Reviewer's report

Title: Should we ‘hug a hoodie’? Protocol for a systematic review and meta-analysis of interventions with young people not in employment, education, or training (so-called NEETs).

Version: 1 Date: 28 May 2014

Reviewer: Kitty Stewart

Reviewer's report:

This is a very important and topical subject. Bringing together the results of experimental studies that have examined interventions for this group of young people should prove a valuable exercise. The protocol is clear and well-written. The authors have carefully considered questions of quality control and their approach seems sensible, in terms of both the narrowing of results on the basis of method (experimental approaches only, with a control group, though this need not be randomized), and the assessment of quality within included studies.

The way in which results will be synthesized is left fairly open and this also seems reasonable given uncertainty about the studies that will be identified.

My one major concern is that no attention has been given to the fact that interventions may take place against very different backgrounds and contexts that are likely to influence or mediate their impact. This will place limitations on the possibility of generalizing more broadly and may make any attempt at meta-analysis (rather than narrative review) misplaced. In my view, the importance of the specific context would be a factor worthy of careful consideration even if all studies were going to be from the UK, but it is even more relevant given that the review covers the whole world with no exclusion on study country. The protocol talks about different components of the interventions themselves, and about different target groups (such as offenders), and about heterogeneity of outcomes, but not at all about these broader contextual issues.

No search terms have been provided, so I assume these are under development and will be published with the paper.

Major Compulsory Revisions

(1) As highlighted above, I would like to see more consideration of the issue of context. The success or failure of a particular intervention will surely depend on the environment in which it is applied. A training programme may work to reduce non-employment against a background of high employment demand but not in a depressed area. A media campaign may work well in one cultural context but not in another. Counselling support may be right for teenagers in a particular time and place but far from helpful for others. What works in Namibia may not work in Paris and what works in London may not work in Merthyr Tydfil. I think this poses quite a challenge for the review and I think the protocol needs to address it.
Minor Essential Revisions

(2) In footnote DCFS presumably should be DCSF (the references is the Department for Children, Schools and Families), not Children, Families and Society. It would also be helpful to have more detail here if possible (see comment below).

Discretionary Revisions

(3) On page 5, middle paragraph, with reference to the “widely-cited” study in the North of England: this is (I understand from the references) an untitled study from the DCSF, which has been cited in the TES. I’d like a bit more information here given that this is such a striking statistic – based on what data and how robust is the calculation. It seems odd that the report is untitled. And can we call it widely cited if the main citation is the TES?

(4) Secondly, I found the last paragraph on page 5 a little confusing in relation to the direction of causation between disengagement and poor mental health. Of course causation can run both ways, and I think the authors are saying this, but they might want to revisit and make the phrasing clearer.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.