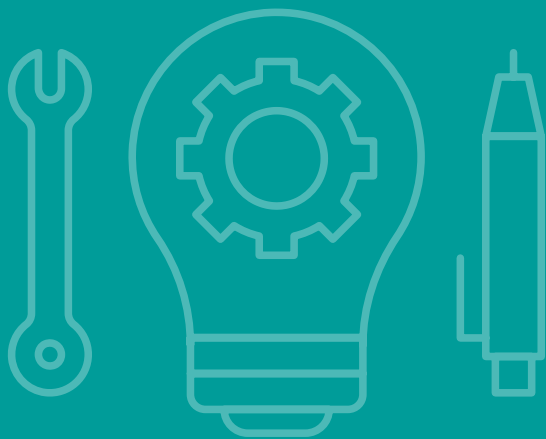


Transforming the 14-19 education and skills system in Northern Ireland – youth voices and solutions



PIVOTAL

PUBLIC POLICY
FORUM NI

Executive summary

Education and skills are important drivers of economic growth. Improving skills is a key element of the Northern Ireland Executive’s plans to revitalise the economy. This report argues that transformational change is needed in the education and skills system for 14-19 year olds, to address skills gaps and to ensure that all young people meet their potential.

A connected approach between government departments, education providers and employers is essential to ensure young people have a clear roadmap of opportunities, so they can make more informed choices and gain the skills needed to succeed in these careers.

This report documents experiences and perceptions of current education and training provision for young people and how the system could be improved.

It includes the views of young people, parents and carers, teachers, employers and other professionals with a role in supporting young people.

Findings from surveys, interviews and focus groups revealed five major themes:

1. **Developing employability and life skills**
2. **Experience of careers guidance and advice**
3. **Understanding of career pathways and the labour market**
4. **Attitudes toward Further Education and vocational pathways**
5. **Barriers to engagement in the education and skills system**

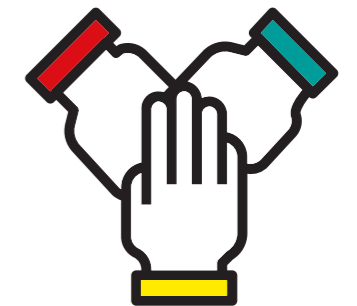
The project makes three major policy recommendations:



1. Employability and skills training should have greater emphasis throughout the curriculum to prepare young people for life after education



2. Careers advice should be innovative, responsive and accessible to young people and parents/carers



3. The status of vocational education must be elevated through effective working across education providers

Introduction

This report aims to explore questions raised in our previous policy review in December 2020, through new research undertaken with people with experience of the education and skills system.

We sought primarily to hear from young people about their current experiences and vision for future change. The report also includes insights from key stakeholders who support young people; parents and carers, teachers, and other professionals working across education, industry and voluntary sectors. Together we wanted to hear views and ideas to help develop evidence-based and user-informed recommendations for change.

Who took part in this research?

Data collection took place between April and July 2021. All post-primary schools and colleges in Northern Ireland were invited to take part in this study.

An online survey was distributed to young people, parents and carers of young people and careers teachers and/or advisors. Survey data was supplemented with follow-up interviews and focus groups. A stakeholder event was held in August 2021, allowing research participants an opportunity to engage with and provide feedback on findings. We also liaised with the representatives from the Department of Education (DE) and Department for the Economy (DfE) throughout the project to feed into the wider government work on skills and education for this age group.

Study participants were separated into four main groups: Young People; Parents & Carers; Careers Teachers; and External Stakeholders (including employers, youth support services and FE representatives.)

Rigorous analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data identified five main themes explored below. For each of them, we present the views of participants on current education and skill provision in Northern Ireland and their proposed solutions for future improvement. The five themes were:

- 1. Developing employability and life skills**
- 2. Experience of careers guidance and advice**
- 3. Understanding of career pathways and the labour market**
- 4. Attitudes toward Further Education and vocational pathways**
- 5. Barriers to engagement in the education and skills system**



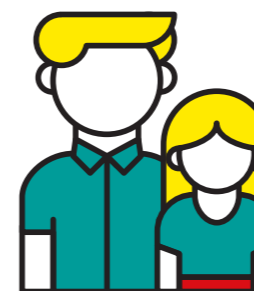
Young people

252 Survey responses
64% Female
32% Male
2% Non-binary
1% Prefer not to say



Young people focus groups

11 Focus groups
78 Young people



Parents and carers

63 Survey responses
6 Interviews



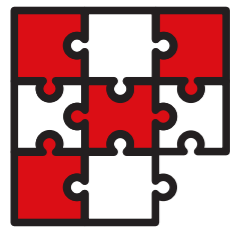
Careers teachers

46 Survey responses
10 Interviews

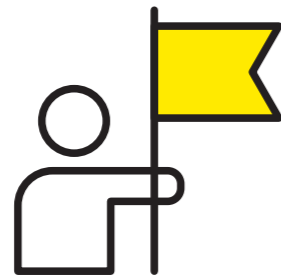
THEME ONE

Developing employability and life skills

Life skills include:



Problem solving



Leadership



Time management

Although employability and life skills are incorporated into the Northern Ireland curriculum, concerns have been raised both by CCEA and the OECD that the focus on grade attainment in examinations at Key Stage 4 may undermine wider skills development. In the current study, participants raised similar concerns.

How are young people developing employability skills?

Graphic 1 shows that the majority of young people referenced their family and part-time employment as the main sources of gaining experience in developing employability skills such as problem-solving, communication, leadership and critical thinking. Less than a third (31%) of young people claimed to learn these skills in school. Young people noted that the opportunity to develop communication and problem-solving skills in school was often subject-dependent, showing the need for broader skills development to be implemented more uniformly across the curriculum. Only one quarter of young

Young people:

Where are you most likely to learn these skills?

Graphic 1
(Percentages are from 224 participants who answered. Multiple answers were permitted)

49% Family

46% Part-time employment

31% School

28% Youth clubs & out of school activities

27% Friends & classmates

people and 29% of parents felt that young people were currently learning the skills they needed for future study and employment (**Graphic 2**).

There was a consensus among young people that school allowed little space for critical thinking, particularly past Key Stage 3:

“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 person, focus group

Parents were also critical of the over-focus on grade attainment in schools, suggesting it came at the detriment of supporting wider skills development required for employment.

“School has academically provided all the information he needs for his subjects, but not so much in other aspects...I don’t know how schools would even go about developing those other skills.” - Parent, interview

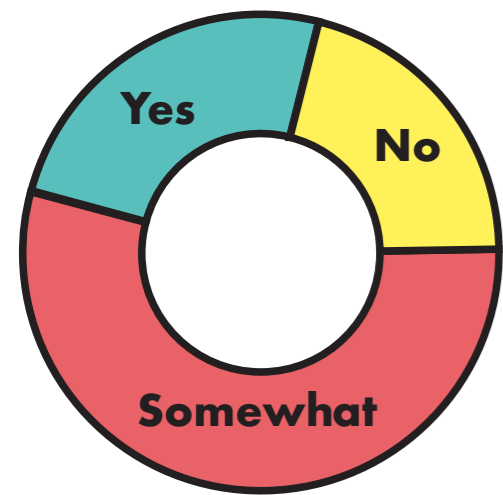
“The GCSE system means that genuinely mordant learning for life and work (in general, not the subject) is undervalued.”

