

Education, skills and training for young people aged 14-19 years old



Overview

Education, skills and training reform must be at the centre of Northern Ireland’s long-term economic recovery plan, in order to develop a modern workforce for the future.

Policy reform in Northern Ireland has long acknowledged challenges in developing and maintaining a skilled workforce to enhance economic and social outcomes for all. Whilst educational attainment and skill levels have slowly improved, many young people do not reach their potential and the economy continues to experience a shortage of ‘mid-tier skills’. As youth unemployment continues to rise and sectors that historically employed young people close or evolve due to automation, urgent attention is required to address skills and training deficits.

This is the first of two reports exploring what opportunities and challenges exist for policy makers to support young people to develop skills for a modern workforce. This report outlines the wider economic context that influences skills and training for this age

group, before exploring policy gaps and opportunities in Northern Ireland. Whilst the primary focus in this report is young people aged 14-19, this report will also consider some wider policies to enhance education, skills and training for other age groups.

This report is published during a time of social and economic crisis across the globe created by Covid-19. Education, skills and training reform must form an integral part of Northern Ireland’s long-term economic recovery plan. The Executive have committed to enhancing careers advice, curriculum, training and apprenticeships as part of the New Decade, New Approach deal. This commitment and the upcoming skills strategy led by the government are opportunities to address this long-term problem.

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The economic context in Northern Ireland

Projected economic growth in Northern Ireland

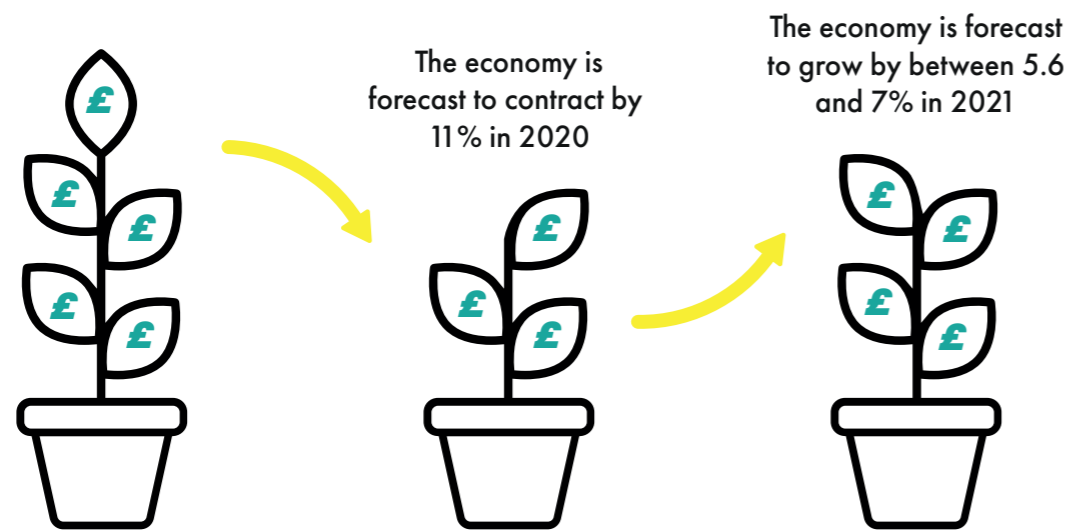


Figure 1. Source: Danske Bank Sectoral Forecasts, (2020), <http://www.northernirelandchamber.com/member-news/ni-economy-expected-contract-11-2020-growth-7-2021/>

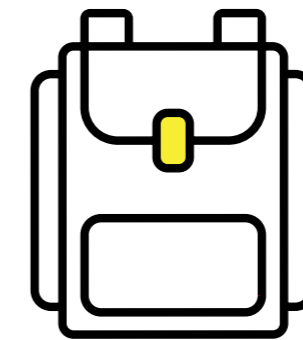
Northern Ireland has some of the lowest levels of high paid jobs, innovation and productivity of any UK region. The structural economic challenges like low skills and high levels of inactivity that preceded the pandemic are at-risk of becoming galvanised and accelerated by it.

Figure 1 indicates that the economy is forecast to contract by 11% in 2020. Across the first quarter of 2020, all four regions of the UK showed negative growth according to the Office for National Statistics with Northern Ireland experiencing the sharpest decrease

(falling by 4.5%). Whilst growth projections vary, Brexit is likely to have an effect on economic recovery. Whilst it may present opportunities in certain areas, there is a risk that trade frictions could lead to a slower recovery in Northern Ireland compared with other parts of the UK.

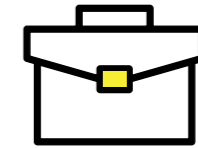
Figure 2 demonstrates the forecast impact of the economic downturn on unemployment. Northern Ireland has the lowest employment and highest unemployment rates and the highest inactivity rate of all UK regions.

Youth unemployment



11.5%
Youth unemployment
(16-24 years old)

Unemployment



3.6%
Unemployment

Figure 2. Source, NISRA: Labour Market Report (2020)' - <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/labour-market-report-november-2020.pdf>

Northern Ireland has the highest level of low paid jobs in the UK. Research found that 1 in 4 jobs were paid below the real living wage in 2020, equating to approximately 240,000 jobs in the economy of Northern Ireland. 70% of young people aged 18-21 are in roles that are below the real living wage. The levels of youth unemployment are particularly concerning as sectors which employ high levels of young people have been most affected by the pandemic.

Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, 10.2% of young people aged 16-24 were classed as not in Education, Employment or Training

(NEET). Young people categorised as 'NEET' are at risk of long-term economic inactivity, contributing to Northern Ireland's already poor levels of economic activity.

The labour productivity rate in Northern Ireland remains amongst the lowest of UK regions. The percentage of businesses who are active in innovation in Northern Ireland has continued to decline, with approximately a third of businesses engaging in innovation in 2016-2018. Whilst strategies and policies have been implemented to varying degrees, the economy continues to be characterised by a high number of low value-added sectors.

