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Careers advice in schools needs to be modernised, say Northern Ireland's young people

New research from think tank Pivotal found that local young people want to know more about changing trends in the job market, and to be given the chance to develop useful skills like communication and critical thinking – and parents, teachers and employers all agree.

Northern Ireland's schools need to modernise their curriculums and careers advice to reflect today's rapidly-changing job market, according to local young people.

Classroom time is too focused on coaching pupils to pass exams rather than on the broader education and development of children – including the sort of skills that will help employability.

New research from Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland, found that less than a third of local young people feel schools help them develop problem solving, communication, leadership and critical thinking. Only 25% of children and 29% of parents feel that young people are learning the skills they need to succeed in the world of work.

Published today [Tuesday, September 28], *Transforming the 14-19 education and skills system in Northern Ireland - youth voices and solutions* found that young people want careers advice to be both brought up to date and enhanced – while skills development should be woven into the curriculums of different subjects. According to Pivotal's research, 69% young people have little to no knowledge of changing trends in the labour market – and only 30% of careers teachers feel they have enough time in their role to research and provide guidance about those changing trends.

The paper also found that vocational qualifications and Further Education Colleges are still sometimes seen as second-class options for young people, particularly by parents.

The Executive is currently drawing up plans for a new strategy for education and skills for young people aged 14-19 years old, set to be announced in the coming months. Pivotal hopes that the findings from this research with young people will help inform the Executive's plans for the transformation of the current system. Pivotal also spoke to parents, teachers, youth practitioners and employers. Many of the concerns raised by young people were echoed by those other groups.

There was also a lot of agreement on solutions, such as better promotion of vocational options, and more integration between employers and all levels of the education system – together with more ambitious and modernised careers support.

Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: "This report gives a voice to local young people, and provides a platform for them to explain how careers advice and skills development in schools could be improved, based on their lived experiences of the system as it currently stands.

"Schools should not just be about coaching children to pass exams, but about the broader development of young people. Part of that is preparing them for future training, work and life through developing a range of

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transferable skills. Careers advice needs to be innovative, responsive and accessible. And the status of vocational options must be elevated, to reflect the realities of employment.

“The voices of these young people should be heeded – especially given that their suggestions are generally supported by parents, teachers, youth practitioners and employers.

“We know that the Northern Ireland Executive is planning to publish a new strategy for education and training for 14-19 year olds within the next few months. We hope that the views and experiences of young people in this report will influence the decisions made about how things need to change.”

Pivotal’s research highlighted three strategic changes that need to take place to modernise the education system’s approach to employability:

- Employability and skills training require greater emphasis throughout the curriculum to prepare young people for the future workforce
- Careers advice should be innovative, responsive and accessible to young people and parents/carers
- The status of vocational education must be elevated through effective working across education providers

In carrying out their research, Pivotal approached every post-primary school in Northern Ireland, considered survey responses from more than 250 young people, carried out ten focus groups, and also gathered views from more than 120 parents, teachers, employers and youth workers. Five different themes emerged from these discussions:

1. Developing employability and life skills

Northern Ireland’s young people think schools are heavily focused on maximising exam grades, such as by teaching pupils exam technique, and that this comes at the expense of broader personal development. Less than a third of local young people (31%) say they develop skills such as problem solving, communication, leadership and critical thinking in school.

Only 25% young people and 29% of parents feel that young people were currently learning the skills they needed for future study and employment.

One young person reported, *“I think in school we’re not taught critical thinking as much. We’re taught ‘this is your exam technique, this is what you need to write for that question to get marks.’ It’s not wider thinking, it’s just what you need to do – learn it off so you can get your marks.”*

Young people say they want:

- More engaging employability and careers advice
- The chance to learn useful life skills such as budgeting and applying for a mortgage
- Lessons about the skills and values required across different industry sectors
- Work experience opportunities to be more meaningful
- Opportunities to develop broader skills like critical thinking, communication and leadership while at school

Other groups also proposed solutions:

Parents agreed with young people that broader skills and knowledge of job opportunities need more focus, and also asked for work to improve and maintain wellbeing – such as by developing resilience.

Teachers want careers advice to be prioritised, want principals and management to recognise that wider skills should be developed across the curriculum, and want stronger links between education and industry to boost work-based learning opportunities.

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2. Experience of careers guidance and advice

Only 20% of young people feel the careers advice they receive is helpful, compared with 25% who say it is no help at all (with the remaining 55% saying it is “somewhat” helpful). Almost four in five (79%) say that careers guidance could be improved.

55% of young people felt that work-based learning experiences were the most helpful in shaping their future choices.

Both young people and parents felt that careers guidance should be more ambitious and up-to-date, covering areas of growth and innovation in the labour market.

Young people say they want:

- Accessible and continual interaction with careers advisors, instead of a one-off guidance interview
- More opportunities for work-based learning, including workplace visits, careers talks from employers, careers events and work experience
- Work experience to be more varied and to take place earlier than Year 13

Parents made similar points to the young people, while also calling for tailored careers advice aimed at those with special educational needs (SEN), and for schools to provide more information about self-employment and entrepreneurship.

Teachers want more consistent standards of careers guidance across different schools and for schools to put more resources into careers advice.

Employers want increased involvement in schools or with community outreach, to engage young people with different industry sectors.

