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Barriers to participation and progression in education

A review of the evidence

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SECTION 1: LITERATURE REVIEW - WHAT ARE THE MAIN BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION?

Young People and Barriers to Education

Spielhofer et al (2008) report that 86% of people aged 16 do not face any barriers that stop them from doing what they want to do. However, a large proportion of young people (63%) face one or more constraints. These 'constraints' do not stop them from doing what they want to do but nevertheless are problems that they must overcome. For 14% of young people, these constraints become barriers which stop them from doing what they want to do. Spielhofer et al (2008) found that the most common barriers for young people were not having a course or training available in their local area, a lack of money or a lack of knowledge of all the options available to them. In addition to this there are a number of social issues that affect young people. These include: lack of confidence, poor health and poor previous experience of educational settings.

For those on government training schemes, a lack of agency is often seen as a discouraging factor. A qualitative study of two focus groups, comprised of young people from two different youth organisations in the Belfast area, was conducted as part of an internal Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) project on those Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEETs) (available from Department for the Economy (DfE) on request). Common themes among participants were a resentment of the compulsory nature of the scheme, and the fact that attendance was tied to receipt of social security benefits, as well as a general disaffection with government schemes.

Adult Learners and Barriers to Education

Flynn et al (2011) cite three distinct groups of barriers which may affect adult learners; situation barriers, institutional barriers and dispositional barriers. Situation barriers relate to the person's life situation and could include household circumstances such as childcare responsibility, poverty, violence in the home or a lack of emotional support. For instance, in 2015/16, 4,360 higher education students had responsibility for young people which represented 8% of the higher education population in Northern Ireland (Department for the Economy 2017a). Institutional barriers may include a lack of support for learners, current government policy, a lack of teacher training and an unsuitable curriculum. Dispositional or motivational barriers include negative past experiences, negative attitudes towards education amongst the individual's peer group and/or family, low self-esteem or the general demands of family life.

Joo and Huang (2013) found that adult learners have different needs to traditional students. They often work full-time and have families and so could benefit from greater access to on-line learning. The study identified four motivational factors; intrinsic motivation (personal satisfaction), short and long term extrinsic motivation (this is associated with the rewards accruing from undertaking an activity such as praise or financial reward) and technological willingness. The study found that female online learners tended to have higher levels of intrinsic motivation. Students aged in their twenties, thirties and forties tended to report higher levels of extrinsic motivation for learning. This ties in with previous work by Super (1980) which suggested that adults aged 25 to 44 are in a career establishment phase and tend to seek out experiences which will advance their career, rather than engaging in learning for personal satisfaction. In terms of technological willingness, Joo and Huang (2013) found that adult learners with minimal prior online learning experiences will need more time to adjust to the new learning processes and technology. They recommend that online learning programmes should provide comprehensive instructional support systems in order to assist novice online learners navigate the early stages of their programmes.

We are now more dependent on mobile phones and tablets to gain access for educational needs. Broadband coverage to people's homes and businesses has continued to improve (Ofcom 2017). In 2017, 85% of properties in Northern Ireland were capable of receiving at least superfast speeds (30Mbit/s to less than 300Mbit/s coverage). Although this is an increase from 77% in 2015, the proportion is lower than those England, Scotland and Wales and the United Kingdom average of 91% (Ofcom 2017). Broadband speed is not uniform in Northern Ireland. While Belfast Local Government District has on average 85% of premises with Ultrafast Broadband (300Mbits/s or greater coverage), the Local Government Districts of Causeway Coast and Glens, Fermanagh and Omagh, and Mid and East Antrim have no coverage at this speed.

In the Northern Ireland context, *Removing the Barriers to Learning: Exploring Adult Perceptions and Attitudes to Participation in Further Education* (DEL 2012) cited the main barriers to learning for adult learners in Northern Ireland, and who were interested in learning related to: timing, work, family commitments and the cost of courses. The research also identified the potential of non-vocational learning to act as a stepping stone for some adult learners to progress into vocational learning. It can also be noted that there are no comprehensive data to measure the level of participation in training in the workplace as data for this are not collected centrally (Learning and Work Institute 2017).

Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs)

Research on NEETs (*BIS Research Paper Number 87*, 2013) identified some frequently cited barriers to learning. Twenty percent of those interviewed for the study reported that family members and peers can be a significant obstacle to engaging in learning. In particular, there is a segment of the population who are unwilling to take part in education, therefore encouraging this group to participate in training that leads to employment can be particularly challenging. One in six young people made reference to the course format or content acting as a barrier to learning or causing them to drop out of a course. One in six young people also reported that both the cost of courses and their wider financial situation acted as a barrier to learning; in particular, losing entitlements to benefits resulted in young people turning down learning opportunities. Other barriers identified included behavioural problems and low attendance, the accessibility and availability of courses, a lack of support and advice, a lack of skills or qualifications, personal circumstances such as substance abuse or a lack of confidence, health and disability, a lack of motivation or direction or poor previous learning experiences. The study highlighted the need for good quality information, advice and guidance for young people hoping to access education and training, as well as appropriate support in addressing some of the practical barriers such as childcare or financial support. Evidence from the study suggests that a positive adult learning experience can transform negative experiences of schooling, which may result in learners engaging in learning throughout their adult lives.

In 1997 the Training and Employment Agency published *Status 0* based on NEETs. The study was based on a survey of 980 young people who were followed for 24 months and who were first eligible to leave school in 1993. Further qualitative research was carried out by undertaking in-depth interviews. The qualitative research showed that the causes of *Status 0* were often "a complex web of relationships between young people's attitudes, their family background and their experiences of school and post-school institutions" (Northern Ireland Economic Research Council (NIERC) 2000). A further study tracked the original *Status 0* cohort over an additional four years was published by NIERC in conjunction with the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment in 2000. This report found that if young people were allowed to coast into unemployment and inactivity at the ages of 16 and 17, their chances of ending up long-term unemployed as young adults is significantly higher. It was recognised that 'prevention is better than cure' and schemes were set up to intervene with school-aged children to prevent them from becoming unemployed. In particular, it emphasised that those excluded at ages 16 and 17 were likely to be also excluded at ages 18-22 years.

In a scoping study by DEL (2010), it was noted that young people who are classed as NEET are far from being a homogenous group. Typically they have a wide spectrum of problems and barriers which are in no way mutually exclusive and which a young person may experience simultaneously. The report also noted that actions to prevent or reduce the number of young people who were NEET can be divided into preventative and intervention or re-engagement.

Next *Steps* (The Executive Office 2016) found that, based on the interviews conducted with young people who were NEET, the main barriers to getting back into education, employment or training were a lack of relevant work experience, a lack of employment opportunities, lack of qualifications, low levels of confidence and self-esteem and a lack of motivation. The findings point to the fact that not every person faces the same barriers and also that there is nearly always a combination of factors that prevent young people moving out of NEET status. This underlines the fact that the policy response required to remove barriers is likely to be complex and needs to be tailored to the needs of the individual. Moreover, Youthnet (2013) noted that: "Achieving sustained employability for young people who are NEET requires strategic investment in preparing and enabling young people to engage effectively and purposely with training, education and employment opportunities."

Further information on NEETs for Northern Ireland can be found in Annexes 1 and 2.

Intergenerational Unemployment and Parental Worklessness

Schoon (2014) carried out an analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), which investigated the relationship between parental worklessness and the chances of a young person becoming NEET. The research found that, although there was a moderate direct effect of parental worklessness on the NEET experience of their children, the findings did point to other potential explanatory factors such as parental education, large family size and area based effects such as deprivation. Schoon postulates that it matters where young people live, and that area characteristics can affect youth development and adjustment.

Macmillan (2013) found that, although the problem of intergenerational unemployment is overstated, evidence suggests that workless spells are associated across generations. Local labour market conditions are also a factor in that sons with workless fathers are disproportionately affected by high unemployment. The relationship between parental worklessness and the employment outcomes of their children varies according to local labour market conditions, suggesting that the theory of a 'culture of welfare dependency' does not hold. Macmillan's work also points to the importance of informal networks when searching for jobs. Those with unemployed parents may have weaker contacts and therefore experience more difficulty in finding job opportunities.

