

**Developing the Skills for Northern Ireland's Future
Citizen Space Survey Results**

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Background

On 30 January 2025, the Public Accounts Committee took evidence from members of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly on their views and experiences in respect of qualifications and careers advice.

The evidence provided by the Youth Assembly Members provided the Committee with great insight into the views of Young People, and as a result, a Citizen Space Survey was developed which mirrored and expanded upon the research already conducted amongst Youth Assembly Members.

Development of the survey

The survey was developed using the questions included in the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly report, alongside additional questions raised by members during the evidence session.

The survey was launched on 4 March 2025 and advertised through the NI Assembly Social Media channels, via the schools C2K notice board, and through emails sent to all secondary schools and FE Colleges with a link to the survey.

The survey closed on 26 March 2025 and a total of 538 responses were received.

Profile of respondents

The survey was open to students from 11 to 19 years old in secondary education.

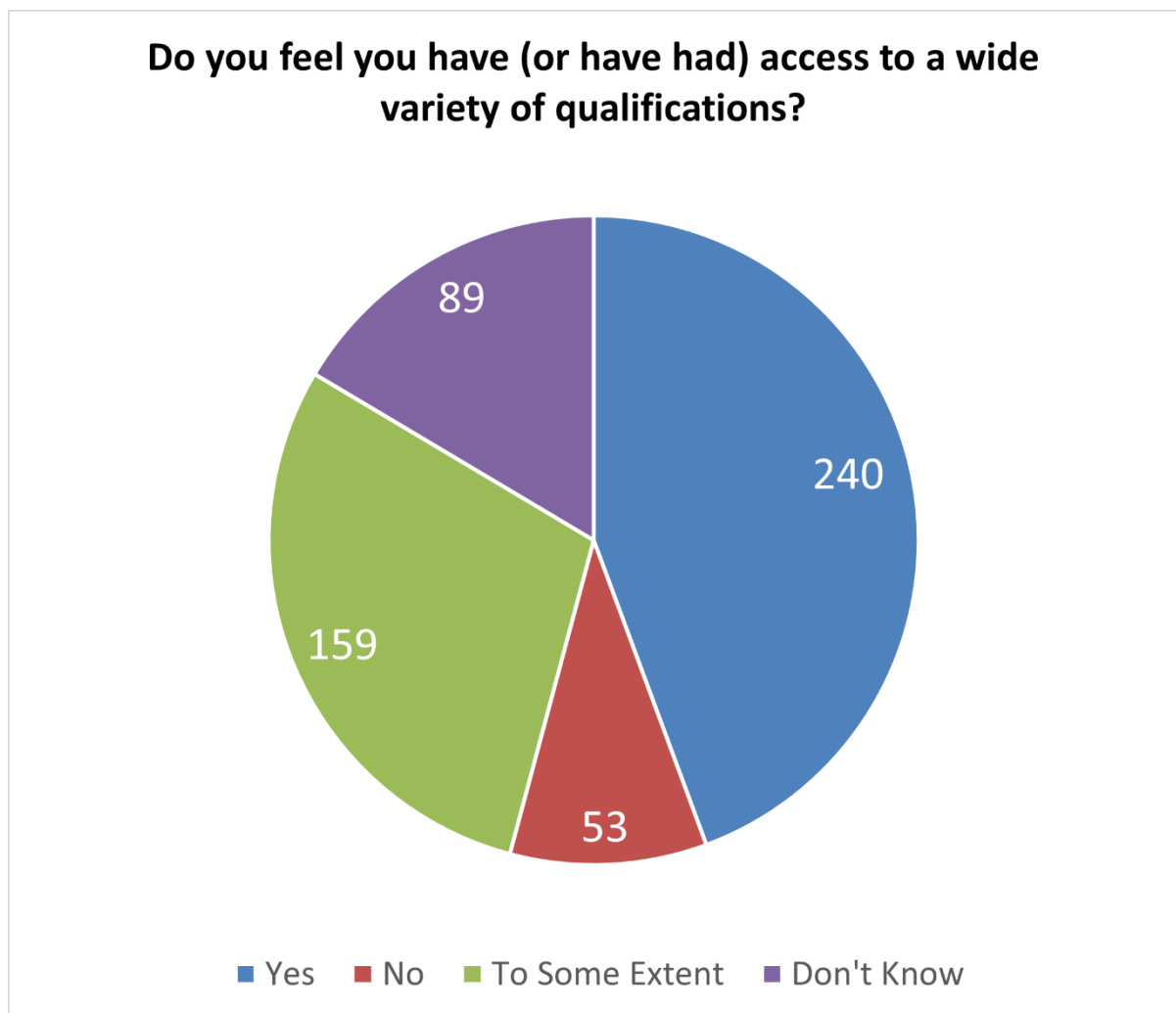
Of the responses received, 310 (57.62%) were from students at Secondary Schools, 199 (36.99%) were from students at Grammar Schools, 12 students (2.23%) were at FE colleges and one student (0.19%) was undertaking an apprenticeship.

79% of respondents were aged between 14 and 19 (426 respondents), and therefore will have chosen, or be in the process of choosing qualifications for GCSE's and beyond. Within this group of respondents, 55% attend Secondary Schools whilst 38% attend Grammar Schools.