Children attaining baseline qualifications of 5 A*-C GCSEs including English and Maths

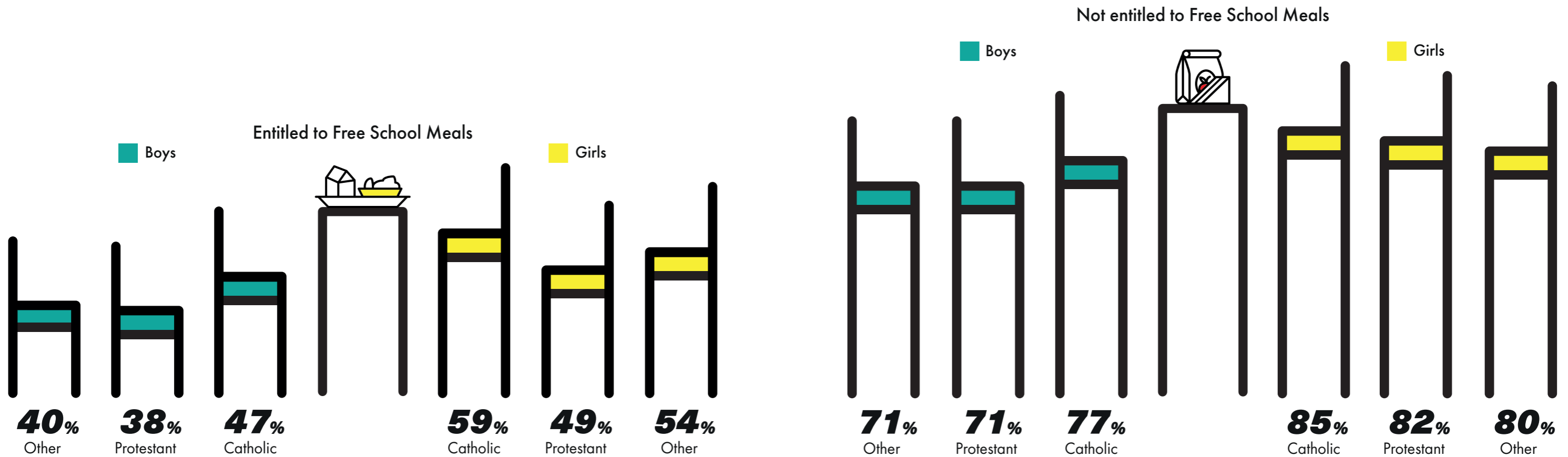


Figure 3. Source: NISRA (2020) Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers 2018-19

Education, skills and training in Northern Ireland

Education policy in Northern Ireland has evolved more slowly than other areas in the UK and Europe. Single-sex schools and grammar schools have been retained longer than most parts of the UK. Education in Northern Ireland is typically segregated on grounds of religious belief and many children transition to post-primary education through the use of transfer tests. International evidence clearly indicates that stratification in education

systems magnifies inequality but there is no political agreement on whether or how to achieve a less segregated education system in Northern Ireland.

New Decade, New Approach makes a commitment to develop enhanced careers advice, curriculum, training and apprenticeships to promote employability and economic growth. The upcoming consultation on the skills strategy in 2021 is a welcomed step towards progressing this commitment.

Northern Ireland has some of the best academic attainment outcomes in the UK. However, figure 3 demonstrates that academic excellence is not universal. Recent data demonstrates the disparity of outcomes relating to those in receipt of free school meals (FSMs), gender differences and the poor outcomes of some groups, particularly Protestant males.

The data demonstrates that only 38% of Protestant males entitled to FSMs obtained five GCSEs grade A* -C, including English and Maths. Consequently, this group of young people and the general trend of lower achievement associated with FSM entitlement creates a particular risk of poorer outcomes in the future economically, socially and potentially in terms of health too.

Illustration of National Qualification Framework (NQF) levels

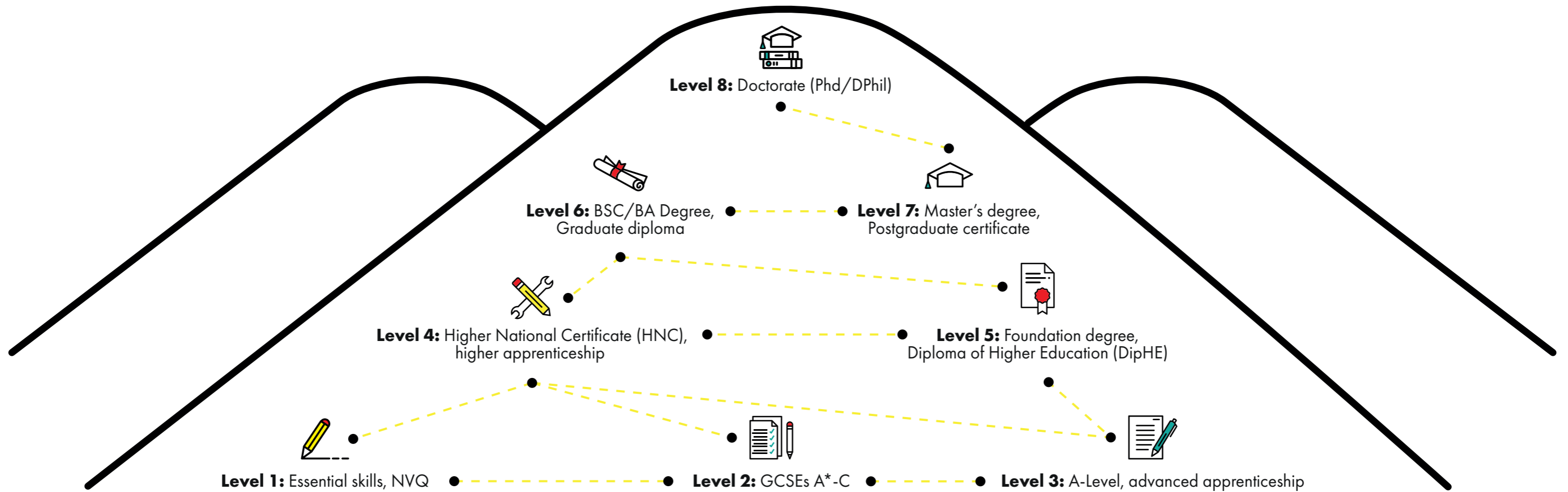


Figure 4. Source: National Qualification Framework levels

Figure 4 provides an illustration of National Qualification Framework (NQF) levels.

Comprehensive work about skills projections was completed by the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UU-EPC) in 2019 prior to the pandemic. However, areas of growth and decline may continue to fluctuate.

