



**Public Accounts Committee Inquiry**  
**Developing the Skills for**  
**Northern Ireland's Future**

**Youth Assembly Members' views**

**22 January 2025**

## Background

The Youth Assembly was established in June 2021. The current 90 Youth Assembly Members took their seats in October 2023. At the time of recruitment, they were in school years 9-12 which is approximately age 12-16. They are a diverse group. Membership includes young people from every constituency and recruitment was designed to ensure proportionate representation of Section 75 categories including gender, religious background, race, care experience, sexuality, disability, and young people with caring responsibilities.

The Youth Assembly was established to perform three functions:

- To engage with the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly, specifically with Assembly Committees on legislation and inquiries relevant to young people;
- To undertake project work generated by the three Youth Assembly committees; and
- To enable consultation with government Departments and to participate in youth voice projects.

## Developing the Skills for Northern Ireland's Future

Youth Assembly Members received a briefing from Public Accounts Committee staff and deputy Chair Cheryl Brownlee MLA on 22 January 2025. They had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss the key points. Youth Assembly Members will attend the Public Accounts Committee meeting on 30 January 2025 to present their views.

Youth Assembly Members gave their views via a Mentimeter survey. The survey results can be accessed in Appendix A.

The Youth Assembly Members wish to record their gratitude to the Committee staff and to Cheryl Brownlee MLA for meeting with them which has been invaluable to them in understanding the inquiry and forming their views.

## Youth Assembly Views

Youth Assembly Members welcomed this inquiry and the opportunity to take part. Eleven Members attended the online meeting on 22 January. Most of the Members who attended the meeting are students in Grammar schools. This is coincidental, however this should be taken into account when interpreting the survey results.

### Access to qualifications

Most of the Members stated that they had access to a wide range of qualifications and were made aware of a variety of options. Members described that, in their schools, progression from GCSEs to A levels is a 'default' expectation. *"Going to Tech is seen as a last resort"*. Most of the Members said that they were not encouraged to explore alternatives to school-based provision at post-16.

They reported that they were required to achieve a certain number of points in their GCSEs in order to be allowed to return in Sixth Form. If they do not do well in AS (lower sixth), they will not be allowed back to complete the A level in upper sixth.

One Member, who attends an all-ability school, said that her school provides a range of qualifications at post-16 including BTECs, apprenticeships and A levels.

Members would like to have more GCSE options including Politics, PE, economics, and a wider variety of languages. Some said that they do not feel they have enough choice as they have to study certain subjects (e.g. English, maths, science, languages) and, depending how the choices boxes are laid out, they can be limited in the combinations they can choose.

Members reported that if you do not wish to choose academic subjects, there are few or no vocational qualifications to choose from. They felt that challenges with fitting the subjects into the timetable means that they can't always access the subjects they wish to study. One Member said that the timetabling and subject option process seemed to prioritise the top students.

## Guidance

Members felt that they received adequate careers guidance when choosing qualifications and most said that the advice provided was useful though there was a great emphasis on the A levels to university pathway within their schools.

They had opportunities to meet with a range of adults including teachers, careers teachers, external careers advisors and external organisations.

Members said they would like more one-to-one, personalised advice which would include consideration of grades but also individual strengths and interests. They would like clearer information on what to expect from the qualifications (i.e. how much coursework will there be? when are the exams?) and where this could lead.

One Member said that, as a young carer, she would like advice on how to manage her responsibilities at home and plan for her own career.

One Member reported that the careers advisor they met couldn't access their previous grades and therefore they felt that the advice they were able to provide was limited.

They would like opportunities to find out more about careers through guided research and work experience. They would value advice from former students and more information on study opportunities abroad.

## Academic v. vocational qualifications

The vast majority of Members stated that academic and vocational qualifications are not equally promoted or valued.

Members felt that, in their schools, they were expected to continue on to Sixth form to study A levels. Many said that only academic subjects were available at their school. They further said that apprenticeships were "undervalued" and *"only seen as an option if you're struggling with academics"*. They would like less focus on university as the only option.

Some Members reported that teachers in their schools encourage pupils to take "their subject" for GCSE or A level even if it may not be a good fit and make pupils feel guilty if they don't choose it. They

stated that this was because the teacher did not want to have their timetable filled with 'Learning for Life and work' lessons.

One Member reported that teachers in some subject areas were more open to vocational routes e.g. teachers of Home Economics, but that this depended on the subject.

### **Skills needs in Northern Ireland**

Most Members are not aware of the skills needs in Northern Ireland. A brief discussion was held following the survey about the importance of the following areas to the Northern Ireland's future economy: STEM, ICT, creative and digital media, agri-food sector, business and financial services, manufacturing and engineering, renewable energies, and health and life sciences.

Members were equally split on whether the current curriculum aligns to these areas.

