

Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum – Pivotal response to Call for Evidence

Pivotal is an independent public policy think tank which aims to contribute to better policy-making in Northern Ireland. Launched in 2019, Pivotal does deep-dive research reports into current topics, for example [Should I stay or should I go? Reasons for leaving Northern Ireland for study or work](#) (2021) and [Economic inactivity in Northern Ireland](#) (2024). Pivotal publishes regular reviews of how government is functioning, for example [Review of the first year of the restored Northern Ireland Executive](#) (2025). You can find out more about Pivotal and our work on our website [here](#).

In recent years, Pivotal has done a series of research projects with young people related to education and training, including our reports [Transforming the 14-19 education and training system Northern Ireland - youth voices and solutions](#) (2021), [Youth voices - life, work and study in Northern Ireland](#) (2023), and [Youth solutions - improving education, training and employment in Northern Ireland](#) (2023).

Gathering new data from surveys, focus groups and interviews with young people, parents and teachers has been a central part of these recent projects, and we are pleased that they have provided up-to-date findings about experiences and views on the education system in Northern Ireland.

We are therefore glad to share five headline findings from our recent research projects that are relevant to the Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum.

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

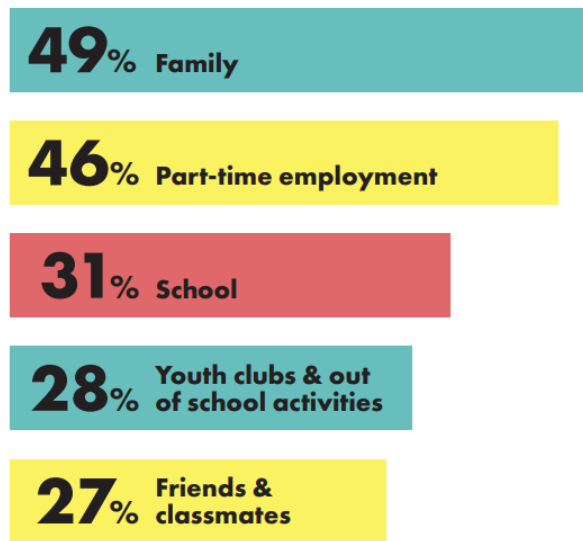
Although employability and life skills are incorporated into the Northern Ireland curriculum, concerns have been raised both by CCEA and the OECD that the focus on grade attainment in examinations at Key Stage 4 may undermine wider skills development. In Pivotal's recent research, participants raised similar concerns (see [Transforming the 14-19 education and training system Northern Ireland - youth voices and solutions](#) for further details of this report, including research methodology).

When asked where they learnt employability skills like problem solving, time management and leadership, young people in our research referenced their family and part-time

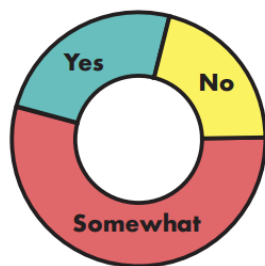
employment as the main sources of development opportunities (see graphics below). Less than a third (31%) of young people said that they learnt these skills in school. Young people noted that the opportunity to develop communication and problem-solving skills in school was often subject-dependent, showing the need for broader and more consistent skills development to be implemented across the curriculum. Only one quarter of young people and 29% of parents felt that young people were currently learning the skills they needed for future employment at school.

Young people:
Where are you most likely to learn these skills?

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



Young people:
I am learning the skills needed for future employment.