The overall labour market in Northern Ireland indicates a shortage of 'mid-tier skills' (NQF

levels 3-5). There is also an undersupply of those with NQF level 6 qualifications, although this is marginal in comparison to NQF levels 3-5. In contrast, there is a significant oversupply of individuals with qualifications below NQF level 2 including those with GCSE grades D-G or those with entry level qualifications. The skills gaps at NQF level 3-5 may be attributed to the comparatively small-scale provision of professional and technical qualifications in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, as many

NQF level 3 students continue in education, it reduces the supply of students finishing education at that level.

There is an undersupply of workers with NQF level 6 or higher in areas such as: engineering technology; mathematical and computer science; and physical and environmental sciences. Whilst skills in these areas are currently undersupplied in the workforce, many of these sectors are projected to have

the most growth over the next ten years creating the greatest number of new jobs in the economy. In contrast, there is an oversupply in other areas of expertise at NQF level 6 (for example, education).

There is also a shortage of individuals with training at NQF levels 4-5 in areas such as engineering and manufacturing technologies, science and mathematics.

A failure to increase the overall baseline of educational achievement in Northern Ireland will leave young people vulnerable to future unemployment.

Recent research has indicated that skilled trade occupations, such as those in electrical or agricultural work, were found to have the greatest number of vacancies due to an undersupply of qualified individuals. Despite the short-term effects of Covid-19 on the economy, these occupations are predicted to grow over the long-term.

The skill 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 the managerial, professional or associate professional level whilst only approximately 10% will be at the NQF level 2 or below. This is a significant issue for Northern Ireland given the proportion of young people who do not possess this minimum qualification level. Skills gaps are likely to widen without intervention, given future predictions and the current baseline of skills and education at these levels. Young people who do not leave school with

a minimum level of education and training will be at risk of long-term unemployment in the changing 'high skill' employment market.

Analysis of skill and training needs must also include higher order or skills that are transferable rather than being subject specific (for example teamwork, problem solving and digital literacy). These areas also require attention within the national curriculum and higher education framework. Evidence from the Department for the Economy indicates that 89% of employers reported difficulties finding applicants with any technical or practical skills, whilst 52% reported difficulties finding applicants with complex analytical skills.

Figure 5 provides recent projections of the sectors predicted to grow and decline which incorporates the changes that Covid-19 has created.

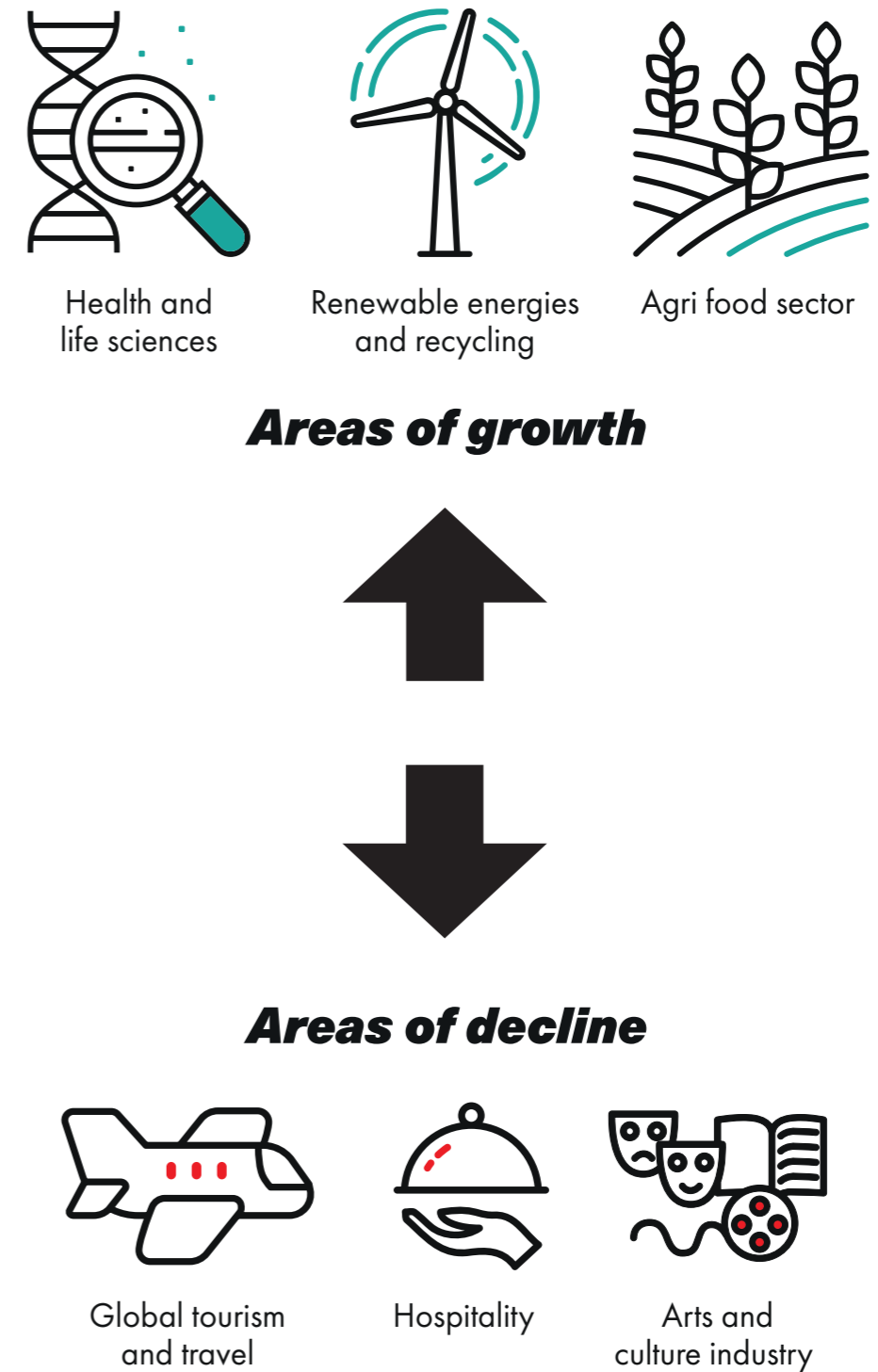


Figure 5: Source: https://www.ulster.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/683077/COVID-19-and-the-Arts-Culture-and-Heritage-sector-s-16-October-2020-published-version.pdf

Policy approaches to education and training in Europe



Policy responses to skills and training European perspective

Countries within the European Union (EU) take a range of approaches to policy reform but have worked collectively on shared areas of interest (for example, digital innovation). As a general principle, European education is often conceptualised as being somewhat more liberal than UK education with children commencing education at a later stage and the curriculum content, and the assessment, being broader than the UK approach. However, youth labour policy has been criticised as being overly reliant on supply-

side policies and quantitative targets with a lack of strategy on sustainable labour market outcomes.