### **Collaborative practices and duplication**

Members were split on the question of collaborative practices between schools and Further education (FE) colleges. They suggested that it is more common in non-selective post primary schools than in grammar schools.

They are aware of some examples of duplication citing schools which offer vocational courses such as beauty, childcare, technology which are also offered at the local FE college.

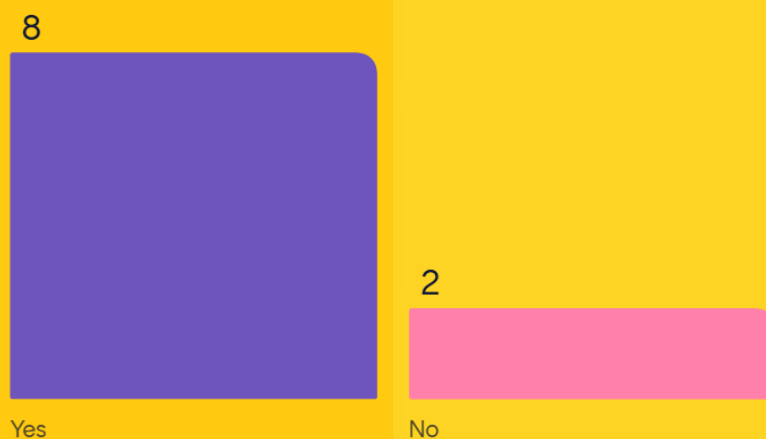
### **Further comments**

Views on work experience came about through a discussion following the survey. Members reported that work experience which is organised through their school is becoming less common as schools cannot afford the insurance required for pupils. They agreed that work experience is an important part of exploring future careers. They said that, where a school does not offer a work experience programme, they must organise this themselves without help from their school.

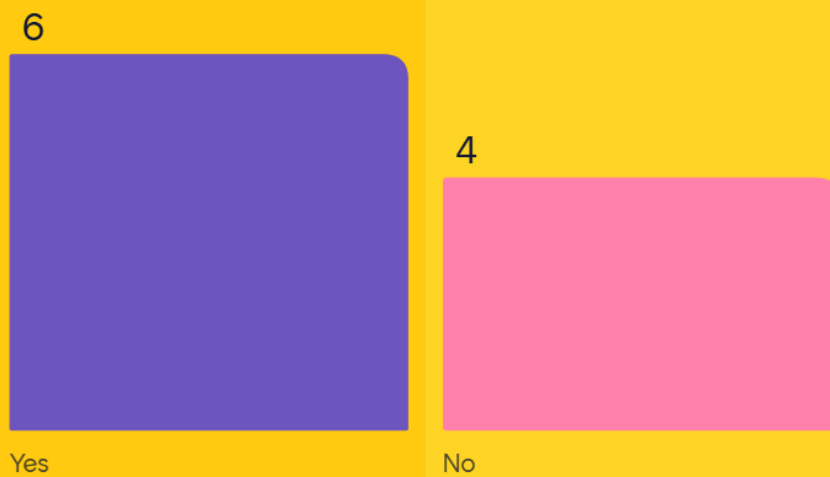
Members felt that careers education must begin earlier in the school journey and that there should be better links between schools, local businesses and FE colleges.

## Appendix A Mentimeter responses

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



Are you made aware of a wide variety of qualifications?



## What guidance have you received when choosing qualifications?

19 responses

1 on 1 meeting with careers advisor

A phone call with a careers advisor

We had career advisors and unifrog accounts.

Individual careers interview with a specialist Careers teacher in Year 10 before GCSE choices

University course requirements

What is needed for University

I had a careers meeting

Teachers advise what subjects to pick

A level requirements

Carriers advisor

We were really only told about choosing universities for GCSEs rather than actual careers

Mostly to do with personal preference/ personality

University representatives, employers etc come in to speak to us.

Subject week, (teachers show how a gcse class plays out for their subject!)