- Parent, survey

THEME ONE DEVELOPING EMPLOYABILITY AND LIFE SKILLS

Young people:

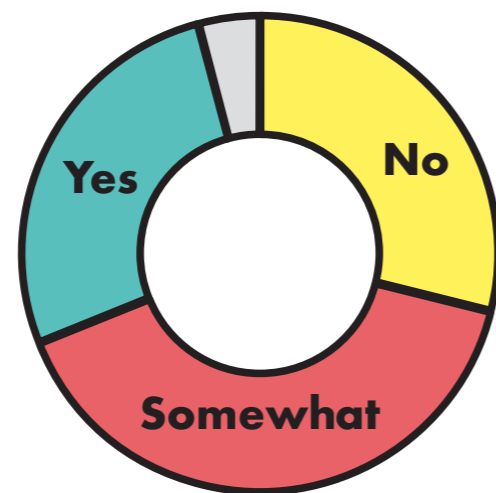
I am learning the skills needed for future employment.



24% Yes, 55% Somewhat, 21% No

Parents:

Education is preparing my child(ren) for the world of work.



29% Yes, 40% Somewhat, 27% No, 4% I don't know

Graphic 2

How could opportunities for skills development be improved?

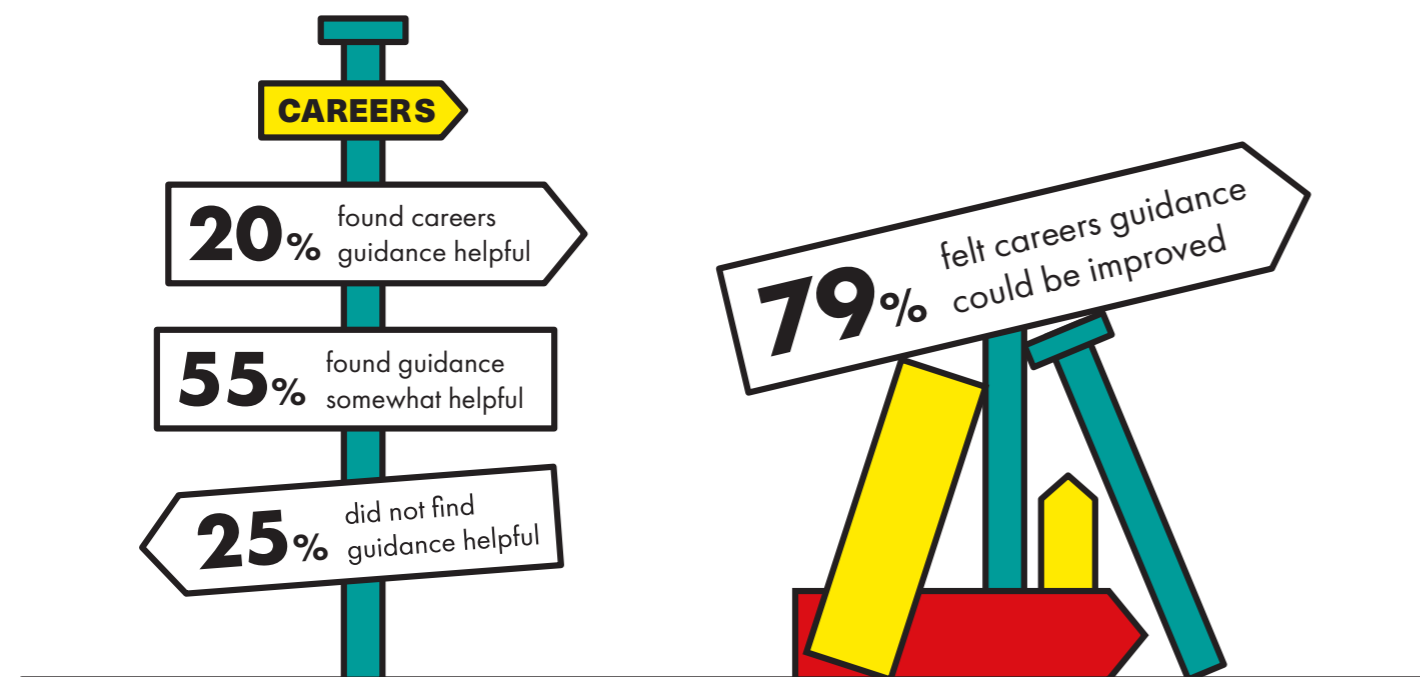
Table 1 summarises the main solutions proposed by stakeholders to enhance opportunities for skills development among young people. They consistently highlighted the need for more opportunities to develop employability skills and basic life skills while at school, to address the current over-focus on academic achievement and for the development of stronger links between education and industry to ensure an understanding of the skills needed across sectors.

Stakeholder group	Proposed solutions
Young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employability and Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) to be more engaging areas of the curriculum. Opportunities to learn useful life skills at school, such as budgeting and applying for a mortgage. Opportunities to learn about the skills and values required across different industry sectors. Meaningful work experience opportunities to develop these skills. Equal opportunities across subjects to develop skills such as communication and teamwork. Opportunities to develop leadership skills while at school.
Parents and carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Broader skills development to be more highly prioritised in curriculum implementation across schools. Assess skills as well as knowledge, for example through group work, debates and presentations. Teach young people basic life skills, including budgeting and financial planning. Equip young people with skills needed for wellbeing such as resilience and coping with stressful situations. Equip young people with sufficient knowledge about the skills needed for the future economy.
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CEIAG to be afforded more priority within the curriculum. Principals and Senior Management within schools must recognise the need for skills development to be intertwined throughout the curriculum. Greater focus on developing leadership skills at school. More varied work experience opportunities for young people to show them the range of transferable skills needed for employment. Stronger links between education and industry to facilitate work-based learning opportunities.
Employers/other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stronger links between education and industry to ensure young people understand skills needed for specific industry sectors. Better joined-up working between schools, colleges and industry with a common goal of equipping young people with the skills needed for employment.