In recent years, Ireland has undergone a comprehensive policy review to develop a national skills strategy designed to build on the progress made under the previous strategy published in 2007, 'Towards Tomorrow's Skills'. The Irish government developed a comprehensive cross sectoral, 'National Youth Strategy' for the period 2015-2020 that aimed to promote better outcomes for all children in Ireland across inter-related domains such as health, wellbeing and education.

More recently, the 'National Skills Strategy 2025' highlighted a skills shortage in areas such as advanced manufacturing and ICT and outlined that improved digital skills will be vital for the future. The strategy's key objectives included supporting an increase in the supply of skills to the labour market and promoting lifelong learning. It also encouraged educational and training providers to place a stronger focus on the provision of skills development which is relevant to the needs of learners, society and the economy.

After having lagged behind the rest of Europe, the strategy set a target of 15% of 25-64 year

olds being engaged in lifelong learning by 2025. As of the fourth quarter of 2019, Ireland's lifelong participation rate reached 14.7%. The Irish approach indicates the importance of delivering reforms that include young people whilst also addressing lifelong learning to ensure those at a mid-career stage of learning continue to enhance their skill levels and employment opportunities.

The following section will explore convergence and divergence across the UK.

A dual approach of early intervention for school leavers combined with mid-career learning for those in employment is required throughout the UK.



Curriculum and policy development across England, Scotland and Wales

The devolved nations have taken varied approaches to education, skills and training reform, influenced by changing political leadership, national need and global challenges. The Scottish system includes National 5 (equivalent to GCSE) and Scottish Highers (equivalent to A-level), whilst Wales developed a Baccalaureate model for Key Stage 4 learning.

Across the UK, policy development and reform was initially focused on enhancing outcomes for school leavers and young people, with less emphasis on life long learning strategies. Participation in higher education was a central policy for New Labour as a key driver in its knowledge economy policies. Whilst this policy direction may have enhanced social

mobility for some, the approach placed less emphasis on intermediate skills policy development. More recent policy has recognised that a focus on young people's skills development is insufficient, leading to greater emphasis being placed on learning, meeting digital skills demand, and mismatch and gaps in training provision. However, lifelong learning remains problematic with evidence indicating that only a third of working aged adults participated in learning during the previous three years.

Across the UK there is clear recognition of a dual approach of early intervention for young people combined with mid-career intervention for those already in employment. While the two strategies evidently require tailored policy approaches, they cannot be considered in isolation.

Policy responses to youth skills and training

Historically, school leavers have opted for three broad pathways when completing compulsory education: further academic education (e.g. A-levels); vocational training (e.g. skills and training); and employment. Policy makers have in the past focused on the transition from compulsory education at age 16 as an intervention point. However, this may be too little, too late to effectively influence a young person's skills and training journey.

Earlier intervention in youth policy is challenging to develop and implement as the national curriculum leaves limited space to provide additional training as well as compulsory content, thus most historical policy interventions have focused on the school

leaver. However, those who find it difficult to engage with the national curriculum may feel disenfranchised from the education system when they leave school, which acts as a barrier to future engagement with skills and training programmes.

Across the UK significant efforts have been made to widen policy interventions, expanding the intervention point to older age groups. Skills Advisory Panels (SAP) have been established in England to address local skill shortages and strengthen the links between public and private sector employers and education/training providers.

Investment in high quality post-16 skills and training options generates significant economic return.

Similar approaches exist in Wales and Northern Ireland, whilst in Scotland this provision is part of a wider comprehensive Skills Development Scotland (SDS). SDS takes a stratified approach that addresses the needs of young people, those long-term unemployed and mid-career workers.

Wales has similar economic and social challenges to Northern Ireland, however their government have placed considerable emphasis on the role of digital innovation to address skills and training deficits. Following a recent review of digital innovation commissioned by the Welsh government, renewed emphasis has been placed on large scale investment in digital transformation, teaching digital skills from primary to post-primary, and regional approaches to digital innovation.

Apprenticeships

The apprenticeship model has been widely used for decades as a viable alternative to a traditional 'academic' pathway for young people to address skills deficits. However, within recent years reforms have taken place to increase the sophistication of the apprenticeship models, enhance links between education and enterprise, and significantly increase the numbers of young people participating in apprenticeships. Whilst the apprenticeship funding model varies across the devolved nations, research indicates that investment in apprenticeships generates more economic return than other vocational training approaches.

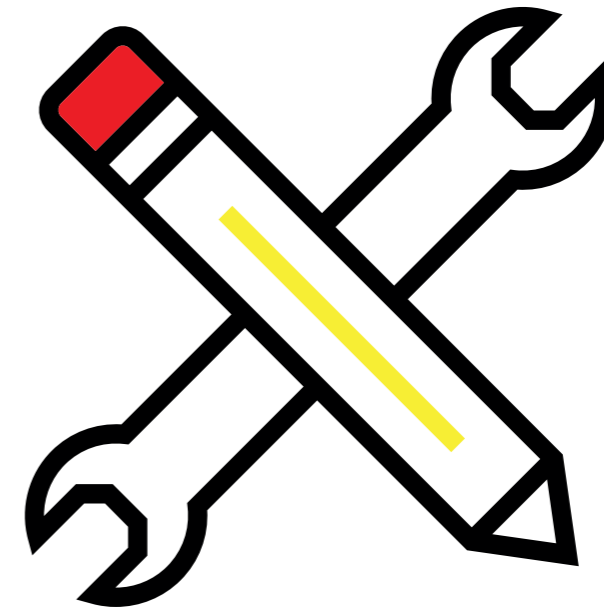
There are three levels of apprenticeships in the UK, Level 2, Level 3 and Higher Level Apprenticeships (HLA) from Level 4 upwards.

Apprenticeships are usually aimed at young people aged 16-24 although in Scotland young people can begin some apprenticeship programmes at 15 years of age alongside the national curriculum.

