

Northern Ireland leaves too many young people unprepared for future jobs. 10 December 2020

Without education and training that develops modern skills and takes account of why some young people do not succeed at school, economic trends show that many young people in Northern Ireland will struggle to find work, according to research from independent think tank Pivotal.

Northern Ireland's education system is leaving many young people with low-level qualifications, but the local jobs market is already saturated with low-skilled workers. Meanwhile, economic forecasts indicate that future jobs will typically demand higher skills.

Without significant change, large numbers of local young people will find themselves competing for a shrinking number of low-skilled, low-paying jobs. At the same time, employers are likely to struggle to recruit people into higher skilled roles.

According to a new report published today by Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland, a transformation and modernisation of skills development and careers advice for young people is needed.

Improved curriculums and training for those aged 14-19 could reduce future economic inactivity and create a more skilled workforce that would allow individuals to gain higher skilled, higher paid jobs. In turn, the Northern Ireland economy will benefit from a higher skilled, more flexible workforce.

Education, skills and training for young people aged 14-19 says that employability programmes have to take better account of why certain young people leave school with few qualifications or none at all, such as difficulties at home, or social pressures that suggest education and training are not valuable.

Schools, further education colleges and other settings should find a place for 'soft skills' in curriculums, while careers advice itself should be modernised, take better account of job trends, and make more efforts to engage young people – who sometimes think that college courses or vocational training are a second-class pathway.

Pivotal's Director Ann Watt said:

“Northern Ireland needs to better prepare its young people for the world as it will be in the coming years and decades.

“This is a matter of urgency, because the jobs market of the future will require people to have a higher skillset and broader range of transferable skills.

“However, while this issue is pressing, change will not happen overnight. Many initiatives have tried to tackle economic inactivity, improve skills and modernise the local job market over the past 20 years. There are several reasons why their success has been limited – and similar shortcomings must be avoided in future.

“Doing this will require input from education professionals, employers, parents and carers and, of course, young people themselves. Pivotal's next major piece of research, beginning early next year, will work with as many partners as possible, towards policies that can transform the prospects of Northern Ireland's young people and, as a consequence, the regional economy.”

Local jobs and skills

The local labour market has the highest-level of low-paid jobs in the UK but, despite this, the number of people with low qualifications is so large that an oversupply of workers is already in place.

In contrast, there is a shortage of workers with mid-tier skills, and a shortage of people with degree level qualifications in engineering, technology, mathematics and certain areas of science.

Ann Watt said: “Despite the short-term effects of Covid-19 on the economy, higher skilled occupations are predicted to grow over the long-term. The skills markets of the future will be highly influenced by automation and advances in digital technology. As a result, the majority of employment will be at managerial or professional levels, while only 10% will be in the lower-skills brackets where many of our young people find themselves.

“Currently, the education system in Northern Ireland leaves far too many young people with low qualifications and skills. Half of young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds leave school without five good GCSEs. It is already difficult for that group to find work. This will only become more challenging in future.”

Modernisation is required

Throughout the 2010s a number of upskilling and employability schemes for young people were pursued by the Executive. Although these initiatives had some success, research from Pivotal shows fundamental issues remain. The number of young people aged 16-24 who are not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) was 10.2% prior to the Covid-19 outbreak – a figure that has remained static for a number of years.

Ann Watt said: “Upskilling programmes can be excellent, and they provide a vital service. However, sometimes they are too little or too late. It would be far better if more of our young people were able to develop skills fit for the future during their school-age years.

“This would allow them to look for higher-paying work at a younger age, make them suitable for the jobs that will be available in the future – and make Northern Ireland a more attractive place for businesses to invest.

“Our education system leaves too many behind. The options for 14- to 19-year-olds need to be expanded and made more relevant for the world as it is today.”

Historically, education policy in Northern Ireland has evolved more slowly than other parts of the UK and Europe in general. Today’s school system produces a relatively high number of children with very good grades, and a high number with poor grades who fail to achieve five good GCSEs. This contributes to Northern Ireland’s very high levels of both low paid jobs and economic inactivity.

Change for the future

Pivotal’s research has identified five areas where reforms are needed:

1. Educational inequalities and disengagement amongst young people in Northern Ireland
2. Developing a curriculum for the future workplace
3. Resourcing and delivering innovative careers advice
4. Attitudes to further education
5. Enhancing partnerships between employers and training providers

Ann Watt said: “Change is needed to improve the supply of skilled people to the local jobs market, the education system and the dynamic of how these two work together.

“The reforms required are so broad, and the existing challenges have proven so stubborn, that this will take some time and requires input from educationalists, employers, young people and their parents or guardians, as well as local policy makers.

“However, the good news is that the Executive has some good examples of how to engage with employers and education providers to address skills deficits, for example the Assured Skills programme.”

1. Educational inequalities and disengagement

Northern Ireland has a reputation for academic excellence but the reality is more mixed. Many young people leave school with very strong grades – but a high proportion leaves with few qualifications or none at all.

The outlook for those who do not achieve a minimum of 5 GCSEs A* to C is bleak. They face low - and shrinking - job prospects, a risk of economic inactivity, and higher risks of poor physical and mental health.

Programmes aimed at supporting these young people into the labour market are often based on the assumption that they are able and ready to engage. They can fail to take account of life circumstances that can contribute to and maintain unemployment, for example housing difficulties, family problems, issues with physical and mental health, and parents’ and guardians’ attitudes towards education and work. A more tailored and flexible approach is needed that takes account of these wider circumstances.

2. Curriculum development to incorporate broader skills

Global changes in technology and automation need to be taken into account in developing young people’s skills. The traditional academic pathway focuses on knowledge acquisition and retention, which is measured with exams and grading. However, employers are increasingly focused on ‘soft skills’ – such as problem solving, leadership, and teamwork – which are transferable between jobs as the labour market changes. Help for young people to build these skills needs to be better woven into curriculums within schools and in other settings.

3. Innovative careers advice

Recent research indicates that many young people show limited interest in how the labour market is changing.

At the same time, a 2013 inquiry into careers education in Northern Ireland found that provision is inconsistent, that advisors are under-resourced, and that they face difficulties accessing market data about growth and deficit areas to tailor and modernise their teaching. Although more efforts have been made to involve employers in providing careers guidance, the extent to which this happens across Northern Ireland is not standardised.

4. Attitudes to further education

The local approach to education is very traditional. Sixth form study and higher education are often perceived as being more prestigious than further education.

Young people could be turned off technical or vocational education because they perceive it as a lower-status option, rather than part of a pathway towards employment.

More needs to be done to promote the range of specialist options in the six local FE colleges.

5. Partnerships between employers and training providers

Northern Ireland's education and training system has some positive history of collaboration with employers. This needs to be expanded upon.

Examples include the Assured Skills programme, developed by DfE and Invest NI to reduce the risk of skills gaps within the local workforce and reassure potential investors that their businesses could thrive in Northern Ireland.

It focused on training linked to employment, aiming to address both unemployment and underemployment, and saw high levels of job creation as well as contributing £141m to the local economy.

ENDS

Notes for 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. Pivotal's previous report – *Priorities for recovery – a briefing paper for the Northern Ireland Executive's return from recess* can be found [here](#) .
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. A wider Reference Group has helped steer the development of Pivotal and will provide ongoing guidance.
7. 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.
8. 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
9. For further information about Pivotal see pivotalppf.org or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835 .
10. Follow Pivotal on Twitter @pivotalppf .