Table 1

THEME TWO

Experience of careers guidance and advice



Graphic 3

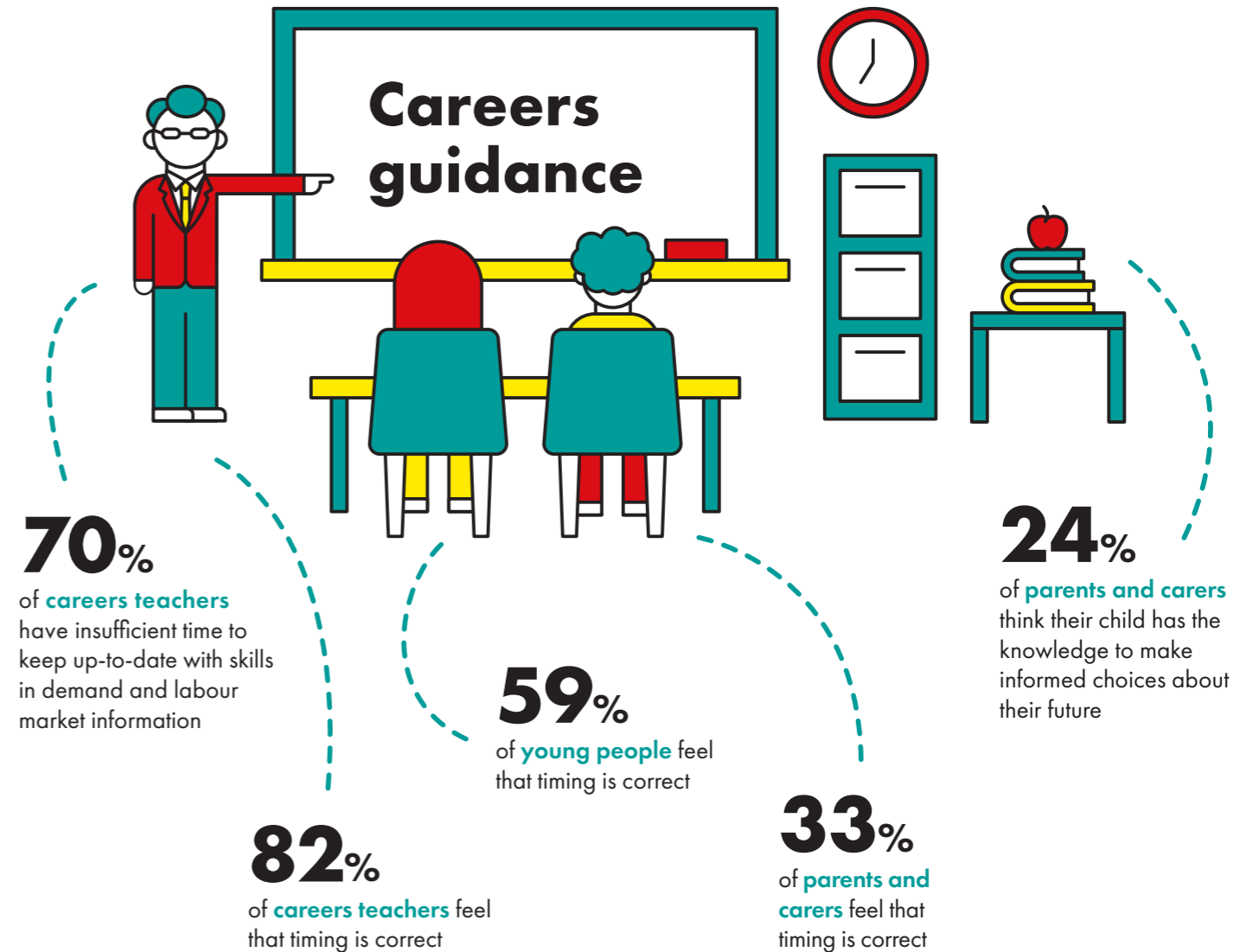
Engaging and timely careers support is crucial to increase young people’s awareness of the labour market, understand the importance of employers’ expectations and help young people to make more informed decisions about their futures.

Effective careers guidance, combined with opportunities for experiential learning in the workplace, can also help to raise the aspirations of young people in Northern Ireland.

How is careers guidance currently perceived?

Graphic 3 demonstrates that young people’s perception of careers guidance is mixed, perhaps indicating an inconsistency in standards of provision across schools. Of those survey respondents who had experienced individual careers guidance (n=123), only 20% found it helpful, while 55% found it somewhat helpful and the remaining 25% did not find it helpful. The majority of respondents (79%) felt that careers guidance could be improved.

Both young people and parents felt that careers guidance should be more ambitious in its nature.



Graphic 4

There remains a focus on traditional career paths such as medicine, law and teaching and a resulting lack of opportunities to learn about areas of growth and innovation in the labour market.

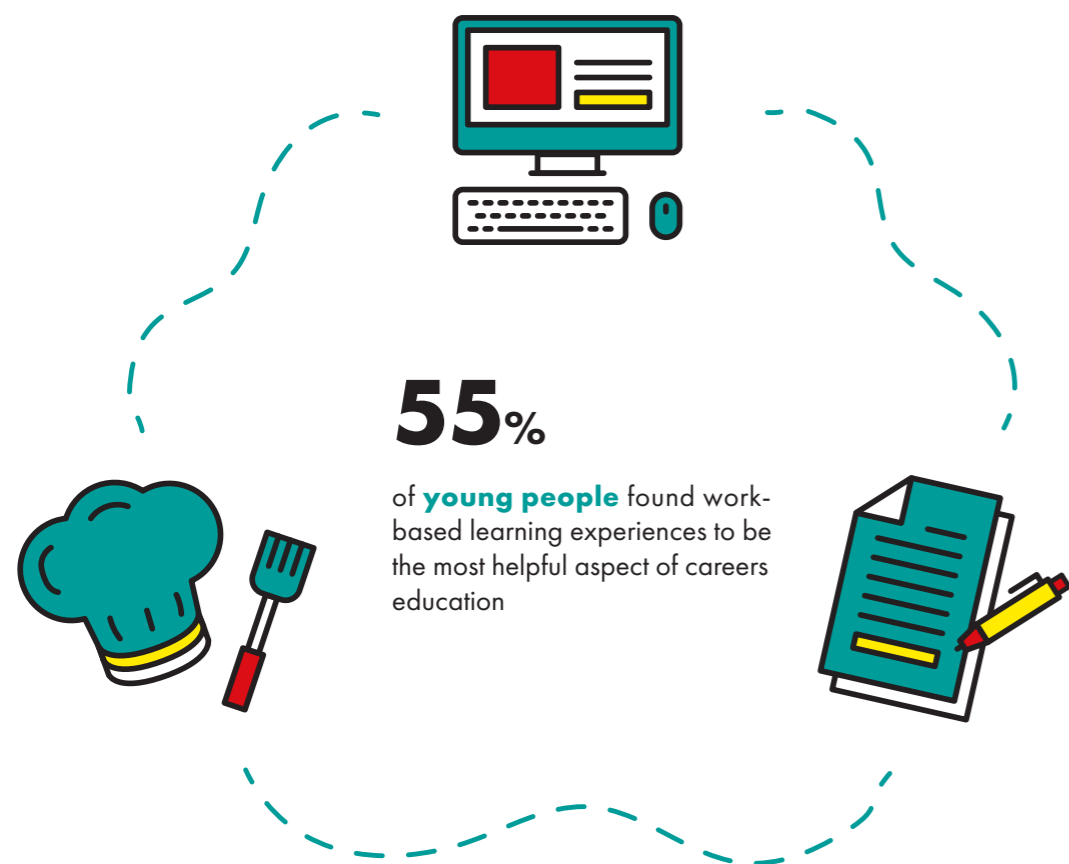
“I would love the school to show them the new jobs in technology...and to stop going back to ‘we will bring in a nurse and we will bring in a teacher...’ Widen out their world and show them that there is loads out there for them to do, make them think outside the box.” - Parent, interview

Young people received an individual careers interview with the Careers Service NI in Year 12, or in some cases both Year 10 and Year 12. Graphic 4 indicates that

whilst 82% of teachers felt the timing of individual guidance to be correct, only 59% of young people and 33% of parents agreed.