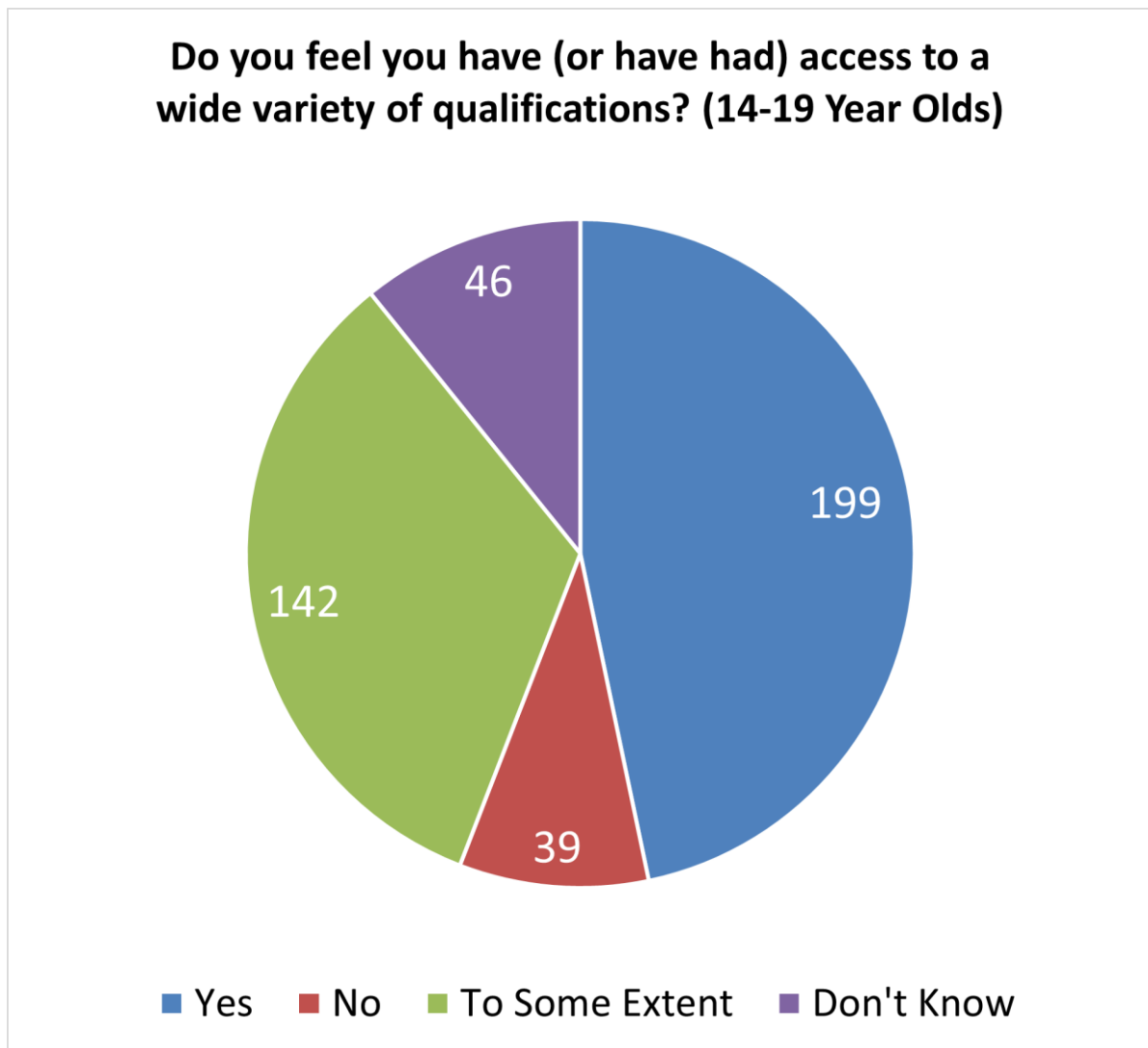
Access to Qualifications

Of the 538 respondents, 240 (44.61%) felt that they had (or have had) access to a wide variety of qualifications.