A report for the Social Mobility Commission by Friedman, Laurison and Macmillan (2017) found that there is very little evidence of generations of families never working, but those who experience a workless household are more likely to experience their own workless spells in adulthood. The paper also supports Macmillan's (2011) argument that the combined experience of growing up in a workless household and being exposed to a bad local labour market creates greater intergenerational worklessness. The probability of spending any time workless if an individual was in a workless household increases as the local area unemployment rate increases. For an individual who was in a workless household at age 14, the gap in the probability of experiencing workless spells compared with an individual in a working household at age 14 is 7 percentage points greater in low unemployment areas, and up to 25 percentage points greater in high unemployment areas. Historically, the unemployment rate in Northern Ireland had been higher than the United Kingdom average and this may have had some bearing on the levels of intergenerational worklessness in the local context.

However, the unemployment gap between Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom has been narrowing for some years, with Labour Force Survey figures for August-October 2017 estimating the Northern Ireland International Labour Organisation (ILO) unemployment rate at 3.9%, which is below the United Kingdom ILO unemployment rate of 4.3%. Economic inactivity, however, remains persistently above the United Kingdom average with recent Labour Force Survey (LFS) figures estimating that the Northern Ireland economic inactivity rate was 29% compared with the United Kingdom average of 21.5%. The LFS also shows that Northern Ireland has a higher proportion of workless households than the rest of the United Kingdom. In April-July 2017, the proportion of workless households in Northern Ireland was 21%, compared with the United Kingdom average of 15%.

It is important to note, that while there is little doubt that those in workless households find it harder to gain employment, there are a number of potential underlying explanatory factors. Friedman, Laurinson and Macmillan (2017) found that the intergenerational transmission of poor health may explain some of the relationship between growing up in a workless household and spells of worklessness. Simmons, Russell and Thompson (2013), in their case study of NEETs, posited that the quality of work available to young people is the single most important factor influencing sustained labour market participation.

Barriers to Higher Education

Financial and family circumstances, concerns about 'fitting in' and the individual's attitudes toward higher education in general, e.g. whether they consider higher education to be of interest to them, are all key barriers to participation in higher education (McWhirter 1997). The study also found that individuals had certain perceptions about which barriers to progression may face them once they began a higher education course. Financial and family

circumstances are again considered key barriers. Other concerns related to self-esteem such as being afraid of not being smart enough or of fitting in socially, were also discussed.

Kimmel et al (2016) suggest some of the potential barriers to participation in higher education for adult learners include life events, employment, parenting responsibilities, early educational achievement and socio-economic status. These factors tend to be common barriers to participation in higher and further education, as well as vocational training.

McCoy and Byrne (2011), in their study of barriers to higher education in Ireland, noted that a lack of effective careers guidance at school may act as a barrier to participation in higher education. Some students reported that information on higher education was often about the mechanics of applying rather than a discussion of what they might like to do. This often left students lacking direction. In particular, those in lower socio-economic groups will be more reliant on school-based advice whereas students from more affluent households will often be able to avail of advice from parents who have themselves participated in higher education. The most recent Higher Education Age Participation Index for Northern Ireland figures from the Department for the Economy showed that 48.2% of Northern Ireland 18 year olds enter full-time undergraduate higher education in the academic year 2015/16. This is a growth of 16.1 percentage points from the beginning of the series in 1992/93. The Higher Education Participation rate for 18 year olds in England was 27% in 2015/16.

