putting them somewhat in transition.

The UK is described as a liberal welfare regime in most international [studies](#); this makes it akin to the Polish model with its individualised approach to addressing (youth) unemployment as an individual problem, and therefore, ultimately, the individual's responsibility. This is coupled with minimal (and contracting) welfare systems, an emphasis on flexible labour markets and social mobility, and less emphasis on protection. However, each country of the UK has a different government with a different political ideology: the Conservative party ruling over the

UK but with certain powers only over England; the SNP in Scotland; Welsh Labour in Wales; and the DUP, Sinn Fein, SDLP and the Alliance party power share in Northern Ireland. Political differences between the four countries is reflected in key policy documents on youth unemployment which I will analyse for the next blog¹. Here, however, I will show varying approaches taken by civil society organisations within these four different policy contexts.

Using Hobbins, Eriksson, and Bacia’s study and a [methodology](#) developed by Chaney and Wincott (2013), I have analysed UK civil society organisation’s objectives as set out in their entries in two key databases. Deductive coding of these entries allowed the following organisational distinctions in their approaches to youth unemployment to be identified:

| CSO APPROACH | DESCRIPTION |
|--------------------------------|--|
| (1a) Structural view of YU | youth unemployment as one part of a bigger problem (e.g. poverty), government takes responsibility |
| (1b) Individualised view of YU | youth unemployment as an individual problem, individual takes responsibility. |
| (2a) Policy-orientated | a focus on advocacy, lobbying, co-working with government |
| (2b) Service-orientated | a focus on delivering services like training and mentoring |

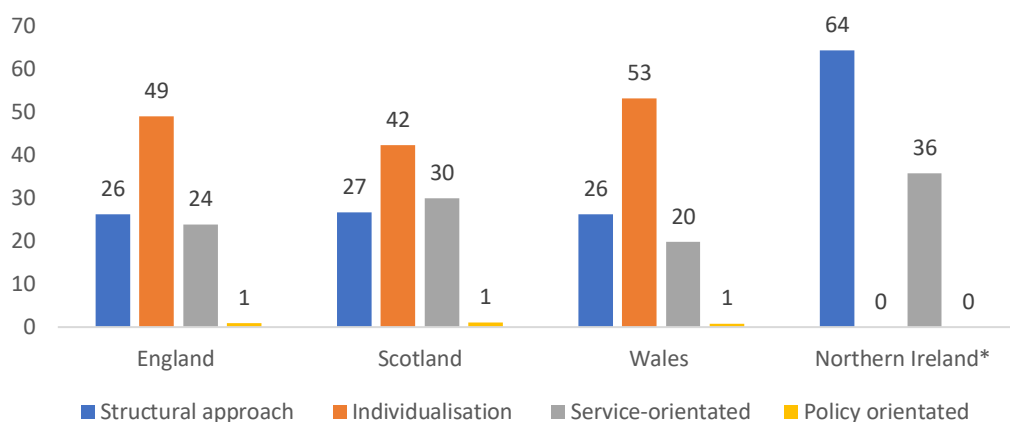
As noted, I have derived these distinctions using descriptive signifiers representing civil society approaches to working with young people, these signifiers have been analysed within each databased using content analysis. I have categorised the different approaches into these four distinctions. The data comes from two sources, identified in partnership with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations ([NCVO](#)):

- (1) Charity Commission Database (all registered charities working in the field of youth unemployment across the UK)
- (2) 360 Degree Funding GrantNav (detailing all civil society organisations funded to carry out activities in the field of youth unemployment).

Findings from the two databases are presented separately because they represent different organisational approaches: Civil society organisations in the Charity Commission database have youth unemployment as part of their organisational remit, while those in the 360 Degree database have been funded to carry out work onto address youth unemployment even though it might not be their main type of work. Both are important, but for different reasons - as we’ll see.

¹ Policy documents will include: the Youth Contract and Plan for Jobs in England; Developing the Youth Workforce and Scottish Youth Guarantee; Jobs Growth Wales and the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework; and Steps to Success in Northern Ireland.

Table 1: CSO 'Objectives' in Charity Commission Database (%)



Number of CSOs =E:2968, S:3248, W: 128, NI: 3460

Table 1 shows the results from the Charity Commission database analysis. Charity objectives emphasising a structural view of youth unemployment (so viewing it as part of a bigger problem like poverty and inequality) include words like ‘citizenship’, ‘empowerment’, ‘poverty’, ‘equality’, ‘justice’ ‘deprivation’ and ‘diversity’. Northern Ireland has by far the highest proportion of civil society organisations emphasising this view with 64% of analysed objectives indicating a structural, or more holistic approach. The other three countries show very similar levels of this view - with 26% in England and Wales respectively and 27% in Scotland.