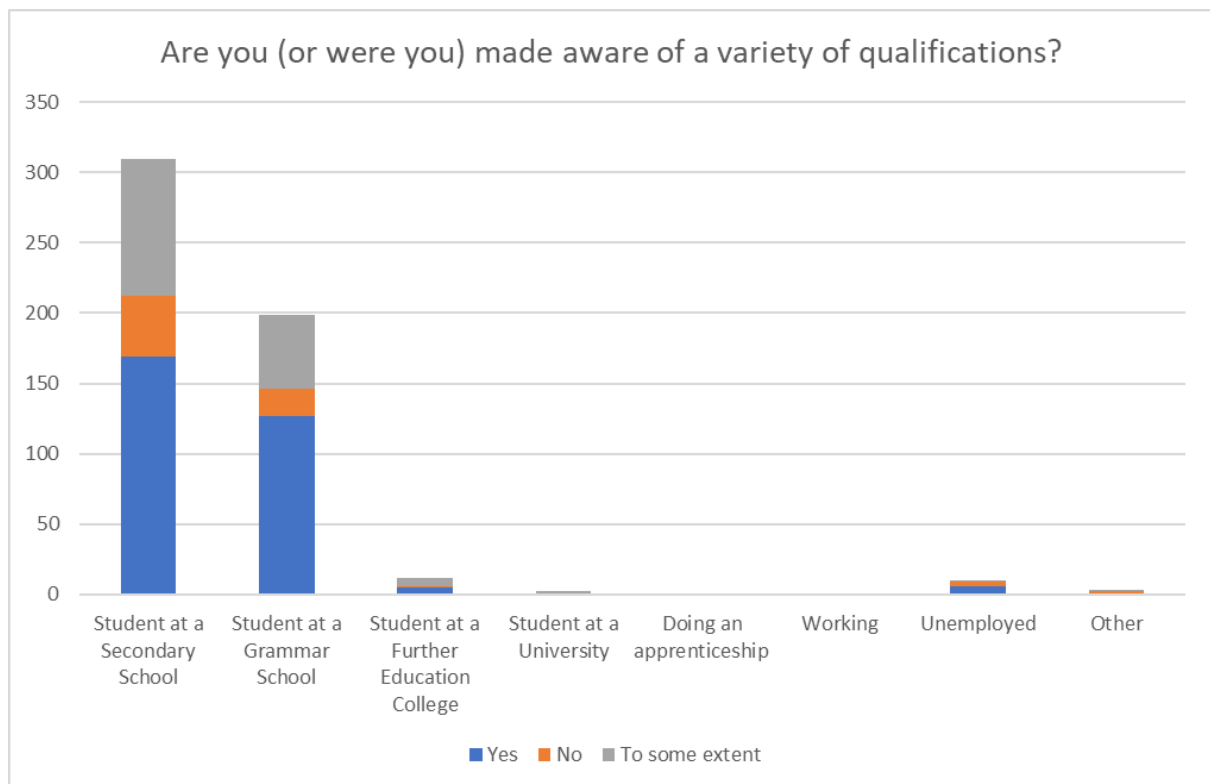
Only 53 respondents (9.85%) advised that they did not have access to a wide variety of qualifications, with the remainder indicating they did, to some extent, or did not know.



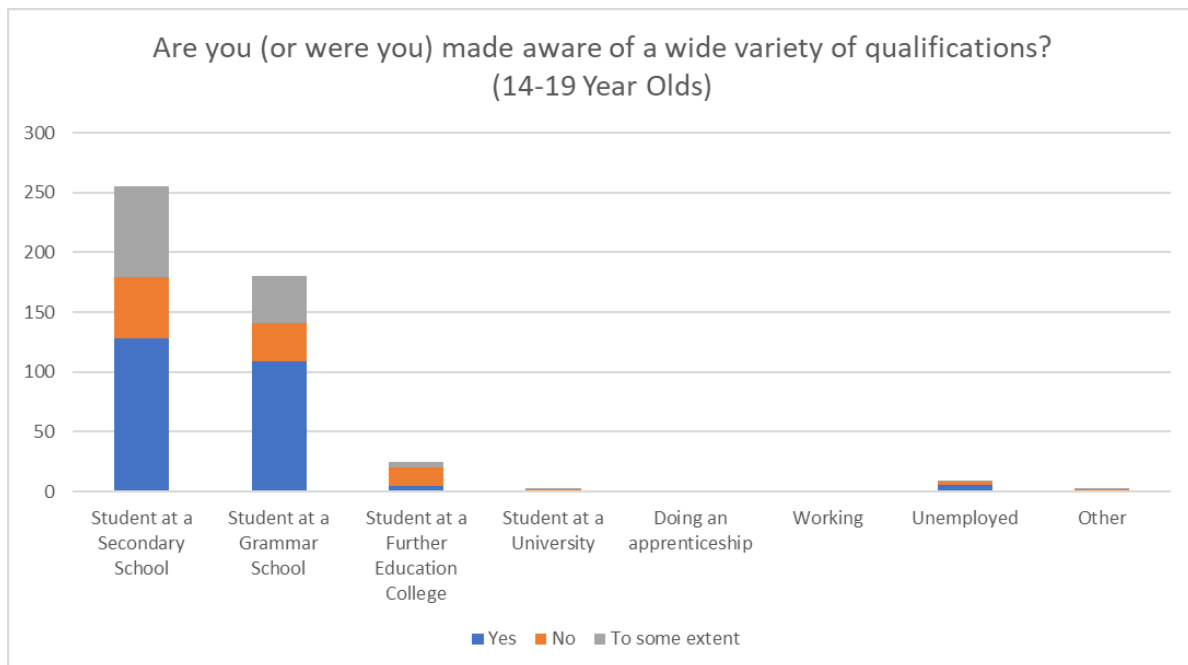
Amongst respondents between the ages of 14 and 19 (426 respondents), 46.71% feel that they have, or have had, access to a variety of qualifications, 9.15% say they have not had access to a variety of qualifications.



54.5% of respondents at Grammar Schools indicated that they felt they had access to a wide variety of qualifications, this was higher amongst those at Secondary Schools at 63.8%.



Amongst respondents between the ages of 14 and 19 (426 respondents), 33% of respondents at Grammar Schools indicated that they felt they had access to a wide variety of qualifications, this was higher amongst those at Secondary Schools at 44%.



57.62% of all respondents and 23.24% of respondents aged between 14 and 19 feel that there are qualifications that they would like to be offered in addition to those currently available to them. There was little difference in this between Secondary and Grammar schools.

