

## Independent Review of Education's initial request for views - response from Pivotal

Pivotal is the independent public policy think tank for Northern Ireland. Pivotal is a new organisation which aims to help improve public policy in Northern Ireland, through promoting a greater use of evidence in decision-making and by involving a wider range of people in talking about policy issues that matter to them. Pivotal is independent of political parties and political ideologies, and we operate outside of government. We aim to enable discussion about policy issues in Northern Ireland that is evidence-based, inclusive and accessible.

Pivotal has published research reports on a range of issues (see [here](#)), including two recent reports which are particularly relevant to the Independent Review of Education. The first is about [education, skills and training for 14-19 year olds](#), looking at how well the education system is preparing young people for future life and work. The second is about [educational migration](#), exploring why so many young people choose to leave Northern Ireland for study and not return.

Our response to the Independent Review will focus on the findings from these two research projects, rather than addressing the full range of issues in the Review's wide remit. We will however offer some brief introductory comments covering the wider context for the Review. We would be happy to meet with the Review panel to discuss any aspect of this response.

### 1. Introductory comments

Pivotal gives a warm welcome to the Independent Review of Education, in particular its broad scope, the involvement of independent experts and the consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. While the remit is very wide and ambitious, in our view this is necessary for such a fundamental review.

#### ***Northern Ireland's skills and human capital***

Any discussion about education here needs to be placed in the context of Northern Ireland's overall low levels of skills and human capital compared to the rest of the UK and Ireland. Northern Ireland has a high proportion of the population with no/low qualifications, and a low proportion of the population with university education. Lower human capital in Northern Ireland is attributable to low educational attainment overall, the educational attainment gap and the migration of high-achieving young people to university and employment elsewhere.

In turn, low skills contribute to economic indicators that are amongst the lowest of the UK regions for productivity, innovation and economic output. Any analysis will emphasise the importance of improving skills to overall economic performance and wider wellbeing.

### ***Educational inequality***

While it produces excellent exam results for some young people, Northern Ireland's education system also has significant inequality in outcomes depending on socioeconomic background. This has been well documented in several high-profile reports. While the 'attainment gap' has reduced in recent years, it remains significant and contributes to the predominance of low paid jobs, poverty and inequality in later life.

### ***Skills for future life and work***

Improving education and skills is not just about addressing low attainment, but also about preparing people for changing roles as the nature of work evolves. Future skills needs will be increasingly in STEM subjects, coding, digital analytics, AI and digital marketing. There is also a need to focus on 'softer' transferable skills like problem solving, resilience, teamwork, critical thinking, people management and negotiation.

The [Skills Barometer](#) produced by Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre looks at the skills needs of the Northern Ireland economy over the next ten years. It shows that when compared with NI's current skills, there is:

- Marginal undersupply of people with level 6 qualifications (degree and above) and a particular undersupply in STEM subjects
- Significant undersupply of people with levels 4-5 and 3 qualifications (vocational qualifications completed at FE colleges)
- Significant oversupply at level 2 (GCSEs and below)

### ***Special Educational Needs***

Although we have not done any research reports specifically about Special Educational Needs (SEN), we would emphasise the inadequacy of current SEN provision in Northern Ireland. We would urge that this be a focus for the Independent Review. A recent [Public Accounts Committee report](#) was highly critical, highlighting the number of children with SEN who are being failed by the system. In 2019-20, 85% of assessments were not completed within the statutory 26 week target. Children who have not been properly assessed and supported for their SEN are likely to under-achieve in school, putting them at risk of poorer outcomes in the future.

### ***Implementation of previous reviews of education in Northern Ireland***

Northern Ireland has a history of producing excellent policy and strategy documents, but has been much less effective at ensuring that these are delivered to bring about real change. There is also an absence of evaluation evidence to allow assessment of whether past policy initiatives have been effective. In education, there have been many major reviews and initiatives over the years, particularly about the educational attainment gap. In the light of this, we would encourage the Independent Review to ensure that their recommendations are followed up by proper actions, monitoring, accountability for delivery and evaluation.

## 2. Education, training and skills for young people aged 14-19 years

Pivotal's recent report [Transforming the 14-19 education and skills system in Northern Ireland - youth voices and solutions](#) (September 2021) looked at how the education system is preparing young people for future life and work. As well as looking at research evidence and assessing the current policy framework, importantly we also gathered the views of more than 250 young people, along with teachers, parents and employers, about how the current system is preparing them for the future. Our research highlighted three strategic changes that need to take place to modernise the education system's approach to employability.