Two things to note at this point, firstly, that Northern Ireland Charity Commission ‘objectives’ are entered differently to England, Scotland and Wales. The Northern Ireland objectives include generic statements such as ‘The advancement of education, citizenship and training’ which are repeated for each charity; rather than the bespoke statements made by charities in the other three countries where each statement is different. Secondly, under the heading ‘what the charity does’ instead of ‘objectives’ and with a much more generic wording for each; secondly, the high proportion of structural emphasis in the province is predominantly based on use of the word ‘citizenship’ in the CSO descriptions. For the other three countries, signifiers of structural approaches are distributed evenly across the board. This is in striking contrast to Northern Ireland.

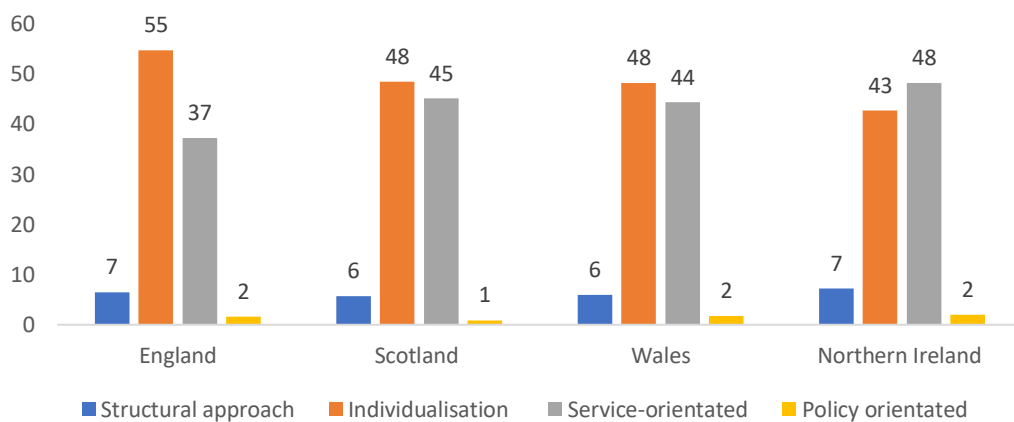
Next, Charity objectives emphasising an individualised view of youth unemployment (in other words, the problem is the individual being out of work) are highest for Wales (53%), then England (49%) and then Scotland (42%). This includes use of words like ‘employment’, ‘employability’, ‘skills’, ‘training’, ‘career’ and ‘internships’. The most common signifier for all three countries is the word ‘training’. In terms of significant variation in civil society approaches between the four nations, the pattern is the same for all – individualisation of the problem is the most common approach – but the small variations are not insignificant, particularly between Wales and Scotland, where Welsh Labour and SNP governments are emphasising their policy differences from England as more social democratic and therefore more likely to take a structural view. This is more evident in the Scottish results than the Welsh. The lack of individual emphasis from civil society organisations in Northern Ireland is

something that needs further investigation through more in-depth content analysis and fieldwork interviews (planned for Autumn 2020).

Finally, and strikingly, policy-orientated approaches with civil society organisations are very poorly represented in all four countries. Given the liberal welfare regime in the UK, this is both surprising and expected depending on the literature you read. Several studies argue that more social democratic welfare regimes can be the product of a strong, policy orientated civil society (for example, see the literature on Sweden and Quebec) – here the argument runs that CSOs (for example) which in turn thrive in such environments and, through policy engagement, seek hold government to account. Other [studies](#) argue that poor conditions amongst workers can lead to a strong reaction from civil society, which, in turn creates a more policy orientated approach. However, when considering these different possible explanations for lack of policy orientated approaches, organisational size is a further important factor to take into account. A large politically orientated civil society organisation advocating on behalf of other organisations as well as young people, such as Youth Employment UK, would only be counted once in this analysis despite its reach and influence going far beyond and encompassing many smaller CSOs. This is a key issue to explore further through fieldwork.

Moving on to the 360 Degree database showing civil society organisations (CSOs) funded to carry out youth unemployment activity; even though that may not be their main remit.