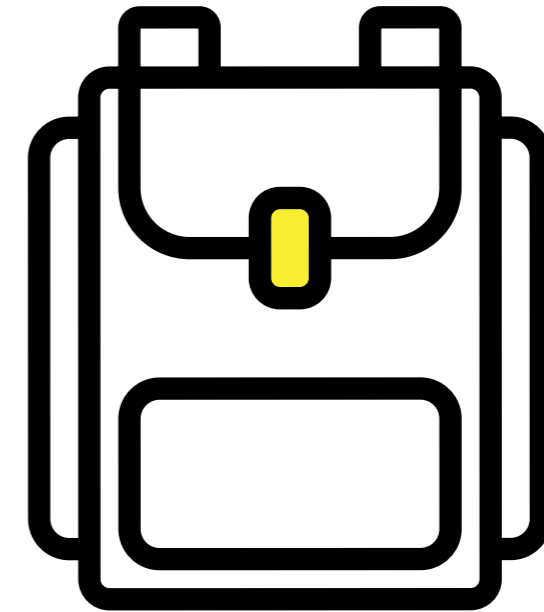
The UK government committed to 3 million apprenticeships from 2015-2020, as part of a wider youth training strategy to enhance youth employability and address national skills gaps. However, the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in 2017 led to an initial decrease in apprenticeship uptake in England. The levy funds collected in Northern Ireland are not ring-fenced for investment in local apprenticeships. The funds are collected by the Treasury and distributed to Northern Ireland (and Scotland and Wales) on the equivalent of the Barnett formula used for general block grant allocation.

Work readiness interventions

School leavers across the UK are targeted with a range of employability and training programmes to encourage participation in education or employment. Those who exit compulsory education at 16 without a clear training or employment trajectory are at risk of social and economic exclusion. Whilst interventions vary, the majority of programmes aim to include subject specific training, essential skills and some form of work readiness training. These programmes are ambitious in nature as their core demographic are at higher risk of social, emotional and behavioural challenges than working age adults. As a result, establishing and maintaining engagement on these programmes can be extremely challenging.



Reforms to the national curriculum are required to reflect the knowledge, skills and transferable competencies needed in modern society.



Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET)

Across the UK, in the first quarter of 2020, an estimated 11.2% of young people aged 16-24 were not in education, employment or training (NEET). Those who experience long-term NEET may find it particularly challenging to access mainstream government support schemes and are at considerable risk of adversity and social disadvantage.

Despite variations within the UK education and training system, various common factors unite the diverging policies: curriculum choice at upper secondary education; a flexible shared labour market and educational migration to England.

General approach to policy and curriculum development in Northern Ireland

Policy development and curriculum reform in Northern Ireland has taken place in the context of educational segregation, political instability and the widespread use of transfer tests. The national curriculum has not been revised for almost 13 years and may not reflect the knowledge, skills and transferable competencies required to equip young people to succeed in modern society. The Executive have taken an inconsistent approach to publishing evaluations of policies across different departments. As a result it can be difficult to ascertain which strategies have been particularly effective in Northern Ireland.

The decade long 'Success through Skills' policy initiative, developed in 2011, was a major policy initiative designed to address gaps in skills, high levels of low paid employment and educational underachievement in young people. The strategy also aimed to enhance professional and transferable workforce skills in targeted areas (e.g. engineering), essential skills (e.g. ICT, numeracy and literacy) and employability skills.

This policy change was accompanied by enhanced efforts by government departments to work in partnership with business leaders, employers and education providers to address skill deficits and upskill the workforce through initiatives such as Strategic Advisory Forums (SAF) and the Assured Skills programme.

Approaches to youth skills and training

The strategies developed for youth training and skills reform linked to the 'Success through Skills' policy initiative included comprehensive changes to careers advice and apprenticeships. The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) attempted to enhance the overall quality of vocational training as a credible parallel route to the traditional academic pathway. Efforts were made to enhance participation in level 2 numeracy and literacy qualifications whilst also providing more opportunities for work-based learning. DEL recognised the need to extend support beyond young school leavers and include young people up the age of 24 to promote a culture of lifelong learning within Northern Ireland.

Apprenticeships aim to bridge the gap between the binary choice of an academic or vocational route.

Careers education and guidance was significantly reformed following a 2013 inquiry that amongst other things, highlighted the need for enhanced careers support to address skills gaps and build stronger relationships between education providers and business. The 'Preparing for Success' policy also initiated the commissioning of the valuable UU-EPC skills barometer to provide a clear indication of where skills gaps/shortages occurred within Northern Ireland. Despite these robust strategies, some policy aims have not been consistently met, for example, supporting enhanced attainment of GCSEs for all young people.

Apprenticeships

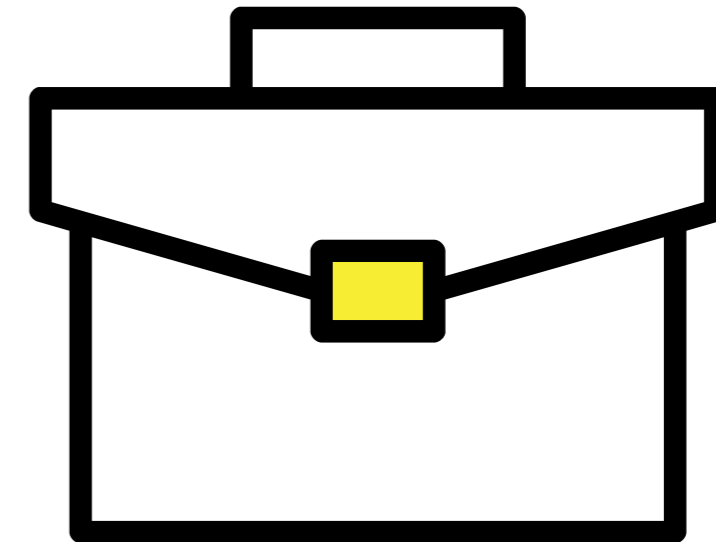
A revised approach to apprenticeships in 2014 provided an updated apprenticeship model driven by strategic partnerships between employers and FE colleges to align supply with demand. The Higher Level Apprenticeship (HLA) reform in Northern Ireland aimed to bridge the gap between the binary decision between vocational and academic training for young people. HLAs offer a skilled training route for those who do not typically continue to HE, either due to ability or motivation, whilst also filling skill gaps identified by employers. However, apprenticeships in Northern Ireland may be perceived as less attractive to the local

business community due to the levy being allocated to HM Treasury rather than ring-fenced for funding apprenticeships in Northern Ireland.