Secondary/Grammar School Education

Burns et al (2015) found that type of school attended was a strong predictor of educational attainment and subsequent destinations post-school. Those who attend grammar schools are more likely to progress to higher education. Official statistics from the Department of Education (Northern Ireland) show that in 2016/17, 71% of Grammar School leavers were progressing to an Institute of Higher Education compared with 22% of non-Grammar School leavers. Research by *Atkinson et al (2006)* indicated that children from less affluent backgrounds were less likely to attend grammar schools. In relation to using free school meals entitlement as a method of measuring social deprivation, in 2016/17, 41% of pupils attending secondary (non-Grammar) schools were entitled to free school meals compared with 14% of those attending grammar schools. Less than a fifth of pupils (22%) who were entitled to free school meals entered higher education compared with 50% of pupils who were not entitled to free school meals. A*tkinson et al (2006)* also note that the minority of poorer children who do go to grammar schools gain a greater advantage from doing so than the more affluent children. The authors argue that if access to grammar schools could be widened for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, then the case for selective education would be greatly enhanced. *Belfield, Britton, Buscha et al (2018)*, in their study of the relative labour market returns to different degrees using the Longitudinal Education Outcomes dataset, found that women who attended independent schools in England earned on average £5,000 more

than the top quintile of state educated women and privately educated men earn £7,000 more than state-educated men. These differences are not causal but highlight the importance of background characteristics when investigating labour market outcomes. The creation of a Longitudinal Education Outcomes database for Northern Ireland would permit similar analyses to be conducted in the context of the local post-primary education system.

Economic Barriers

A central assumption of the literature is that lower socio-economic status is associated with poorer educational outcomes. Holzer et al (2007) postulated that childhood poverty reduces productivity and economic output. The commonly identified economic barriers to participation in education are social welfare, childcare and transport (SOLAS, 2017). In terms of social welfare, recipients may be required to attend a training course as part of the terms and conditions of their payments. This can cause individuals to feel somewhat coerced into participation and may negatively affect their attitude to learning. On the other hand, there is also evidence that the social welfare system may act as a deterrent to course participation in circumstances where the individual is afraid that were they to start a course they would no longer qualify for benefits. Deloitte and Touche (2001) postulated that the following attributes affected employability in the Northern Ireland workforce: personal attributes, structural aspects, managing in the labour market and personal circumstances (see Figure 2, Annex 2).

Social Exclusion and Barriers

Those who suffer social exclusion face considerable barriers to education and employment. Knightly (2007) lists a number of indicators of potential social exclusion, such as financial difficulties, lack of basic necessities, poor housing conditions, poor health and limited social contact. Savelsberg, Pgnata and Weckert (2017) cited an example of partnership projects initiated in Australia to address social exclusion in targeted areas by encouraging participation in education and training. Among the groups targeted for intervention were women, youths, the unemployed and people with disabilities and/or learning difficulties.

MacIntyre (2013), in a case study of 20 young people with moderate learning disabilities, suggested that many young people with learning disabilities are encouraged to go on to college from school, based on a concern that they were not quite ready for life in the 'adult world'. Parents of children involved in the study tended to value college in terms of contributing to the young person's personal development, but some expressed disappointment in terms of qualifications gained and future employment prospects. Earlier work by Riddell, Baron and Wilson (2011) suggested that colleges provide a 'warehousing' function for people with learning disabilities. In relation to areas of improvement, Dowd (2012) cites that there is a need to develop learning support services within all departments and levels, to include the most vulnerable students.

In relation to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Wehman et al (2014) note that individuals with ASD have lower rates of participation in vocational or technical education, employment and post-secondary education. Individuals with ASD continue to experience challenges in all environments related to social interaction and communication in adolescence and adulthood (Cai and Richdale 2016; Toor et al 2016). Youths with ASD have untapped academic potential that is often overlooked (Wehman et al 2014). However, it has been suggested that there is a clear need for professionals and academics to liaise with parents of youths with ASD to ensure that proposed educational strategies meets the needs of the individual students (Dillenburger et al 2010). Educational strategies for ASD need to take account of school, home, work and community (Hendricks and Wehman 2009) in light of rigour, relevance and social relationships (Test et al 2014). Students with ASD often require mentors and a neurodiverse space which is not always catered for (Sarrett 2018). It is also recognised that persons with ASD are likely to become depressed and suffer from increased anxiety (Bellini 2004; Toor et al 2016).