These include a variety of academic and vocational subjects such as;

- Single award sciences
- Further maths
- Psychology, criminal psychology and child psychology
- Sociology
- Philosophy
- Politics
- Law
- Languages including Latin, Spanish, German and Bulgarian
- Computer programming and coding
- Health and Social Care

- Child Development
- Hair and Beauty
- Mechanics and vehicle maintenance and repair
- Woodwork
- Agriculture
- Zoology
- Animal Care
- Physical Education
- Arts courses and apprenticeships including: music, music media, drama, moving image art, textiles, graphic design

Respondents also suggested they would like access to different types of qualifications including;

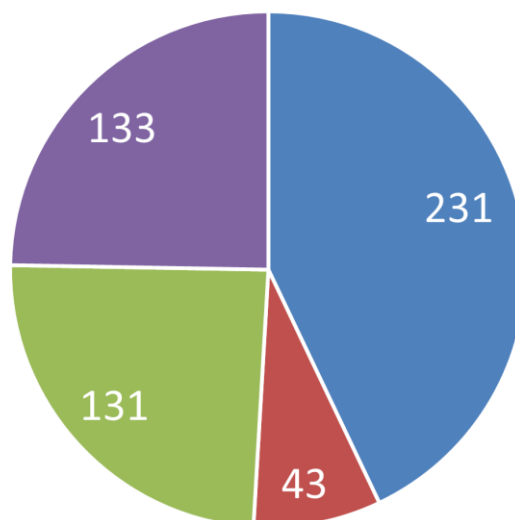
- Degree apprenticeships and foundation level courses
- Apprenticeships

They would also like more information on how universities view the different types of qualifications when considering applications, as some will not accept particular types of qualification.

Alternatives to school -based provision

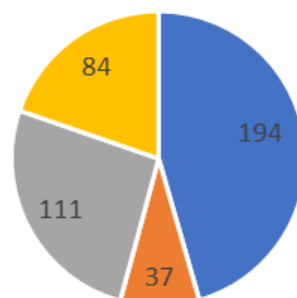
There was little difference by age-group in respect of respondents feeling that they are encouraged to consider alternatives to school-based provision of post-16 education.

At post 16, are you encouraged to explore alternatives to school-based provision?



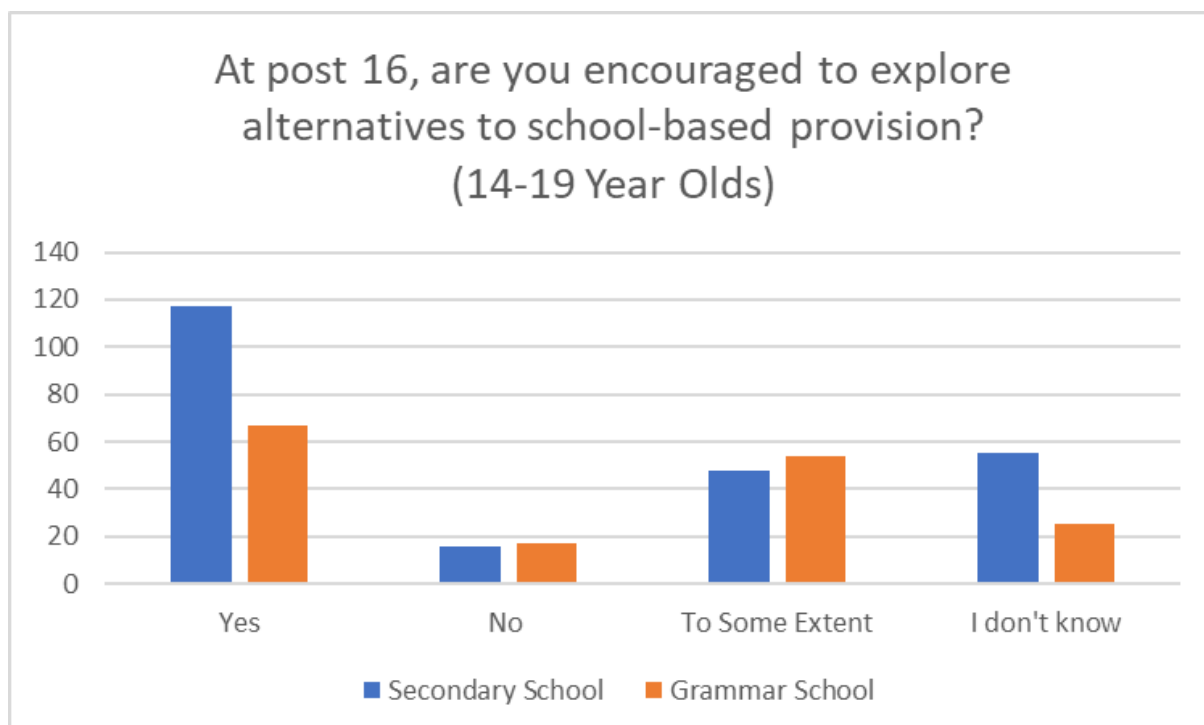
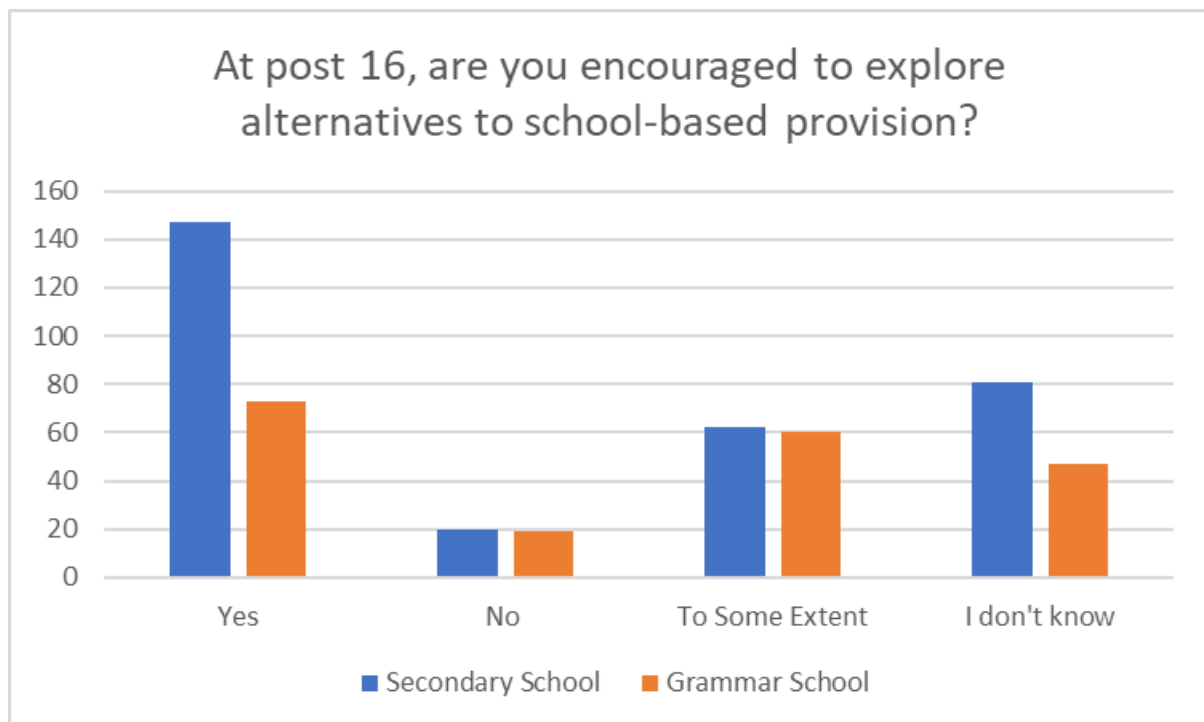
■ Yes ■ No ■ To Some Extent ■ I don't know