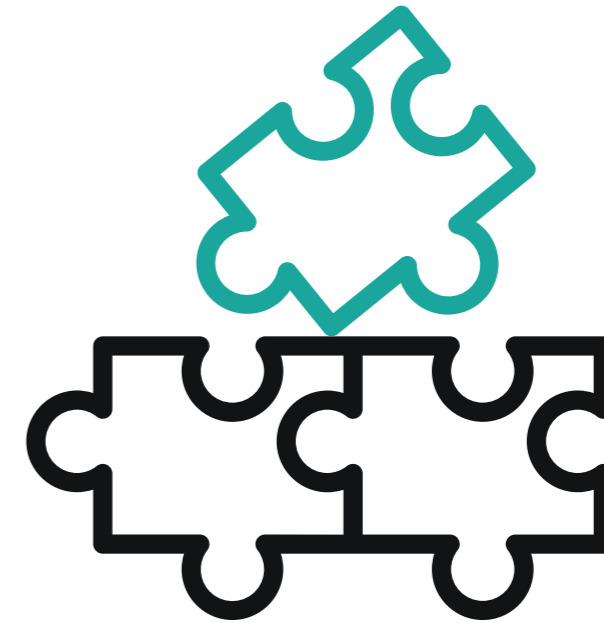
Work readiness programmes

Interventions to prepare unemployed young people for the workforce in Northern Ireland are underpinned by the success through skills conventions of increasing baseline qualifications alongside essential skills and work experience. 'Training for Success' (TfS) is a longstanding programme initially developed by DEL in 2013 to enhance level 2 qualifications and employability skills for young people aged 16-17. The most recent

work readiness programme in Northern Ireland, Steps2Success, was discontinued in March 2020 as a result of the pandemic. The programme was similar to other UK-wide approaches that target long-term benefit claimants who are offered essential skills training and work placement opportunities, many of which were unpaid.



The Executive must build on existing strengths with business and education to develop a comprehensive education, skills and training strategy to prepare young people for the future.



Summary

In summary, Northern Ireland's policy challenges are multifaceted. The focus on traditional approaches in the curriculum, much of which is content based, could lead to a circular issue in that assessment is based on recall which, in itself, is contingent on rote learning with limited time for essential life skills. Furthermore, the emphasis on academic attainment alone leaves limited space to address the skills deficits, whilst also placing too great an emphasis on academic grading rather than skill development.

The lack of a functioning government for almost three years is likely to have reduced the development and implementation of education and training policies in Northern Ireland. New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) has outlined a list of educational goals, including a commitment to develop enhanced careers advice, curriculum, training and apprenticeships to enhance employability and economic growth. This commitment is being implemented through an upcoming consultation on the skills strategy in 2021. The Executive face the difficulty of balancing the need to address

historical challenges (e.g. under investment in SEN) whilst simultaneously developing forward-facing and innovative strategies to plan for the future workforce.

Despite these challenges there are a number of clear strengths for the Executive to build on. The FE sector has undergone significant change through the merger of 16 colleges to 6 and the ONS reclassification to enable FE to deliver greater impact. The education sector has worked well with the Executive to deliver graduate employment programmes such as Assured Skills,

develop research and development, and retain the flexible provision of courses developed for mid-career learners.

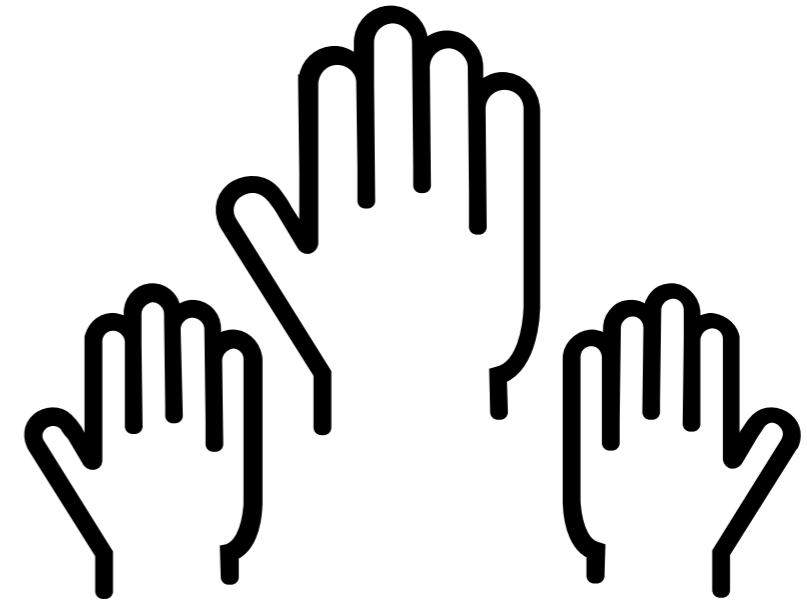
Opportunities and challenges

This section provides an overview of key issues related to maintaining a skilled workforce in Northern Ireland based on an analysis of academic and policy documents.

Educational inequalities and disengagement amongst young people in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has a reputation for academic excellence in examination results but, behind the high levels of success, there are a considerable number of young people who do not achieve the minimum standard of five A*-C GCSEs (including English and Maths).

The economic outlook for those who do not achieve a minimum of 5 GCSEs A* to C is bleak. The evolving job market will have limited roles for those who have not achieved this minimum standard and these cohorts are at considerable risk of future unemployment and long-term economic inactivity. There are also significant risks associated with lower outcomes in relation to health, social opportunities and mental health.



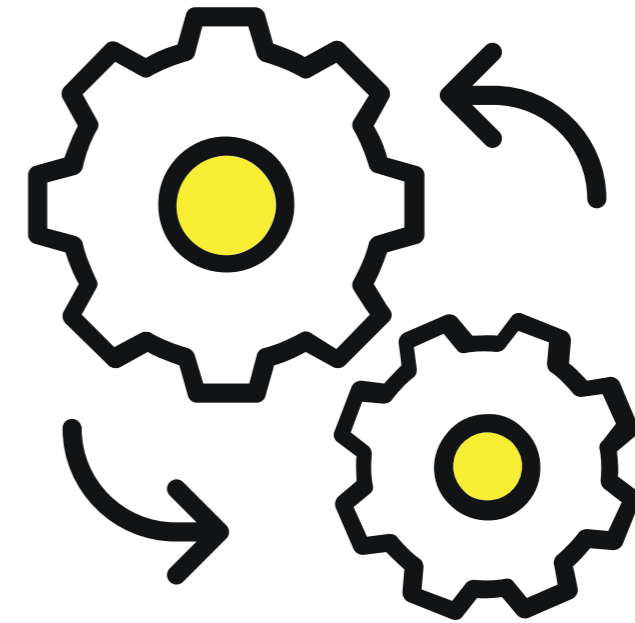
A review of the available evidence indicates there are multiple factors related to disengagement amongst young people in education and training. Factors may include:

- 1. Parent/carer and community attitudes to employment and education**
- 2. Family history of economic inactivity**
- 3. Peer influences**
- 4. Health and wellbeing, including mental health**
- 5. Substance misuse**
- 6. Housing difficulties**
- 7. Prior negative experiences within education**

Education and skills programmes designed to engage young people may not consider these factors and/or have limited resources to influence them. However, a failure to assess and intervene in these issues may lead to poor outcomes in programmes designed to engage young people in education or employment. Some young people may experience one or multiple factors in the above list which will influence their ability to engage in education, training and employment programmes.