met with llw teacher to discuss what alevels/ gcse you want to do

Peoplehawk accounts

In the subject itself, we've been told what career paths it can lead to

Year 14s talking about subjects

Outside org chat

## Who provided this advice?

10 responses

Teacher

Students

Music teacher

Careers teachers at school

LLW teacher

Head of careers

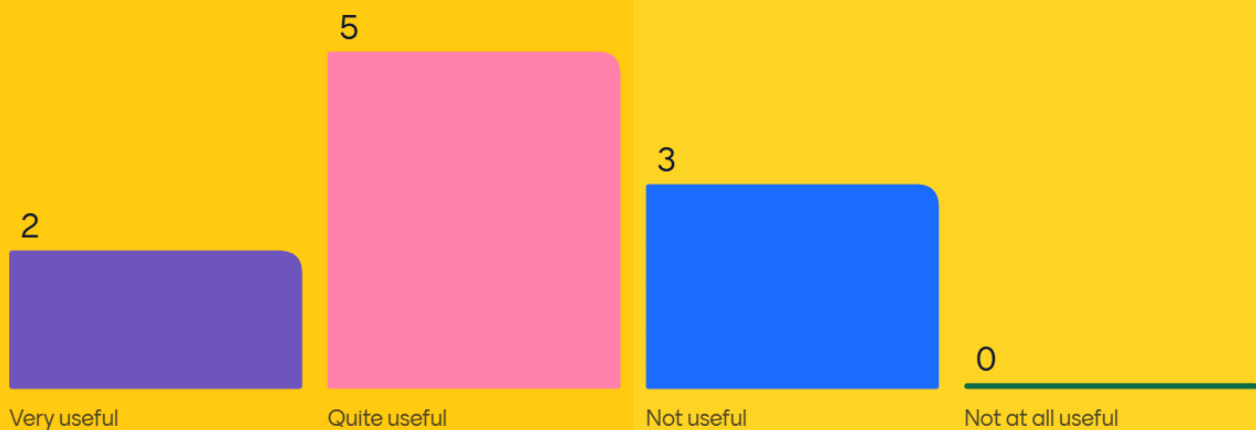
Career advisors and teachers and past pupils

Careers service NI

Careers department

Teachers for GCSEs and carriers advisor and teachers for the future

## How useful was the guidance you received?



## What else might have been useful?

14 responses

A careers teacher

More individual advice rather than just general guidance

More transparency surrounding coursework /exams in subjects

A second meeting a few weeks later with carers teacher or service.

Carriers workshop and possibly independent people

We had a career advisor, she was supposed to know our grades but wasnt able to access them, that would have helped. Honestly online resources were better.

Bringing more talks abroad caters before GCSEs

Less focus on university

speaking to students who are studying the subject were thinking of at uni

Contact with former students who are now in a similar career about their experiences

Allowing us to do more Research in to jobs

More information on studying abroad

More personal meetings with teachers and careers advisors

Not just subjects but interests such as hobbies



Do you have a career path in mind?

10



Yes

0

No

If yes, has this influenced your qualification choices?

5



Yes

0

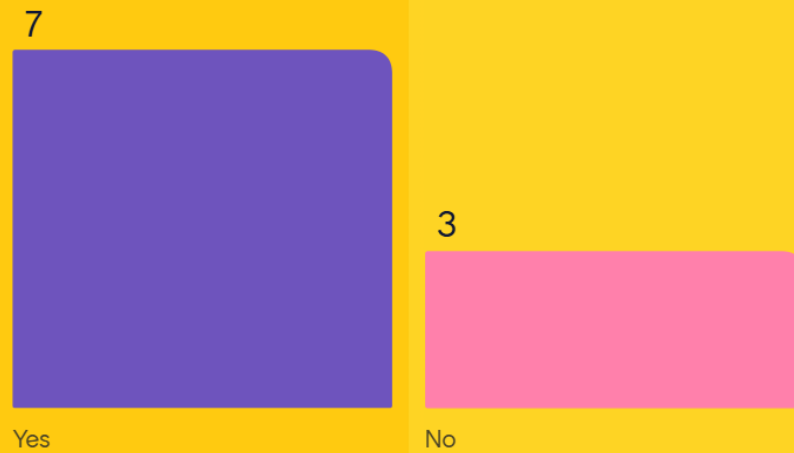
No

5



To some degree

# Have you been supported in working towards this?



## Are there any qualifications you would like to access that are not currently offered to you? What are the reasons you have been unable to access them?

16 responses

GCSE politics

I would love to do politics and government, but it's not offered

Gcse politics

I would like to do politics

GCSE politics

gcse politics and gcse pe

"Classical civilisations" brooke

In my school there is nearly too much choice

Different languages but not offered and wont let me do it even privately

A wider range of languages!

Gcse politics, classics, economics

No single/double award sciences offered

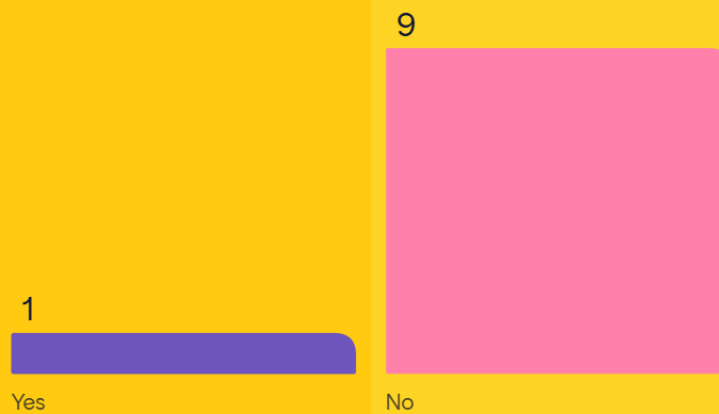
Economics

Drama

If our subject choices dont fit into the timetable you are denied them

Our timetabling prioritised top students

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



## Why do you say that?

16 responses

STEM

Going to a grammar school, doing a levels is expected.