At post 16, are you encouraged to explore alternatives to school-based provision?(14-19 Year Olds)



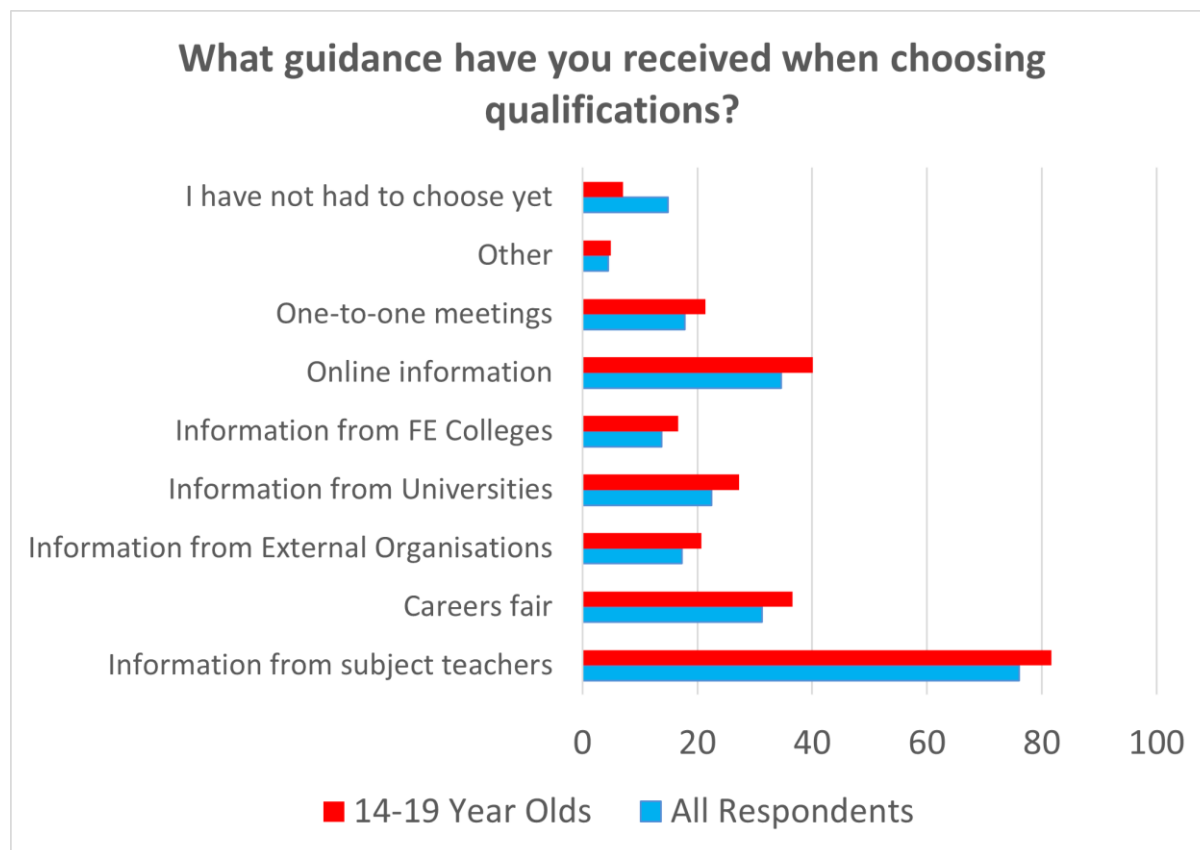
■ Yes ■ No ■ To Some Extent ■ I don't know

However, fewer respondents from Grammar Schools both overall and within the 14-19 age group indicated that they were encouraged to consider alternatives to school-based education.