Whilst strategies in Northern Ireland such as 'Generating our Success' and 'Training for Success' aim to engage and upskill young people, the scheme is based on the assumption that young people are prepared and ready to engage. The issue of social and educational disengagement must be considered during intervention design and implementation.

Interventions developed to improve outcomes for young people must take into account wider challenges in their lives such as mental health and housing difficulties.



Young people aged over 18 who receive unemployment related benefits often participate in 'work readiness' programmes to provide essential skills-based training and work placement opportunities, some of which are unpaid. Whilst these programmes may offer some participants a route into paid employment, research indicates that the lack of collaborative work across agencies and departments is problematic.

Theoretically, work readiness programmes aim to cover a range of areas including essential, employability and inter-personal skills. However, the programmes are focused on employment in a void of the life circumstances that often contribute to, and maintain, unemployment; for example,

housing difficulties, health and mental health problems and substance misuse. A young person's social, familial and romantic relationships are influential on attitudes to employment and training. Furthermore, the timing of these interventions requires consideration as these strategies may be too little and come too late. Future work must involve these key stakeholders in order to explore the role of attitudes and influence on a young person's skills and training journey.

A failure to address inequities amongst young people at an early age, and throughout their education journey, creates a pathway of underperformance that is perpetuated in the form of economic inactivity and poverty concentrated in deprived communities in later years.

Developing a curriculum for the future workforce

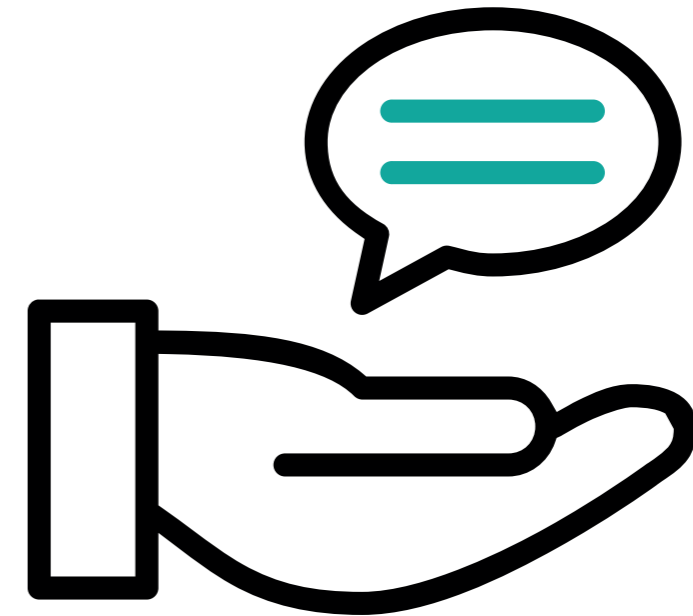
Global changes in technology and automation must be better accounted for within the national curriculum in Northern Ireland. Curriculum development must take account of rising digital innovation which requires large scale investment in digital transformation, teaching digital skills from primary to post-primary and regional approaches to digital innovation in Northern Ireland.

The rise in digital automation is one of many new challenges and opportunities in Northern Ireland that require a change in how knowledge is transferred within education.

Children's success is measured through academic outcomes that do not reflect a broader approach to learning and the 'soft skills' that enable transferable skills to respond to an evolving economy. It is important to balance education and training opportunities with a strong general education and flexible opportunities for young people to reflect the modern labour market.

There is a need for a stronger emphasis on 'soft skills', interpersonal effectiveness and transferable skills in the national curriculum to reflect the portfolio of careers that the modern workplace demands. Young people would benefit from early and ongoing experience of 'soft skills' such as problem-solving, leadership and teamwork

Careers provision at Key Stage 3 combined with opportunities for experiential learning in the workplace may help young people make better informed decision about their futures.



within education alongside traditional curriculum content. The traditional academic pathway for young people is somewhat focused on knowledge acquisition and retention, tested in a transactional manner, with the focus on grades as a measure of good success. Many of the competencies and behaviours demanded by employers are difficult to develop outside of a real workplace.

Previous research with employers in Northern Ireland indicates that candidates with 'soft skills' can be difficult to recruit. Skills such as leadership and self-management were reported to be lacking in many applicants. Whilst employers in Northern Ireland reported a slightly smaller skills gap in these areas

than the UK average, the deficits remain problematic for future labour market growth.

Policy makers may wish to consider the inclusion of innovative training programmes within the curriculum timetable such as the Princes Trust 'Achieve' programme. 'Achieve' provides young people with level 2 qualifications based on life skills, personal development and enterprise projects. This programme is delivered to over 3,000 children in over 100 schools in Northern Ireland. 'Achieve' and similar programmes uniquely offer targeted soft skill development to young people who may not otherwise gain qualifications via the traditional academic route. These programmes not only provide young people with academic

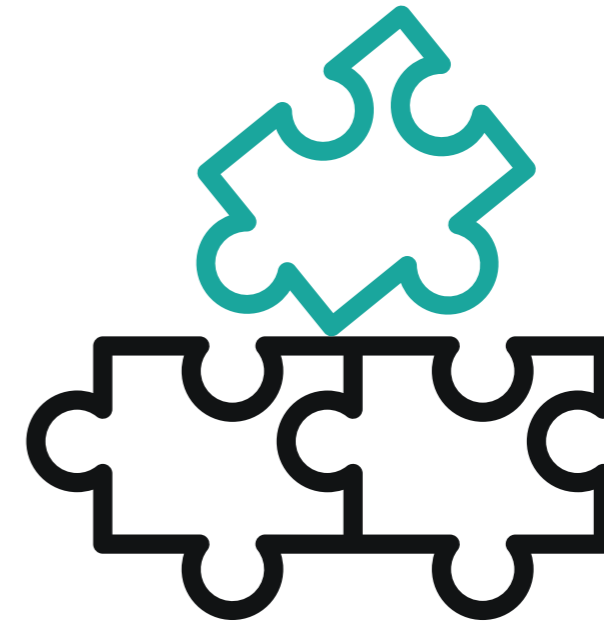
attainment but with positive associations of learning, achievement and self-worth.