3. Understanding of career pathways and the labour market

Over two thirds (69%) of young people claimed to have little to no knowledge of trends in the labour market. Only 30% of careers teachers felt they had enough time in their role to research and provide guidance about the labour market.

One employer who spoke with Pivotal said it was unrealistic for careers teachers to stay up-to-date with a rapidly changing job market, saying: *“How can you expect one person in a school to know the vast array of pathways that are out there in Northern Ireland and relay that to so many different levels of students? It's not feasible and it's something that needs to be changed.”*

Young people want:

- Clearer guidance about areas of growth and decline in the labour market
- Opportunities to learn about a greater number of career pathways and their outcomes

Parents want improved communications with schools, more streamlined information about post-16 pathways (especially alternatives to A-Levels and University), and education on how to support their children.

Teachers want access to a centralised careers platform with simplified information about pathways and outcomes for young people, and greater use of the NI Skills Barometer within schools.

Employers would like to see ‘train the trainer’ initiatives where industry experts train teachers and community leaders about their sectors so they can in turn inform young people.

4. Attitudes toward Further Education and vocational pathways

Despite the importance of Further Education (FE) colleges to the future of Northern Ireland’s economy and society, FE is often viewed as a lower-status pathway than A levels and university.

Careers teachers noted that this A-Level fixation and resulting stigma about FE colleges was still particularly evident among parents. One careers teachers told Pivotal, *“There always seems to be an adverse reaction from parents to anything that's not A-Level related.”*

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Young people want:

- Opportunities to hear directly from professionals who have taken this route to employment
- More opportunities to learn about apprenticeships, and an increased discussion about alternative pathways (FE, apprenticeships) while in school

Parents say they want more research to be done to provide outcomes data on young people in FE and in apprenticeships. **Employers** also said they wanted this, as well as stronger alliances between FE and Higher Education institutions, and for FE to be given its rightful place in educational planning and policy-making.

Teachers said that schools should have visits from FE representatives to discuss alternative options with students, that parents should be able to see FE in action (such as through visits to colleges), and the creation of options allowing high-end academic and vocational qualifications to be pursued at the same level.

5. Barriers to engagement in the education and skills system

For information and data in this area, Pivotal focused on youth practitioners who work with disadvantaged young people.

Factors that contribute to educational underachievement, or disengagement from education and the pathway to employment, include difficult social or familial circumstances, including poverty or close experience of drug and alcohol abuse, or prior negative experiences of education.

Experience of the care system is one of the highest risk factors for underachievement - 37% of care-leavers leave school with no qualifications, compared to 0.1% of young people in the general population.

Youth practitioners told Pivotal that young people in care are often overlooked when it comes to discussions and strategizing about education, skills and employability. Similar shortcomings were identified when it comes to young people with experience of the criminal justice system.

Solutions proposed by youth practitioners include:

- Improved teacher training about the complex needs faced by some young people, including SEN, mental health difficulties and challenging behaviour
- More educational support for young people aged over 16, especially those attending college for the first time and those with additional learning needs
- Increased education for employers on recognising alternative qualifications.
- Targeted opportunities for young people in marginalised communities to engage with businesses

ENDS

Notes to editors

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1. Pivotal is an independent think tank launched in September 2019. Pivotal aims to help improve public policy in Northern Ireland.
2. This latest paper is the follow up to *Education, skills and training for young people aged 14-19 years old*, a research paper published in December 2020 that is available [here](#).
3. Pivotal's previous report – *Pivotal Tracker – policy priorities for Northern Ireland September 2021* can be found [here](#).
4. Pivotal's earlier reports – *Retaining and regaining talent in Northern Ireland* can be found [here](#); *New Decade, New Approach – one year on* can be found [here](#); *Education, skills and training for young people aged 14-19* can be found [here](#); *Priorities for recovery – a briefing paper for the Northern Ireland Executive's return from recess* can be found [here](#).

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5. Earlier reports, *Covid-19 in Northern Ireland - Moving out of lockdown* and *Covid-19 in Northern Ireland - A New Economic Vision* can be found [here](#). These reports looked at how Northern Ireland can best recover from Covid-19.
6. Pivotal's first report *Moving Forward – putting Northern Ireland on track for the future* was published in November 2019. Its second report *Good Government in Northern Ireland* was published on 5 March 2020.
7. Pivotal's Board of Trustees provides oversight of its work. They are Peter Sheridan (Chair), Chief Executive of Cooperation Ireland; Lisa Faulkner Byrne, Project Coordinator, EPIC; Richard Good, public policy consultant; Olwen Lyner, Chief Executive, NIACRO; Seamus McAleavey, Chief Executive, NICVA; and Alan Whysall, Honorary Senior Research Associate, Constitution Unit, University College London.
8. A wider Reference Group has helped steer the development of Pivotal and will provide ongoing guidance.
9. Pivotal's Director Ann Watt is a former senior civil servant with 20 years' experience in public policy development and delivery. Most recently Ann was Head of the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland (2014-2019)
10. Pivotal's Research Manager is Dr Ben Harper with over 17 years' experience of completing research.
11. Pivotal has received funding and in-kind support from Belfast Harbour Commissioners, The Community Foundation Northern Ireland, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, NICVA, Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University
12. For further information about Pivotal see pivotalppf.org or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835 .
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