Guidance

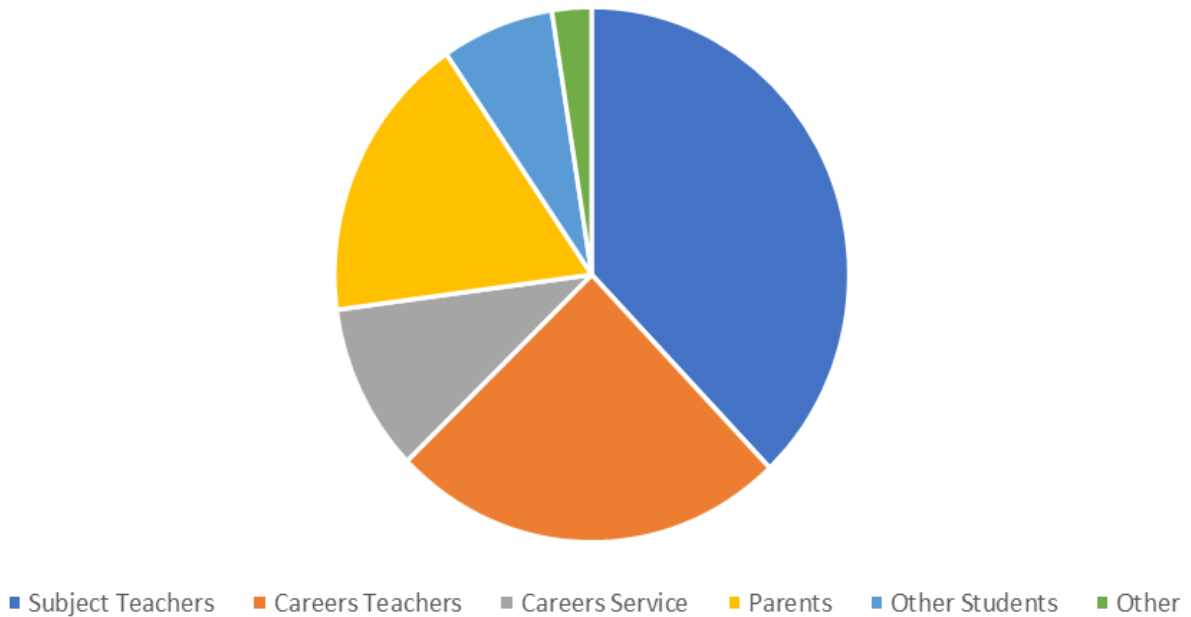
The chart below outlines the percentage of respondents who have received each type of support in choosing qualifications.



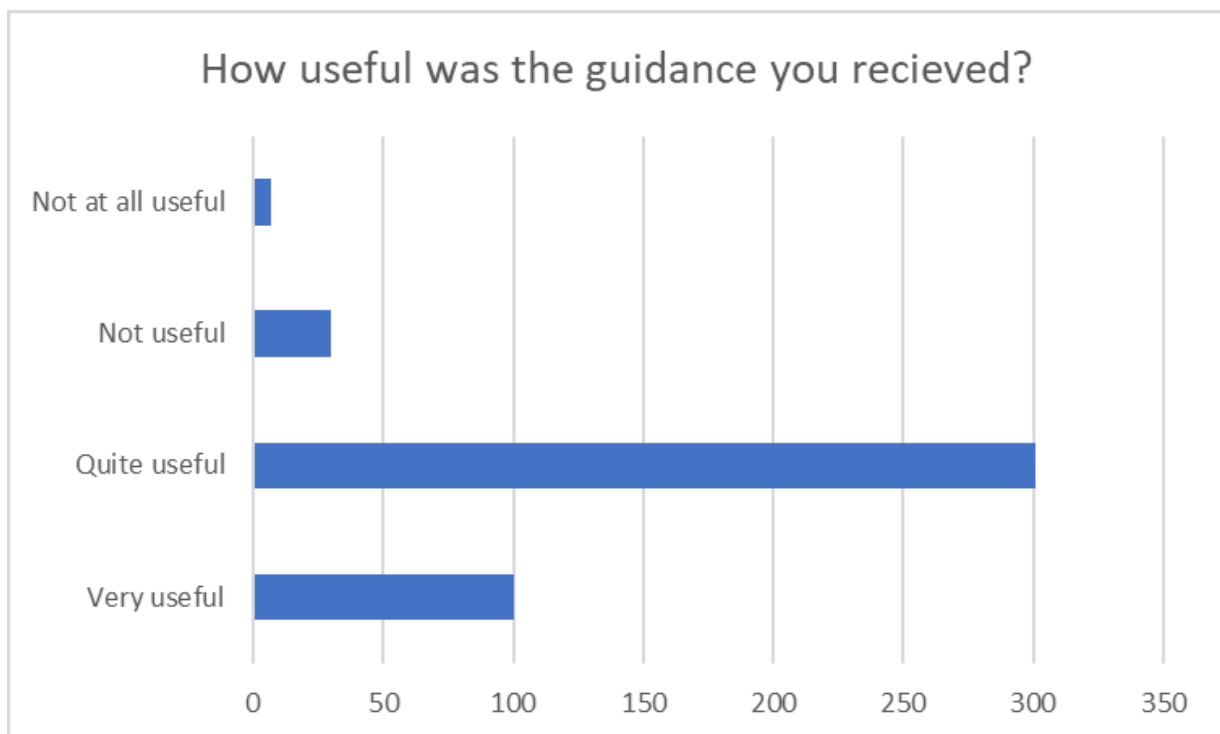
As a percentage the 14-19 age group have indicated receiving more guidance overall, however this is to be expected as they are more likely to have received guidance in order to choose qualifications.