Schools DO NOT promote going down more vocational routes e.g. trades

There is a strong emphasis on continuing through to sixth form, which is mostly academic in nature

As my school only offers academic options rather than vocational

Stigma

Apprenticeships are kind of undervalued - seen as an option if you're struggling at academics

Can only do academic subjects

If you cant do the academic side its hard to do anything else

In my school btecs, ctecs, apprenticeship and going to tec are all promoted equally.

My school heavily promotes A-Level routes, even at GCSE it's all anyone can talk about!

A lot of teachers would give a lot extra effort to those hoping to do a levels

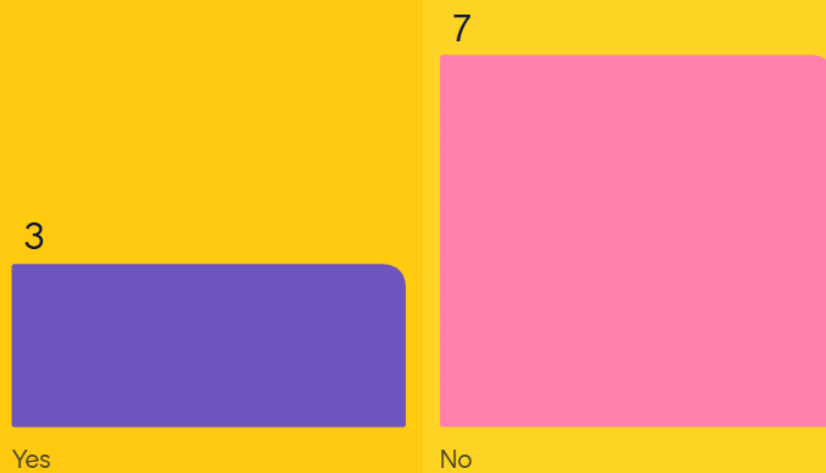
Suppression of English based subjects

My school used to offer SERC alongside a level but that stopped due to being under subscribed.

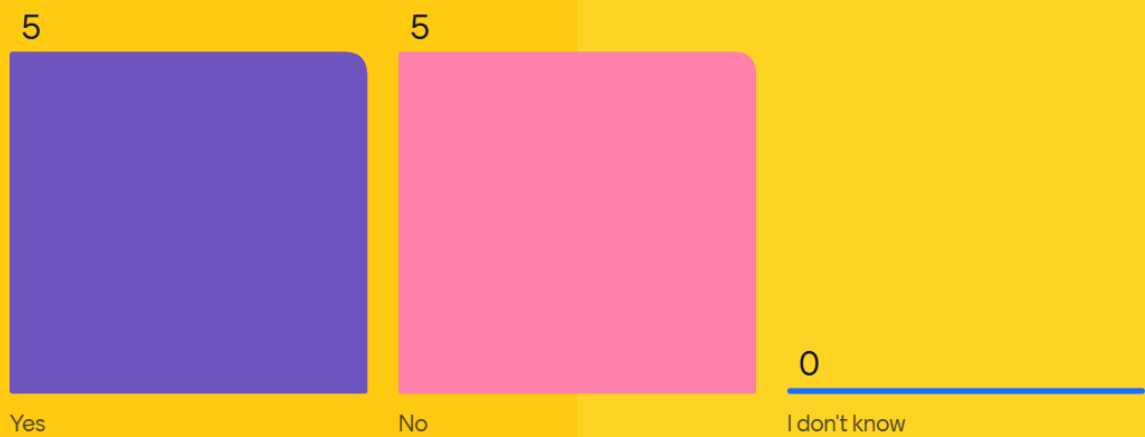
barely any advice on vocational options, it's almost expected to do a-levels and to aim to go to university

Although some subjects eg HE strongly emphasise going to a FE college rather than A Levels - some subjects are more open to it than others

Are you aware of the 'skills needs' in NI?



Do you feel the current curriculum aligns to these skills needs?



Do you have any experience of collaborative practices between schools and FE colleges?

5



Yes

5



No

Are you aware of instances of 'duplication', where schools and colleges offer the same vocational qualifications?

9 responses

No?

Yes like some will offer level 2 while others offer level 3

Yes

No

no

I'm not aware

no

I know a lot of secondary schools offer like beauty in school, and some FE's do also!

Pretty sure the tech department in my school offers a BTec that NRC also offers

Post 16 – are you encouraged to explore alternatives to school-based provision?