While there were mixed opinions on the timing of individual careers guidance, there was a stronger consensus that earlier exposure to the world of work could help better inform pathway choices. Over half (55%) of young people indicated that work-based learning experiences were most helpful in informing their decision-making. Pockets of good practice were revealed in this research (Graphic 4). For example, Science Starz provides STEM outreach to primary schools, helping to ignite an interest in STEM topics and introducing children to the STEM industry at an early age.

THEME TWO EXPERIENCE OF CAREERS GUIDANCE AND ADVICE



Graphic 5

How could careers guidance be developed?

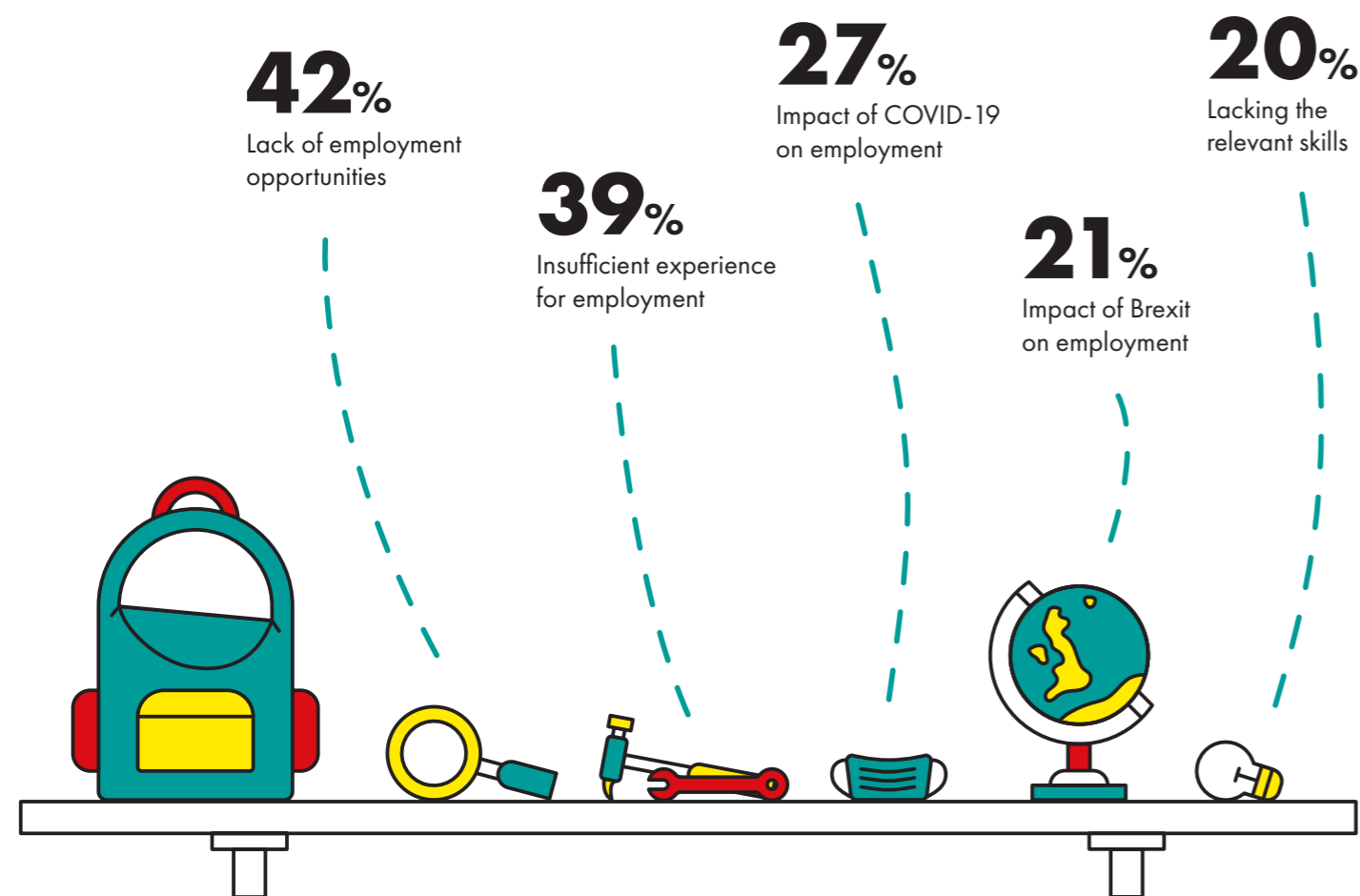
Table 2 shows that stakeholders would like to see earlier exposure to the world of work, numerous and varied work experience opportunities, more consistent standards of guidance across schools and improved guidance for young people with SEN.

Stakeholder group	Proposed solutions
Young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More opportunities to hear directly from graduates, especially those who attended their school. • 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. • Exposure to the world of work at a younger age. • More ambitious careers guidance.
Parents and carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people with SEN to have more relevant, tailored careers guidance and advice. • Guidance to include information about self-employment and entrepreneurship. • More opportunities for young people to engage directly with employers to provide insights into different career routes. • Work experience to take place more than once, and for it to take place earlier than Year 13. • More parental involvement when careers guidance is being offered to young people.
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a more sustainable version of virtual work experience. • More consistent standards of careers guidance across schools. • Professional careers advisors to be located in each school across Northern Ireland. • A dedicated careers department within schools, where careers education and guidance is the teacher's sole responsibility. • Careers guidance to be more aspirational. • Re-examine the EA Work Experience Arrangements to ease the organisation of work experience.
Employers/other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased involvement of employers in community outreach to engage young people with different industry sectors. • Evaluate the barriers to work experience imposed by the EA Work Experience Arrangements, especially to SMEs.

Table 2

THEME THREE

Understanding of career pathways and the labour market



Young people’s concerns about future employment opportunities

Graphic 6

A lack of understanding of labour market information and the range of career pathways available for young people may contribute to reduced engagement in vocational opportunities and reinforce the existing dominance of the Higher Education (HE) route which exists in Northern Ireland. As key influencers in the decision-making process, it is essential that parents/carers and teachers are also well-informed about pathway opportunities.

How informed do stakeholders feel about career pathways and the labour market?

This study affirmed the complexity of information around career pathways in Northern Ireland, and revealed a lack of understanding among all stakeholders about progression pathways, qualification levels and labour market information.

“There’s so much noise out there that it’s almost deafening and it’s hard to see the path view... there’s so many pivots.” - Employer

Over two thirds (69%) of young people claimed to have little to no knowledge of trends in the labour market. One student in Year 14 said they “wouldn’t know where to look” for this kind of information. No young person who took part in the study had heard of the Northern Ireland Skills Barometer, a tool which analyses current and emerging skills gaps and requirements in the economy up to 2028.