Table 2: CSO Project 'Description' in 360 Degree Funding (%)



Number of CSOs = E:6385, S:939, W:306, NI:385

Table 2 shows a much lower level of signifiers emphasising a structural view of youth unemployment (so a focus on unemployment in the context of structural issues like poverty and social inequality) and a much higher emphasis on individual view of youth unemployment in all four countries. Of note, and in-line with the different policy approaches, civil society organisations in England put the strongest emphasis on the individual and employability, followed by Scotland and Wales then Northern Ireland. This is a key finding and is significant because it underlines the centrality of political-economy analysis to understanding the divergent civil society approaches to tackling youth unemployment in sub-state welfare regimes in (quasi-) federal and union states – like the UK. Table 2 also provides a more comparable picture of Northern Ireland uninhibited by the differences in database format – thereby adding to the picture of Northern Ireland civil society organisations as offering a

slightly more holistic approach to youth unemployment than the other three countries. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the database shows organisations with project funding, there is a high emphasis on projects to deliver services over policy activity.

There are a number of ways to interpret these results, but here are two. First, despite small variations, patterns for civil society objectives and projects around youth unemployment are similar in all four countries and broadly reflect a liberal welfare regime: individualised approaches to employment focusing on skills and training and a service-orientated approach. This could lead us to conclude that devolution has not had a significant impact on civil society working in the field of youth unemployment; despite the more social democratic policy rhetoric coming from the devolved territories. However, this interpretation is questionable based on both (1) research and (2) method. (1) [Research](#) by Hazenberg et al carried out in 2014 shows social enterprises working within different ecosystems in England and Scotland which have developed over the last 50 years through their different socio-cultural and political history. In Scotland funding tends to be grant or community finance while in England it is based on repayable investment. This has resulted in more community enterprises working in Scotland and more social businesses in England. These findings contradict the findings presented here and we can use (2) method to partially explain why. Firstly, the method used here gives equal weight to every civil society organisation working in youth unemployment across the UK, meaning that large, policy-orientated organisation acting as umbrellas are not given full credit for their influence over employment policy; and the findings could underplay the intra-country differences between policy and service orientated approaches. Second, the method used here allows us to gain a UK-wide understanding of the shape, size and broad approach of thousands of civil society organisations and to compare them, but it does not go beyond the Charity blurb towards working principles and organisational culture. It is an indicator and a starting point, but not a balanced understanding. For this reason, the findings presented here are only one piece of the puzzle. Finally, the data does show small differences in policy approaches by civil society organisations, with England putting the strongest emphasis on the individual and employability, followed by Scotland and Wales then Northern Ireland. This key finding makes further investigation into divergent civil society approaches to tackling youth unemployment in sub-state welfare regimes - like the UK – valuable learning opportunities.

With youth unemployment set to rise as the end of the government furlough scheme comes closer, along with in-work poverty, precarity, job-insecurity and flexible working causing mental health issues, housing problems and long-term scarring effects amongst young people; based on the data presented here, a more holistic approach to addressing youth unemployment is worth considering. An approach going beyond employability and towards confidence-building and empowerment would, arguably offer a more appropriate response to the current youth unemployment crisis than those framed in terms of narrowly defined macro-economic interventions by the state and transfer payments via social security.

In the next and final blog of this three part-series, links between these findings and the devolved policy regimes in the field of youth unemployment and civil society are examined. I will present findings from analysis of key policy documents relating to young unemployment in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland framed by a number of studies categorising [youth policy](#), [youth welfare citizenship](#) and [youth unemployment regimes](#). An interesting aspect to be explored in this future discussion will be the issue of ‘directionality’ in civil society responses to youth unemployment. For example, is the greater emphasis on individualisation in tackling youth unemployment identified here in relation to English CSOs an endorsement or rejection of neo-liberal Conservative policies at Westminster? Likewise, what does the dearth of policy-

oriented responses in Wales and Scotland tells us about the health and robustness of civil society in those nations and the realisation of a vaunted new democracy based on civil society engagement in public policy promised in the pro-devolution of the 1990s (not to mention Welsh and Scottish governments' policy emphasis on generativity and young peoples' rights)? This exploration will be possible with the interview data I will be collecting from CSOs and policy representatives during this Autumn.

For more information on this project 'Youth unemployment and civil society under devolution: a comparative analysis of sub-state welfare regimes' please email pearces11@cardiff.ac.uk or visit the website: <https://wiserd.ac.uk/research/research-projects/youth-unemployment-and-civil-society-under-devolution-comparative>