Overall there was little difference in who provided the guidance between age groups, a total of 485 respondents indicated that they had received advice, of these 407 were within the 14-19 age bracket.

Who provided this advice?



The majority of advice has come from Subject Teachers, Careers Teachers and the Careers Service. All of those indicating that they had received advice from the Careers Service fell within the 14-19 age bracket.



Of those who have chosen qualifications, which included 438 respondents, the majority indicated that the advice received has been quite useful or very useful. When asked what else might be helpful in helping respondents choose qualifications, the main points raised were;

- More careers-based support including identification of careers pathways with certain subjects and combinations of subjects, information on job prospects after completing qualifications, insights from employers and professionals in the field and opportunities for work experience.
- More advice and guidance including helping students to understand their predicted grades and strengths and weaknesses to inform qualification choices.
- More detailed information about what each qualification involves including an understanding of what classes and coursework would be involved and opportunities to hear from older students or those who have previously completed the qualification.
- Opportunities to seek honest advice and opinions from others, including older students, parents and guardians, teachers, careers advisers including individual meetings with teachers and career advisors.
- Clear information on university requirements and acceptance of qualifications and more information on vocational and other non-university pathways.
- Opportunities to attend open days, taster courses, and career fairs.

Over half of respondents indicated they had a career path in mind with around 30% indicating that they had a career path in mind to some extent with around 80% of those respondents saying they felt supported, at least to some extent in working towards this.

Academic vs vocational qualifications

Of the 503 respondents who answered this question, 50% believed that academic and vocational qualifications were equally valued, within the 14-19 ages group (426 respondents) this dropped to 36.62%.

Of those who felt that academic and vocational qualifications were not equally valued, 11.71% of all respondents, rising to 25.82% in the 14-19 age group.

Respondents from a Secondary school environment were more likely to report that academic and vocational qualifications were equally valued.

Responses and comments indicate that in grammar schools, there is a greater focus on academic achievements and university pathways. Academic pathways are seen as preferable to FE Colleges and vocational pathways which results in students being encouraged to pursue A-Levels over vocational qualifications which are often undermined or not discussed as viable options. There appears to be a more balanced approach within secondary schools with both academic and vocational qualifications being promoted.

Comments indicated that academic qualifications are generally perceived as more valuable and prestigious by wider society and that those who attended university had better career prospects. Respondents also noted that they do not feel that vocational qualifications are valued by universities. Some respondents mentioned that vocational qualifications like BTECs and OCNs are looked down upon and not promoted as strongly.

Skills Needs in Northern Ireland

Of the total respondents, 40.7% (219 respondents) indicated that they are aware of the skills needs in Northern Ireland, this increased to 56.34% of 14-19 year olds.

When asked if they felt that the current Northern Ireland curriculum meets the skills needs in Northern Ireland, the majority of respondents felt that the curriculum either meets the needs to some extent (36.43%), or fully meets the needs (23.05%) only 10.97% felt that it does not meet the needs.

Within the 14-19 age group 62.44% felt that the curriculum meets the needs to some extent (41.55%), or fully meets the needs (20.89%) while the number that feel the curriculum does not meet these needs also increased slightly to 12.21%.

Collaborative Practices

Just over 40% of respondents indicated that they have experience of collaborative practices between schools and FE colleges such as being able to take a course not offered in their school or college at another school or college as part of the normal school day.

In common with the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly findings, more students at non-selective, secondary schools indicated that they were aware of collaborative processes than those in grammar schools.

Duplication of Provision

Just over half of respondents indicated that they did not know of instances of duplication across all age groups. Where respondents indicated that they were aware of instances of duplication, further information was requested. While 107 respondents indicated that they were aware of duplication, only seven respondents provided relevant further information which outlined examples of duplication of provision included courses in;

- Technology and Design
- Health and Social Care
- ICT
- Construction
- There is also duplication of provision of GCSE and A Levels between schools and FE colleges.

There was a greater awareness of duplication in provision between schools and FE colleges amongst respondents from secondary schools.

Work Experience

While work experience was not the subject of questions in the survey conducted by the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly, their feedback and the evidence heard by the Committee identified potential issues relating to the provision of work experience.

289 (53.72%) respondents indicated that they had undertaken work experience, of these 255 fell within the 14–19 age group. There were a range of routes to work experience, some was organised through schools, however a significant number of respondents indicated that their schools did not arrange work experience and had organised it by themselves.