Access to this information is perhaps even more pressing in light of the economic uncertainty caused

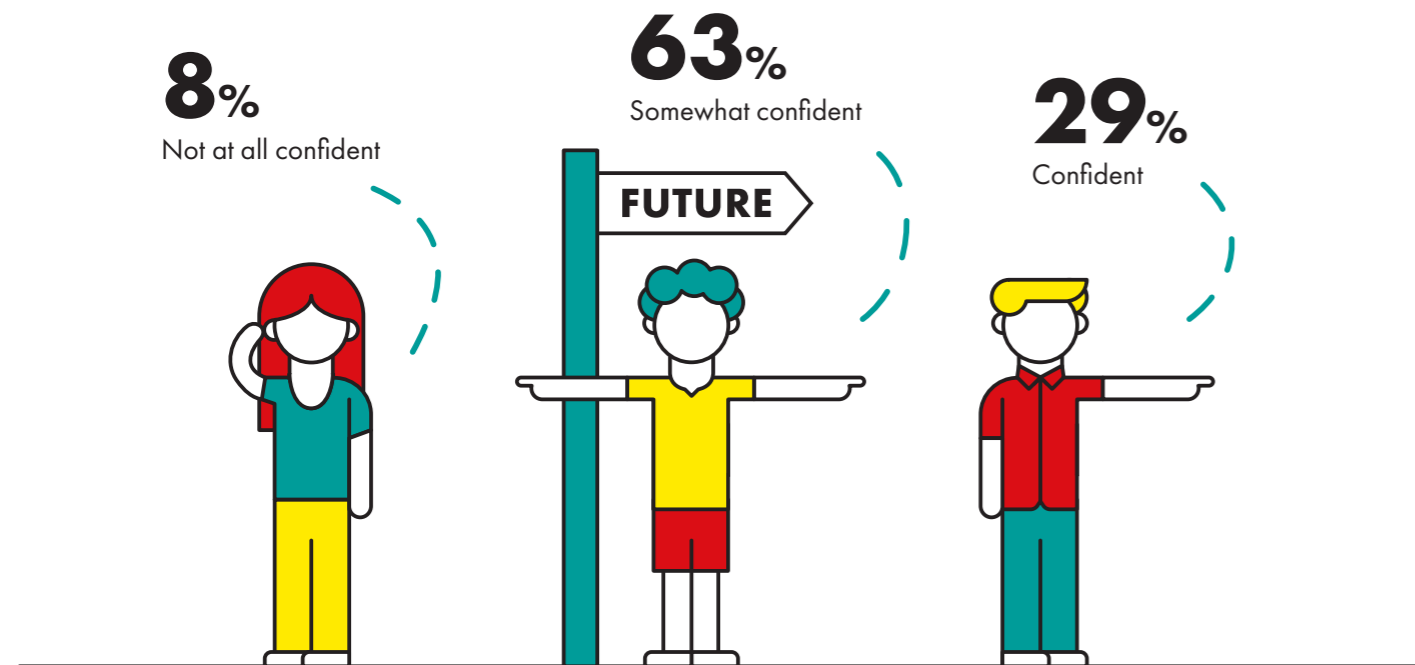
both by Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. 27% of young people in our study were concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on employment opportunities and 21% were concerned about the impact of Brexit (Graphic 6).

Graphic 8 shows the influence parents have on the decisions made by young people. Only 29% of parents said they felt confident in supporting their child(ren) with these decisions, while 63% felt somewhat confident. Only 43% of parents had received guidance on how best to support their child(ren) with decision making.



Graphic 7

THEME THREE UNDERSTANDING OF CAREER PATHWAYS AND THE LABOUR MARKET



Parents: Confidence in advising young people

Graphic 8

“There simply isn’t enough support for parents in any shape or form...There needs to be more joined-up working between home, school, third level and FE together so there is clear communication, so it is a community conversation around the skills deficits and the educational pathways for people.”

- Parent, interview

Only 30% of careers teachers felt they had enough time in their role to research and provide guidance about the labour market.

One employer made the point that it was unrealistic for careers teachers to be up-to-date with the rapidly changing labour market: *“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.”*



25%

of young people said that expectations of family members had the biggest influence on decisions they make about their future

Graphic 9

How could information about labour market opportunities be improved?

Table 3 outlines stakeholder ideas to address the lack of understanding which currently exists around career pathways and the labour market in Northern Ireland. Respondents underlined the need to access clearer information about pathways and aligned outcomes. They put forward the idea of a central online platform which would allow young people, parents, teachers and employers to easily access and engage with this information.

Stakeholder group	Proposed solutions
Young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearer guidance about areas of growth and decline in the labour market. • Opportunities to learn about alternative career pathways and their outcomes. • Easier ways of navigating the complex amounts of information about career pathways, qualifications and employment opportunities.
Parents and carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved communication between schools and parents to help parents better understand pathway options. • Educate parents on how best to support their children with decisions about their future. • Provide more streamlined information about post-16 pathways, especially alternatives to A-Levels and University. • Support parents in navigating the complex information available online related to pathways and outcomes. • Provide young people with reliable information about employment in a post-COVID and post-Brexit world.
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More time and resources for teachers to keep up-to-date with skills in demand and labour market trends. • Access to a centralised careers platform with simplified information about pathways and outcomes for young people. • Increased use of the NI skills barometer across schools.
Employers/other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop ‘train the trainer’ initiatives – have experts in industry train teachers and community leaders about their industry so they can in turn inform young people. • More focus on dispelling myths around certain industries, for example educating people about women working in IT or STEM industries.