In contrast, many post-16 'work readiness' programmes offer similar interventions at a later stage of young people's lives when they may have left mainstream education with a sense of failure. A more integrated approach to delivering transferable skills within the curriculum may address both the skill deficit in Northern Ireland and increase academic attainment for those at risk of disengagement.

Resourcing and delivering innovative careers advice

Engaging and timely careers support is crucial to increase young people's awareness of the labour market, understand the importance of employers' expectations, and facilitate the transition from education to employment. This is particularly significant in Northern Ireland as recent research indicated that many young people demonstrated limited interest in labour market trends. Careers advice is difficult to provide as it may rely on access to 'live' data on growth and decline areas in an ever evolving world. Furthermore, young people may not be attracted to sectors with less peer credibility and/or more abstract roles in industry.

Negative attitudes amongst some young people and their parents/carers towards further education colleges may lead to missed opportunities.



Improvements to careers guidance through policy change to alleviate the skills gaps and increase productivity across the UK has been influenced by the in-depth inquiry into Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG). The inquiry reported a range of widespread difficulties related to careers education in Northern Ireland including inconsistent practice, difficulties in accessing market data related to deficit and growth areas, and a general issue of under resourcing careers professionals.

Career guidance policies have evolved to increase employer engagement with young

people although the extent to which this happens across Northern Ireland is not standardised. There are pockets of emerging practice that have used innovative ways to engage young people in career decision making. A pilot in 2019 led by a local not-for-profit organisation delivered a multi-sector gamification approach to simulate skills-based work experience for 1200 year 9 pupils in Northern Ireland. Young people gained experience of interactive zones of learning from sectors with skill deficits and received a personalized profile at the end of the event. Interactive careers provision combined with earlier careers advice at Key

Stage 3 may help young people make better informed decisions whilst also addressing skills imbalances in Northern Ireland.

Attitudes to further education

Northern Ireland has a traditional approach to education and training with sixth form and higher education often being perceived as more prestigious than further education. As a result young people may face a binary choice between an academic or a vocational route. Training pathways at present demonstrate a limited combination of both activities which may dissuade academically orientated young

people from pursuing a more vocationally based programme, or a mix of academic and vocational courses. Future evaluations of the 'Technical levels' system implemented in England may provide the combination of academic and vocational training that some young people prefer.

Previous research has indicated that vocational education may be perceived as a less prestigious option to higher education, rather than a path toward employment. This perception and influence towards 'higher status' options may prevent young people from pursuing certain careers and contribute

Investment in joint training initiatives between business and education can have a significant economic and social return in Northern Ireland.



to skills shortages and over-education in areas with limited further growth.

Future work is needed to further promote the range of specialist offerings in the six FE colleges in Northern Ireland.

Enhancing partnerships between employers and training providers

There is a tension for all economies in developing long-term strategic training programmes whilst also promoting a flexible workforce that can respond to changing

technological and labour market demands. Northern Ireland has demonstrated a positive history of working with industry to develop joint initiatives to attract foreign investment and boost skill levels.

The Assured Skills scheme is an innovative joint initiative established by DfE and Invest NI, initially conceptualised to reduce the risk of skill gaps in the labour market for foreign investors to provide them with the assurance that the skills they need for their firm will be available in Northern Ireland's workforce. The scheme provides focused

training linked to employment, aiming to address both unemployment and under-employment in Northern Ireland. The scheme has been extended beyond the initial goal of attracting foreign investors to now include existing employers considering expansion. The programme has achieved several impressive outcomes including high levels of job creation and the contribution of an additional £141m to the economy.

The Assured Skills programme has provided Northern Ireland with an evidence-based

approach to respond to emerging innovation whilst boosting the overall skill levels in the labour market. Further work may be useful to consider how joined-up working between key stakeholders could focus on enhancing entry level roles for young people in Northern Ireland. Concentrated efforts must be focused on the sectors and professions that will provide the greatest number of opportunities for first time entrants into the labour market. Data indicates that professional roles in growth areas such as science and technology, and health services, will create enhanced opportunities for first-time job seekers.

Areas for further investigation

An initial review of the available evidence identified challenges and opportunities in five key areas:



Educational inequalities and disengagement amongst young people in Northern Ireland



Developing a curriculum for the future workforce



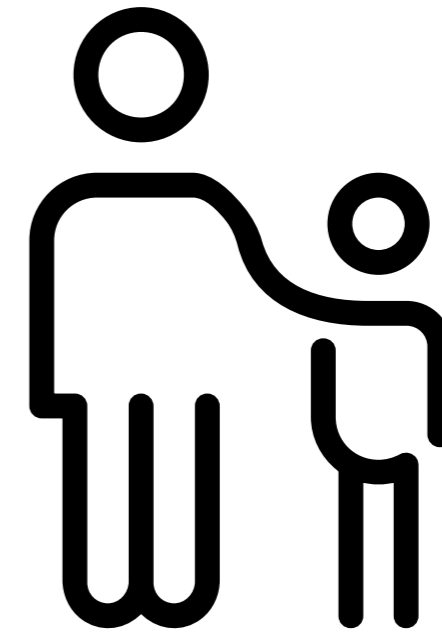
Resourcing and delivering innovative careers advice



Attitudes to further education



Enhancing partnerships between employers and training providers



These challenges and opportunities will be explored in our next phase of research in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the skills and training challenges facing Northern Ireland.

Whilst previous studies have identified areas of decline and growth in the Northern Ireland labour market, there is a paucity of published research that involves key stakeholders.

Our future study aims to develop user-led solutions to the demand and supply relationship for skills shortages in Northern Ireland by involving four key stakeholder groups: young people aged 14-19 years old, parents/carers, education professionals with careers responsibilities and employers. The research aims to address the gap in the current evidence base of youth and user participation in the skills domain in order to make evidenced-based public policy recommendations.

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