24% Yes 21% No
 55% Somewhat

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



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

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

“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

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

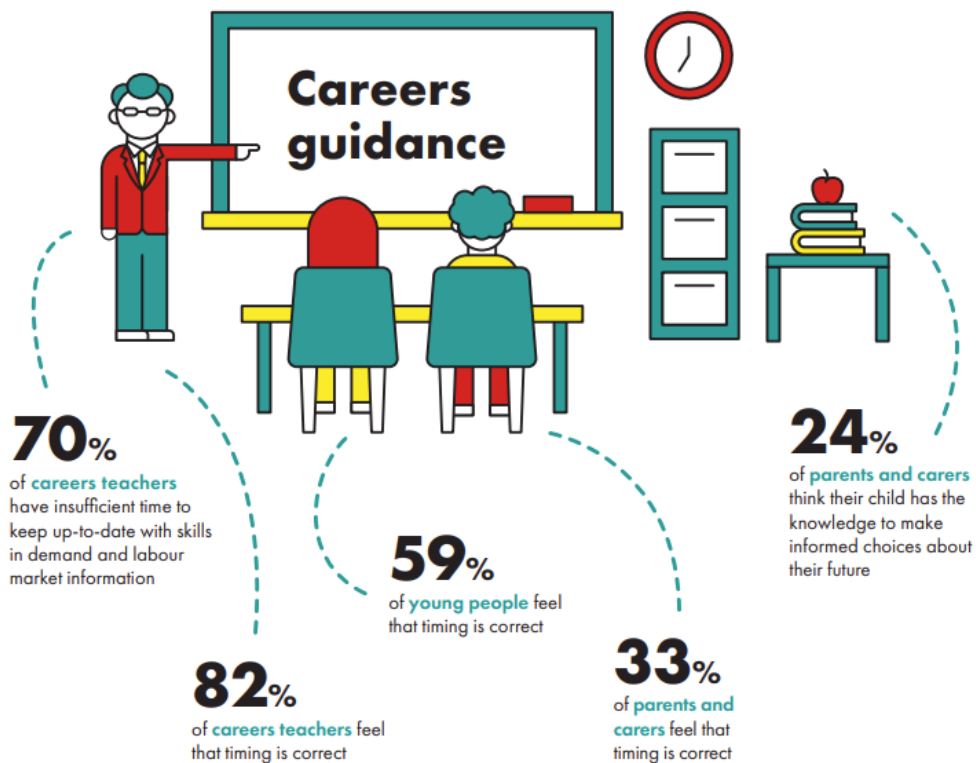
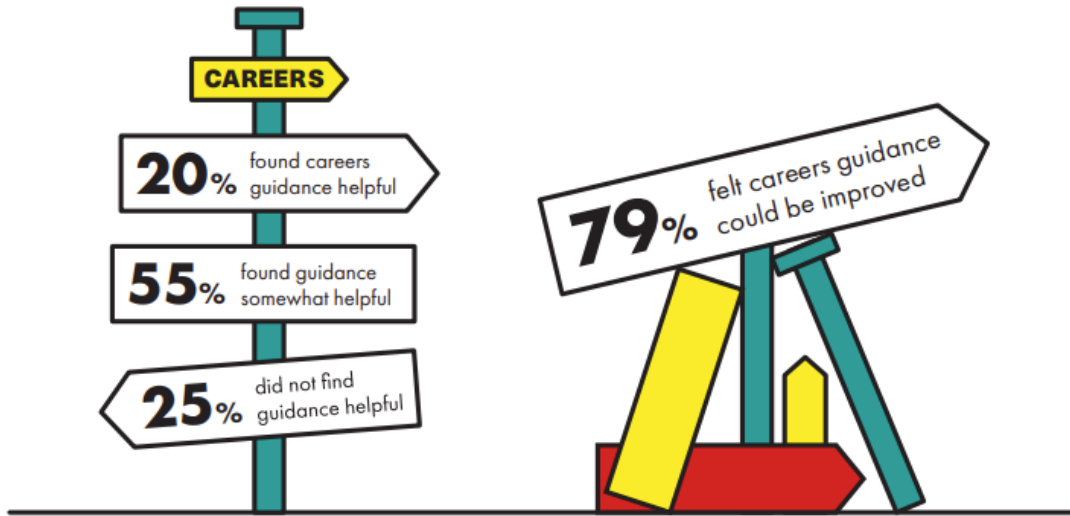
Engaging and timely careers support is crucial to increase young people’s awareness of the labour market, understand the importance of employers’ expectations, and help young people to make more informed decisions about their futures. Effective careers guidance, combined with opportunities for experiential learning in the workplace, can also help to raise the aspirations of young people in Northern Ireland.

How is careers guidance currently perceived? The graphics on the next page show that young people’s and parents’ perceptions 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, 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. They said that 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, as described by the quote from a parent below:

“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

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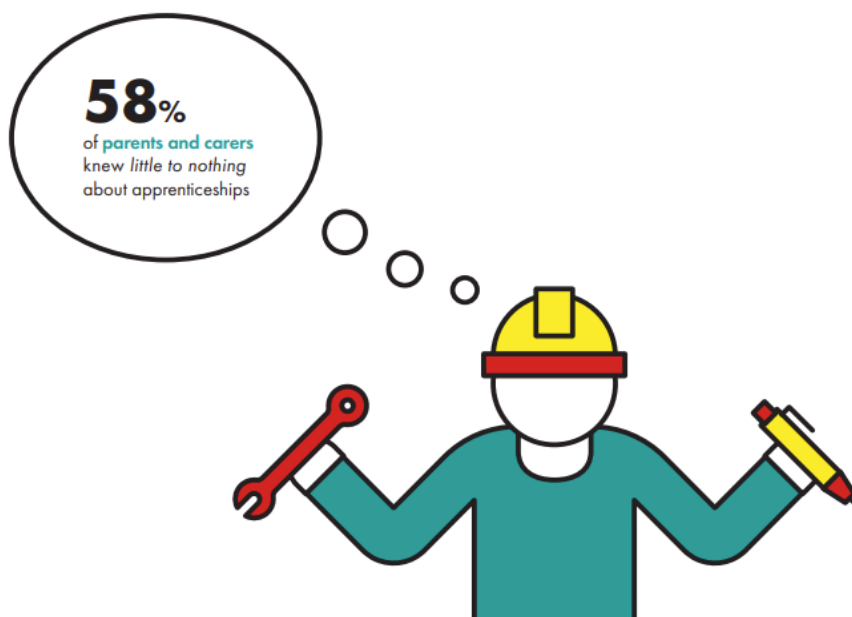


In our research [Youth solutions - improving education, training and employment in Northern Ireland](#), young people said that they needed more support at school to navigate their next steps into training and employment. They felt they needed more time and direction during their school years to explore the options for their future careers. This included information

about suitable progression routes, likely wages, and advice from those working in relevant sectors.

3. The status of vocational education should be elevated

Further Education (FE) in Northern Ireland is still often viewed as a lower status option compared to school sixth form or Higher Education. This perception may prevent young people from pursuing certain careers, as well as contributing to skills shortages and ‘over-education’ in areas where future labour and economic needs are limited. What perceptions currently exist about Further Education and vocational pathways? Our research findings indicate that traditional mindsets toward vocational education routes in Northern Ireland are changing, but only slowly. In a context where success is viewed as academic achievement, FE is still often seen as a lower-status route or second choice option.



// 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

4. Young people struggle to understand the relevance of some parts of the curriculum and they feel that there are important aspects that are missing

In our focus groups for [Youth solutions - improving education, training and employment in Northern Ireland](#), many young people struggled to understand how some parts of the curriculum content they were taught at school could be useful to them in the future. Young people highlighted the need to have access to more practical subjects, with more opportunities to try different types of jobs while still at school.

Participants also reported that there was not enough practical content to prepare them for what they described as the 'real world'. This included the need to learn about managing money and budgets, mortgages, tax and other areas that would be useful, such as basic first aid, driving, cooking and parenting. A specific theme identified as missing from the curriculum was the lack of education about how to start their own business or become an entrepreneur.

"See like whenever in English I'm having to analyse why this person said this and in which context and everything in like 'Of Mice and Men'. Why am I ever going to need to know why this fifty year old dude said what and in which context? When is that ever going to help you?"

Male, 15, North Belfast

"You need to learn about the real world. Like stuff that we're going to actually use when we're old."

Male, 15, Carrickfergus

5. Young people feel that school is far too focused on learning for exams

Our research [Youth solutions - improving education, training and employment in Northern Ireland](#) found that reducing exams and exam pressure was young people's top priority for change. This corroborated our earlier survey findings where 58.6% of the

sample reported there was too much exam pressure. Many young people expressed feeling overwhelmed and demoralised by the amount of revision, coursework and exams they had to do. Specifically, young people reported it was difficult to manage the number of exams scheduled during their final months of compulsory education in Year 12. Stress caused by exams was experienced by young people both mentally and physically.

“You’re put under a lot of anxiety. Like you go into school it’s a Halloween test, you come back from Halloween it’s Christmas test, you come back from Christmas it’s Easter test, when you come back from Easter test it’s your summer test, you don’t have like an hour’s breathing. And there’s a St Patrick’s day test as well. And then you’ve your GCSE’s and mocks on top of it.”

Female, 15, West Belfast

Teachers were predominately viewed by research participants as the source of pressure related to exams. Young people proposed that the exam system should be changed in three main ways. Firstly, young people felt they should have more choice in selecting their GCSE and A Level subjects. This was important as participants reported difficulty in motivating themselves to work for subjects which they did not choose and were not interested in. Secondly, young people suggested that a higher proportion of their grades should be based on coursework which could be carried out throughout the year. Thirdly, young people felt it would be less stressful if exams were scheduled better at points across the year.

We hope that this evidence submission is useful to the Review of the Curriculum. Please contact Pivotal on info@pivotalppf.org if we can provide any further information.

Ann Watt, Director

30 January 2025