Table 3

THEME FOUR

Attitudes toward further education and vocational pathways

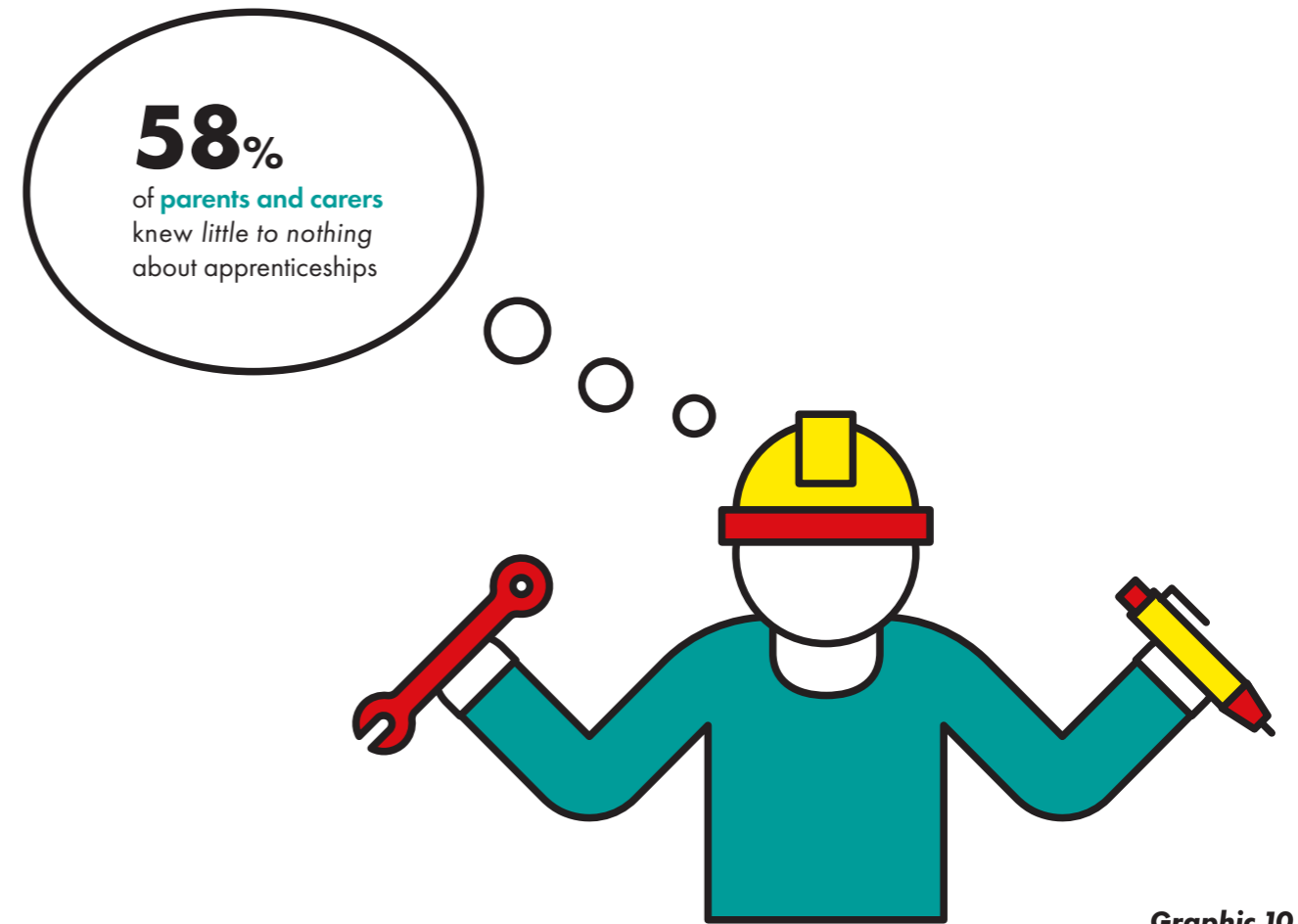
Despite the importance of Further Education (FE) colleges to the future of Northern Ireland’s economy and society, FE is often viewed as a lower-status pathway rather than a valued alternative to school sixth form or HE. This perception and influence towards ‘higher status’ options may prevent young people from pursuing certain careers and contribute to skills shortages and over-education in areas with limited further growth.

What perceptions currently exist about Further Education and vocational pathways?

Findings indicated that traditional mindsets toward vocational education routes in Northern Ireland are changing but it is a slow process. In a context where success is viewed as academic achievement, FE is often seen as a lower-status route or second choice option. The interaction below from a Year 13 focus group underlines the ingrained mindset that one has to attend University in order to be successful:

Researcher: *What are your main reasons for choosing to go to University?*

YP1: *More opportunities – for employment, everything.*



YP2: *I was always told to just stay in education as long as you could cause it would lead to better opportunities, you’d get a better pay cheque and all.*

YP1: *Yeah to be fair, we’re sort of built into that because all of us are in the top class, it’s higher standards. It’s sort of installed into your head.*

Careers teachers noted that this A-Level fixation and resulting stigma about FE colleges was still particularly evident among parents. One careers teachers noted,

“There always seems to be an adverse reaction from parents to anything that’s not A-Level related.”

Parents noted that the lack of available outcomes data about young people pursuing vocational education

added to their apprehension about this route. While some parents spoke highly of the more recently introduced Higher Level Apprenticeships, survey responses showed that 58% of parents/carers knew little to nothing about apprenticeships.

Representatives working in FE described a difference in emphasis of the importance of HE and FE in Northern Ireland. This was seen particularly during decision-making about assessments during the pandemic, where it was felt that HE and post-primary schools were prioritised over FE colleges.

Graphic 10

THEME FOUR ATTITUDES TOWARD FURTHER EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL PATHWAYS

How could these perceptions be improved?

Table 4 shows stakeholder views on how to improve perceptions of FE, including campaigns targeted specifically at parents and stronger alliances with the HE sector in Northern Ireland. Young people would like to feel more informed about vocational pathways and value learning from the experiences of others who have taken this path.

Stakeholder group	Proposed solutions
Young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities to hear directly from professionals who have taken this route to employment. • Increased discussion about alternative pathways in school (ie. more than a one-off assembly on pathway options) • More opportunities to learn about apprenticeships.
Parents and carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More research to be done to provide outcomes data on young people in FE and in apprenticeships.
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All schools should have at least one visit from an FE representative to discuss alternative options with students. • Provide options for high end academic and vocational qualifications at the same level. • Parents should visibly see FE in action e.g. through visits to colleges or discussion with FE teachers. • Harness the influencing power of past pupils to promote FE.
Employers/other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better outcomes data on FE and apprenticeships. • Targeted campaigns at parents which promote the benefits of FE. • Stronger alliances between FE and HE institutions in Northern Ireland. • FE must be prioritised as much as HE in educational planning and policy-making.

Table 4

// Most [parents] are only interested in that traditional route of coming to school to do GCSEs, do A-Levels and go to University. Part of that problem is trying to convince parents that there are other options there, other than just those sort of core traditional pathways.

Careers teacher, interview

// There's still this stigma about regional colleges, that they're a second choice.