Over 85% of respondents felt that work experience is quite or very important in helping them make decisions about their qualifications and careers.

Both Youth Assembly Members and survey respondents indicated that access to work experience varies, with some schools no longer offering work experience. One respondent also suggested that more should be done to encourage companies to offer work experience as it can be difficult to access placements.

One 17-year-old respondent stated “Many people I know have changed their career choices based off of (sic) 3 days in a workplace

environment. I feel as though it would be more beneficial to have more days in work experience later in the year as it gives way more of an insight to what that career is like.”

Appendix 1: Citizen Space Survey

Overview

The Public Accounts Committee commenced its inquiry into Developing the Skills for NI's Future in November 2024. To date the inquiry has heard evidence from representatives of the Department for the Economy, the Department of Education and the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. You can find out more about the inquiry here - [Inquiry into Developing the skills for Northern Ireland's future](#).

Why your views matter

Members would like to hear from young people in post-primary education about their experiences of qualifications and careers advice. This survey should take 10 to 15 minutes to complete, the information gathered will be used to inform the recommendations made when the Committee publish the report, publication is currently scheduled for May 2025.

Please read the Assembly Committees Privacy Notice Below.

General Information

1. What age are you?

(Required)

Please select only one item

- 11
- 12
- 13
- 14
- 15
- 16
- 17
- 18
- 19

2. Which of the options below best describes you?

(Required)

Please select only one item

- Student at a Secondary School
- Student at a Grammar School
- Student at a Further Education College
- Student at a University
- Doing an apprenticeship
- Working
- Unemployed
- Other
-

3. Do you consent to your submission being published on the Committee's website and included in the Committee's report?

(Required)

Please select only one item

- Yes. Publish in full.
- Yes. Publish but with my personal information and any content that could be used to identify me redacted.

Access to qualifications

4. Do you feel you have (or have had) access to a variety of qualifications (academic, vocational, apprenticeships etc.)?

What do the terms 'academic' and 'vocational' mean?

Academic education emphasises theoretical knowledge and prepares students for higher education or professions that require advanced study such as teaching, medicine or law.

Vocational education focuses on practical skills and training for specific careers such as plumbing, electrician, joinery, or beautician.

(Required)

Please select only one item

- Yes
- No
- To some extent
- I don't know

5. Are you (or were you) made aware of a wide variety of qualifications?

(Required)

Please select only one item

- Yes
- No
- To some extent

6. Are there any qualifications you would like to access that are not currently offered to you?

(Required)

Please select only one item

- Yes
- No

If you said yes, which qualifications would you like to access that are not offered to you?

If you said yes, why have you been unable to access these qualifications?

7. At post 16, are you encouraged to explore alternatives to school-based provision?

(Required)

Please select only one item

- Yes
- No
- To some extent
- I don't know

Guidance

8. What guidance have you received when choosing qualifications? (Click all that apply)

(Required)

Please select all that apply

- Information from subject teachers
- Careers fair
- Information from external organisations
- Information from universities
- Information from further education colleges
- Online information
- One to one meetings
- Other
- I have not had to choose qualifications yet

Other -Please provide an example.

9. Who provided this advice?

(Required)

Please select all that apply

- Subject teachers
- Careers teachers
- Careers service
- Parents
- Other students
- Other
- Not applicable

Other - please provide further detail

10. How useful was the guidance you received?

(Required)

Please select only one item

- Very useful
- Quite useful
- Not useful
- Not at all useful
- I have not had to choose qualifications yet

11. What else might have been useful in helping you choose qualifications?

12. Do you have a career path in mind?

(Required)

Please select only one item

- Yes
- No

13. If you do have a career path in mind, has this influenced your qualification choices?

Please select only one item

- Yes
- No
- To some extent

14. If you do have a career path in mind, have you been supported in working towards this?

Please select only one item

- Yes
- No
- To some extent

Academic and vocational qualifications

15. In your experience, are academic and vocational qualifications equally promoted or valued?

(Required)

Please select only one item

- Yes
- No
- To some extent

16. Why do you say that?

Skills needs in Northern Ireland

17. Are you aware of the skills needs in Northern Ireland?

(Required)

Please select only one item

- Yes
- No

18. Do you think the current Northern Ireland curriculum meets these skills needs?

Click on the 'Skills in Demand' link below before you answer this question.

[Skills in Demand](#)

(Required)

Please select only one item

- Yes
- No
- To some extent
- I don't know

Collaboration and duplication

- 19.** Do you have any experience of collaborative practices between schools and FE colleges? For example being able to take a course not offered in your school or college in another school or college as part of your normal school day.

(Required)

Please select only one item

- Yes
- No

- 20.** Are you aware of instances of duplication, where schools and colleges offer the same vocational qualifications?

(Required)

Please select only one item

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

If you are aware of instances of duplication, please give examples.

Work experience

21. Have you ever had any work experience opportunities?

(Required)

Please select only one item

- Yes
- No

22. If yes, who organised the work experience?

Please select all that apply

- School
- College
- University
- Me and my family
- Other

Other - please advise who organised the work experience.

23. How important is work experience for students in helping them make decisions about qualifications and careers?

(Required)

Please select only one item

- Very important
- Quite important
- Not important
- Not at all important
- I don't know

Further comments

24. Do you have any additional comments not already mentioned?