### ***Employability and skills training require greater emphasis throughout the curriculum to prepare young people for the future workforce***

- Northern Ireland's young people think schools are too heavily focused on maximising exam grades, such as by teaching pupils exam technique, and that this comes at the expense of broader personal development.
- Less than a third of local young people (31%) say they develop skills such as problem solving, communication, leadership and critical thinking in school.
- Only 25% young people and 29% of parents feel that young people were currently learning the skills they needed for future study and employment.

Young people said they would like:

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

### ***Careers advice should be innovative, responsive and accessible to young people and parents/carers***

- Only 20% of young people feel the careers advice they receive is helpful, compared with 25% who say it is no help at all (with the remaining 55% saying it is "somewhat" helpful). Almost four in five (79%) say that careers guidance could be improved.
- 55% of young people felt that work-based learning experiences were the most helpful in shaping their future choices.
- Both young people and parents felt that careers guidance should be more ambitious and up-to-date, covering areas of growth and innovation in the labour market.

Young people said they would like:

- 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

### ***The status of vocational education must be elevated through effective working across education providers***

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

Young people said they would like:

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

### **3. Educational migration – young people leaving Northern Ireland for study or work**

In December 2021, Pivotal published new research into why young people leave Northern Ireland for university study elsewhere, and what might encourage them to return after graduation. [Should I stay or should I go? Reasons for leaving Northern Ireland for study or work](#) involved a survey of over 300 current GB-based students from Northern Ireland followed by research interviews, as well as a series of interviews with older professionals who left Northern Ireland previously and have stayed away.

The research found that there are both “pull” factors which attract young people away, such as a broader range of university courses and the prospect of better job opportunities, as well as “push” factors which actively encourage them to leave Northern Ireland such as poor community relations, the unresolved social legacies of segregation, and their view that young people’s priorities are not represented by local politicians.

In terms of numbers, we know that there are around 17,000 young people from Northern Ireland studying at universities elsewhere. Past data show that around 64% have not returned one year after graduation. This represents a major loss of talent, and unlike elsewhere, it is not counter-balanced by significant inflows of students or graduates into Northern Ireland.

Why do young people leave Northern Ireland? Our research found that:

- The **ongoing effects of community divisions** and a **lack of political stability and maturity** in Northern Ireland are key reasons why so many high-achieving young people leave Northern Ireland after school and do not return.
- Young people find the **broader university options** and **better short- and long-term job prospects** available elsewhere attractive.

Unfortunately, the poor state of community relations in Northern Ireland does as much to drive young people away as the promise of varied studies and higher potential wages do to attract them elsewhere.

These concerns do not just make young people want to leave, but causes them to stay away too. The same reasons were given for why a huge number of leaver students will stay away from Northern Ireland after they graduate. Only 12% of the students in Pivotal’s recent research said they planned to return home after completing their studies.

Despite Northern Ireland's long-standing problems with low levels of skills, productivity and innovation, and skills shortages in some key growth sectors, the Executive has no policy in place to seek to retain more of these talented young people in Northern Ireland.

Pivotal's research also found that the reasons people leave have not really changed between generations. Detailed conversations with older professional workers who left Northern Ireland and never returned found similar concerns to those raised by today's young people: poor community relations, poor job opportunities, and a lack of confidence in local political leadership.

Pivotal's recommendations include that:

**The Executive should develop a strategy to address the loss of talented young people** – this needs to be an area of priority for policymakers, with specific planning that addresses all the recommendations in our report. For too long there has been a complete lack of attention or action from politicians here about this issue.

**Northern Ireland, as a society, needs to acknowledge the impact of its poor community relations** – many young people want to leave Northern Ireland because of ongoing segregation and the fact that so much of what happens here is framed within a green/orange lens. Respondents raised concerns about segregated schools, the fact this segregation can continue in local universities, and weariness with the constant focus on community background and identity.

**The Executive needs to demonstrate that it is working collectively to move Northern Ireland forwards** - young people do not feel represented by politicians or political debate in Northern Ireland, and their view is that government is "moving backwards rather than forwards". Participants said they want politics to move beyond green-vs-orange arguments and on to things that matter to them, such as economic recovery, women's rights and tackling climate change.

**The Executive should complete a full review of the funding for Higher Education** in Northern Ireland, with a view to providing sufficient places for an appropriate range of courses across the local universities. The Executive itself acknowledges that there is a long-standing funding deficit in higher education. In addition, the MaSN cap on student numbers has remained unchanged for a decade (apart from a slight increase in response to Covid impacts). This is despite young people from Northern Ireland having amongst the highest rates of participation in higher education in the UK.

Other recommendations include **the Executive should work with universities and employers** to improve undergraduate work placements and graduate opportunities; **alternative routes to Higher Education** must be considered to help retain and upskill young people, including better routes into university via Further Education; and **the Executive should reduce the obstacles that prevent older diaspora returning to Northern Ireland**, such as complications with visas for spouses, and pensions and tax barriers.

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