Careers advisors, interview

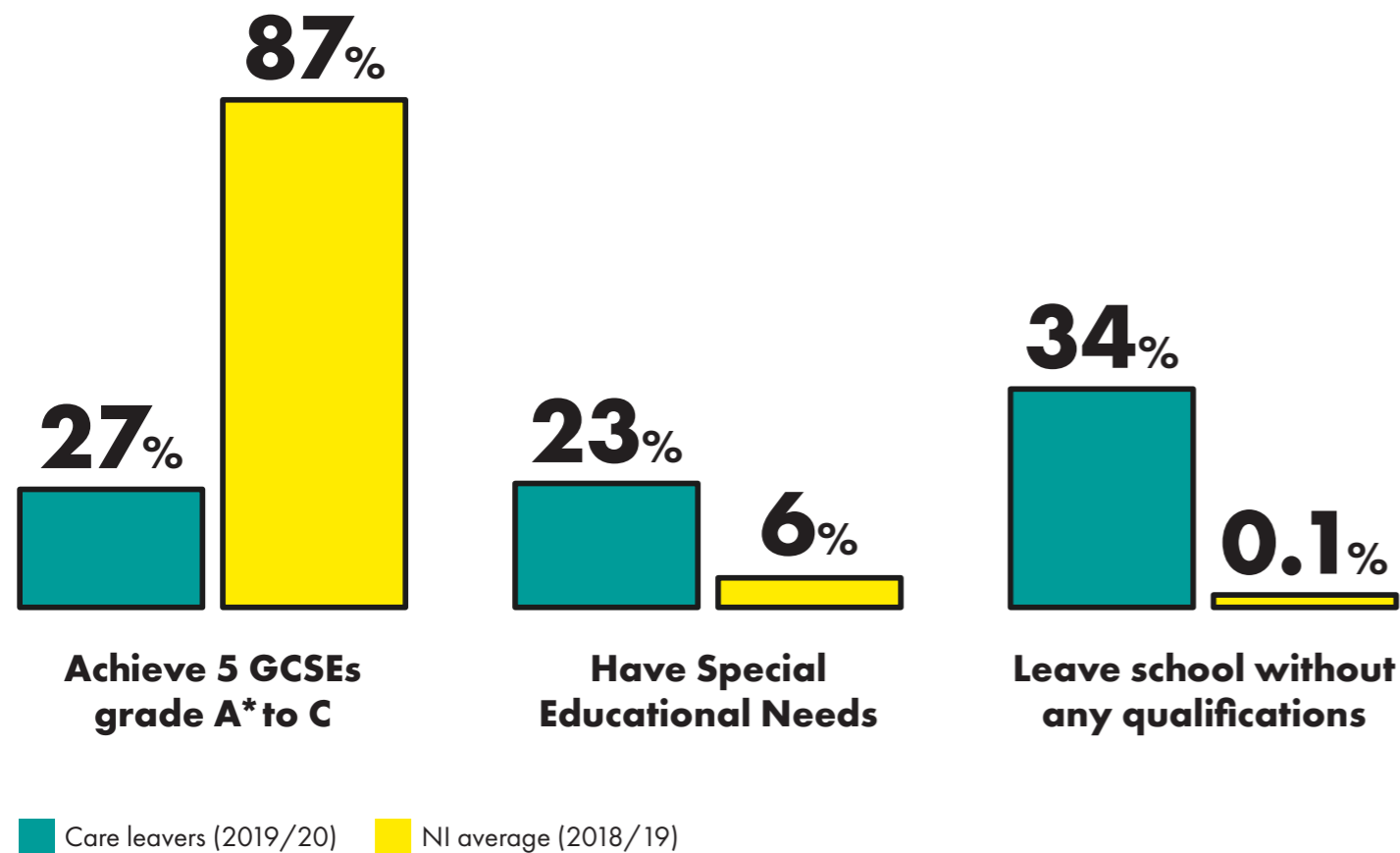
// The only issue I've got, and I guess it might be a time thing, is that there's no hard relevant data on the success of the [apprenticeship] programmes yet... But I certainly think they're a lot closer to the mark.

Parent, interview

THEME FIVE

Barriers to engagement in the education and skills system

Of those leaving care aged 16-19:



Graphic 11 Source: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/statistical-bulletin-72019-year-12-and-year-14-examination-performance-post-primary-schools-northern> & <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/northern-ireland-care-leavers-201920>

There are well-documented reports into educational underachievement in Northern Ireland with clear recommendations for change made in the recent 'Fair Start' review of educational underachievement. We were keen to speak directly with young people facing barriers in education and liaise with professionals working in the voluntary sector who support young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), young people with experience of care and young people with learning disabilities.

What are the existing barriers to inclusion?

Our previous report outlined some of the factors contributing to disengagement with education, including family history of economic inactivity, health and wellbeing, substance misuse, housing difficulties and prior negative experiences of education. Many of these challenges faced by young people have been exacerbated by the pandemic:

“There’s something about this group of young people now even with COVID and with Brexit that they’re going to be more at risk of being left behind and suffer more with mental health, greater risk of homelessness. I think it’s now we need to be acting to support them for beyond their education and employment.”

- Youth practitioner

Practitioners noted the lack of support available for young people past Year 12:

“It seems to be that once you’re beyond school age, that’s it. You’re out in the big bad world on your own. How’s anybody supposed to get to their full potential? That guidance support just snaps when you turn 16. You don’t just automatically stop needing that support.”

- Youth practitioner

One group of young people who must not be overlooked in this discussion are those with experience of care. There is a significant gap between the educational achievement of care leavers and other young people in Northern Ireland.

Graphic 11 notes that 34% of care-leavers leave school with no qualifications, compared to 0.1% of young people in the general population. Practitioners working to support young people in care noted that they are often overlooked in strategies about broader education and skills, and were disappointed at the lack of targeted interventions for this group of young people. They also described a lack of understanding among teachers about the complex challenges faced by young people in care or how to deal with challenging behaviour in school.

There is also a clear lack of capacity in the education and skills system to support increasing numbers of young people with complex special educational needs. Lengthy waiting times for referrals and assessments leads to a domino effect of delayed identification of student needs, lack of individualised support in school and diminished academic performance throughout their school life.

It is also important to note the barriers faced by young people with experience of the youth justice system in Northern Ireland. It is widely recognised that meaningful employment can help to prevent re-offending and yet having a criminal record often

THEME FIVE BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT IN THE EDUCATION AND SKILLS SYSTEM

acts as a barrier to attaining employment. **“When you criminalise a young person you are impacting their education and employment outcomes straight away.”** (Youth practitioner) This is a clear example of the need for cross-departmental liaison (in this case, the Department of Justice and Department for the Economy) to ensure inclusion for all young people in training and employment opportunities.

Stakeholders working in voluntary organisations which support young people on the periphery of the education system noted that their efforts are often hindered by a lack of sustainable funding. In many cases, these organisations are competing for the same funding, which creates competition instead of a collaborative way of working:

“You unfortunately don’t get the option of working together, because we’re all competing for funding. If there was more money or it was looked at differently, maybe it wouldn’t be such an issue and we could work collectively.”

- Youth practitioner

How might barriers to inclusion be overcome?

Stakeholders identified a number of issues which should be prioritised to create a more inclusive education and skills system in Northern Ireland.

Table 5 provides an overview of proposed changes from practitioners who support young people facing these barriers to inclusion. This includes increased training for teachers to work with these young people, a stronger policy focus on supporting overlooked groups of young people and more sustainable funding for voluntary organisations in this area.

Stakeholder group	Proposed solutions
<p>Youth practitioners</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved teacher training about the complex needs faced by some young people, including SEN, mental health and challenging behaviour. • More educational support for young people aged 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 employers. • More sustainable funding for support organisations to avoid competition and instead encourage collaboration to provide more holistic support for young people. • Facilitate youth participation in advocacy work, acknowledging that young people are best placed to articulate their needs to policy makers. • Ensure that legislation around disclosure of criminal records and attitudes of employers towards those with criminal records does not unnecessarily hinder opportunities for young people.

Table 5

Policy recommendations

The following policy recommendations are based on the solutions developed by our stakeholders and existing policy and research evidence.



1. Employability and skills training should have greater emphasis throughout the curriculum to prepare young people for life after education

Whilst the Northern Ireland curriculum aims to enhance the employability of young people, the emphasis on exams from Primary 6 onwards places focus on academic attainment rather than other measures of success such as wellbeing, employability and skills development.

A culture of skills development should be embedded in education from an early stage

Whilst the current education system meets the needs of many, the focus on assessment and attainment leaves limited room to develop wider employability skills. Employability skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, leadership and digital skills are required more than ever as we prepare for jobs of the

future. Automation and advanced technology will lead to a reduction in manualised roles and an increase in managerial roles that require these essential skills. A failure to adequately focus on transferable skills for an ever evolving workforce could lead to increased skills shortages within the Northern Ireland labour market.

The timing of employability and careers education within the curriculum must also be considered. Introducing young people to the world of work at primary level can help to ignite interests and raise aspirations at an early age, allowing more time to reflect on and prepare for a range of possible future pathways.

Better connections between education and employers are essential

Employers who participated in this study wanted to inspire young people to work in their industry but felt under-resourced and under-equipped to do so. Enhancing community outreach programmes within different industry sectors, especially those targeted at young people in marginalised communities, could help to raise aspirations and encourage engagement in education.

Whilst there are various pockets of good practice of employer-school relationships, partnership between education and employers must become essential practice. The promotion of growth sectors could be enhanced through 'train the trainer' initiatives, where employers inform teachers and community leaders about their industry so that they can pass this knowledge to young people.

Young people require access to an inspiring range of work experience placements

Young people would benefit from multiple experiences of work-based learning in a range of

formats across the curriculum to provide them with a taster of options that might better inform future career decision making. At present, the provision of work experience is inconsistent with some young people missing out on the opportunity due to the timing of placements in the curriculum and/or a lack of available options.

Many post-primary schools do not currently have adequate resources to organise individual work experience for all students. The impact of the revised EA legislation on work experience placements may create additional administrative tasks that SMEs are ill-equipped to manage. The introduction of a centrally managed programme of placements could help to alleviate the pressure on both schools and employers to facilitate work experiences and offer students a broader range of work place experiences.



2. Careers advice should be innovative, responsive and accessible to young people and parents/carers

Careers advisors in our study were passionate about supporting young people to make informed choices about their future career pathways. Nevertheless, there was a consistent message of inadequate resources to support young people to develop the best options for

their future. Investment and reconfiguration of careers advice is a policy facilitator for the implementation of the ambitious 10x economy strategy and associated 10x skills consultation. Our research would indicate that it is essential that this commitment results in a

step-change improvement in the careers advice provided for young people.

Professional careers advice should be accessible to young people on a continual basis

Schools have autonomy over their annual allocated budget to invest in careers provision. Schools may also access the Careers Service NI. However, whilst young people can avail of this service outside of school at any time, many do not realise this and only experience a one-time guidance interview, usually in Year 12. Careers guidance is not a discrete event and should not be treated as such. Having a qualified careers advisor embedded within schools (as is the case in FE colleges and universities in Northern Ireland) would help to provide more consistent professional support to students.

Ambitious and innovative careers advice is required to inspire a future ready workforce

Our study highlighted that careers advice can be uninspiring with a focus on traditional careers such as medicine, law and teaching. Young people would benefit from innovative careers advice, pushing beyond traditional careers to areas of innovation, growth and development, for example, entrepreneurship routes and business start-up development. This is particularly important in the context of low innovation rates in the Northern Ireland economy.

Access to a live online portal with innovative options will enhanced young people's decision making

Careers advice is difficult to provide as it involves forecasting future employment trends and market conditions. Our research and others indicates the urgent need for the development of an online platform that can be accessed to demonstrate live labour market trends and areas of growth. This should be a user-friendly platform, easily understood by young people, parents/carers and teachers. It might include short recorded clips to promote growth

industries to increase interests in these areas, for example, advanced manufacturing. Young people are more likely to choose future careers if they fully understand the future role and industry.

Comprehensive measures must be in place for those on the periphery of mainstream education

Too many young people fail to reach their potential in the Northern Ireland education system due to social inequality, poverty, mental health or other challenges. The issue of underachievement has repeatedly been raised in government reviews but there has been a lack of the sustained focus needed to bring about real improvements.

The economic and social costs of early intervention in education to prevent underachievement are well evidenced. It is essential that measures such as additional careers advice, essential skills training, mentoring from peers who have successfully navigated the education system and support to complete non-traditional programmes of study are provided to young people who are failing to meet their potential.

Careers and skills training for young people should involve parents/carers to better reflect the development stage of young people aged 14-19

Whilst young people must be empowered to make their own informed decisions, this age group are at a unique life-stage where they are heavily reliant on trusted adults, often their parent/carer, to support their decision making.

Whilst information evenings and careers events may provide parents with some helpful guidance, more targeted workshops with a peer trained facilitator may increase parents' knowledge of career pathways and increase confidence in supporting the career aspirations of their children. Programmes such as the 'Parents as Career Transition Support' (PACTS) have been shown to be an effective initiative to address this issue in Australia.



3. The status of vocational education must be elevated through effective working across education providers

Education and skills options beyond the traditional GCSE/A-Level routes are poorly understood by key stakeholders. Our study found that the lack of information and clarity of non-traditional routes combined with historical perceptions of colleges as 'techs' made the traditional route more appealing, albeit not always the best option for young people.

FE resources must be better utilised to make best use of specialties in sectors to address labour market demands

Northern Ireland's six FE colleges have a significant breadth of expertise in growth areas such as cyber-security and advanced manufacturing. Unfortunately this expertise is not always understood and valued by young people and their parents/carers, and FE colleges may be under-utilised in Northern Ireland. Whilst programmes such as Assured Skills have made a welcomed investment into re-skilling graduates, further attention is needed to ensure young people make more informed choices before embarking on degree qualifications.

The segregation of post-16 pathways must be addressed to encourage more flexibility between academic and vocational routes

Enrolments on Higher Level Apprenticeships have risen from 324 in 2017/18 (when they were first introduced) to 553 in 2019/20. While it is encouraging to see a rise in paid apprenticeships at Level 4 and above, much work is still to be done in addressing the binary choice between academic and technical routes at lower levels. Lessons can be learned from other

European countries where vocational education is held in higher esteem. For example, the Dual TVET route in Switzerland involves significant work-based learning alongside a portion of school-based vocational education and has been shown to boost incomes and job quality for those who choose this route.

Increased collaboration between education sectors to promote pathway opportunities to young people

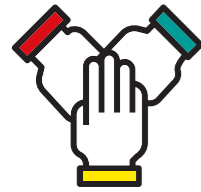
The siloed nature of Northern Ireland's divided education system makes it difficult for genuine collaborative practices to take place across schools and across education sectors. This is directly impacting student opportunities to learn about curriculum pathways, progression routes and the broad-ranging opportunities for skills development. Representatives from local regional colleges must be afforded the opportunity to visit all post-primary schools to inform students of the qualifications and courses they provide, to ensure students are able to make choices best suited to their educational needs and career aspirations.



1. Employability and skills training should have greater emphasis throughout the curriculum to prepare young people for life after education



2. Careers advice should be innovative, responsive and accessible to young people and parents/carers



3. The status of vocational education must be elevated through effective working across education providers

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