Further staff development is also required in all vocational areas within colleges. There is a clear need for nationally recognised qualifications to be available for students with more severe learning difficulties. Better careers advice is also required for students with a disability (Dowd 2012). In terms of the labour market, MacIntyre (2013) suggests that young people face a number of barriers including a lack of support in the workplace, the benefits system and the expectations of young people, parents and employers. Often the work available to young people with learning difficulties is low paid and mundane, and does not meet their own expectations. However, Hendey and Pascal (2001) stress the importance of employment as a route away from poverty and social exclusion, as well as an escape from the stigma of claiming benefits.

Drug and alcohol misuse was also seen as a barrier to education. In 2014/15, 3% of those aged 15 to 64 years were current illegal drug users. Among persons aged 15 to 24 years, the corresponding figure was 6% (Department of Health 2016). In relation to the treatment of drugs, on 1 March 2017, 5,969 persons were being treated for drug or alcohol misuse (Department of Health 2017a). Two-fifths of persons being treated (43%) were for alcohol only misuse, whereas 34% were for drugs only misuse and 23% were alcohol and drug misuse. Only 12% of all treatments were for those aged under 18 years. In relation to those in Further and Higher Education, there is a paucity of information on drug misuse. This is perhaps because drug-taking in the main is a sensitive and illegal activity (McCrystal and Percy 2011).

Persons with mental health issues were seen as less likely to enter further or higher education. The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) is a screening tool aimed at detecting the possibility of psychiatric morbidity in the population. The questionnaire contains 12 questions about recent general levels of happiness, depression, anxiety and sleep disturbance. An overall score of between zero and twelve is constructed, with a score of 4 or more being classified as a respondent with a possible psychiatric disorder. Based on the GHQ, 17% of those in 2016/17 interviewed as part of the Health Survey Northern Ireland had a GHQ of 4 or more (Department of Health 2017b). This proportion is down from 20% in 2010/11. However, over a fifth (21%) of those aged 16 to 24 years and 27% of those living in the most deprived quintile in Northern Ireland had a GHQ score above 4. There is some debate in Northern Ireland as to whether the troubles have had an impact on mental health. Mantktelow (2007) and Ferry et al (2014) argues that it has had a huge impact, whereas O'Reilly and Stevenson (2003) and Campbell et al (2004) argue that there is insufficient evidence for this to be the case. What is known, is that Northern Ireland is more impoverished than other areas of the United Kingdom and has poorer mental and physical health than the rest of the United Kingdom (O'Reilly and Stevenson 2003). In relation to further and higher education, mental health can have an impact of a student's psychological wellbeing as many students are adapting from their transition into adulthood which prevent students from fully engaging in educational settings (McLafferty et al 2017). A high proportion of students with mental health problems do not access mental health services due to the anticipated stigma attached to this (Smith and Applegate 2018). This is compounded with the quality and quantity of counselling services available. Services are often overstretched with inflexible opening hours, late responses and long waiting lists (McLafferty et al 2017).

Students with mental health problems are at risk of lower academic performance, attrition rates (Conley et al 2017), sadness, loneliness, overwhelming anxiety, hopelessness and depression (Conley et al 2013). In higher education, the raising of tuition fees has also been linked to poorer psychological functioning and dropping out of education (Broglia et al 2017). Certain student demographics are more likely to have mental health problems compared with other groups. For instance, bisexual and gay/lesbian students have a substantially elevated risk of mental health issues compared with heterosexual students (Smith and Applegate 2018). There are a number of interventions to combat mental health in place in many colleges and universities. These include one-to-one support, guided self-help, peer-to-peer support and on-line help (Broglia et al 2017).

Maguire et al (2016), using the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study, examined the impact of educational attainment on mental health outcomes post-bereavement. They found that education may protect against poor mental health outcomes post-bereavement, except for those bereaved by suicide. This points to a positive relationship between education and

mental health. The study also highlighted that the association between mental health and education attainment cannot be completely explained by the theory that educational attainment is an indicator of socio-economic status.

It is widely recognised that homelessness is a contributory factor in relation to educational non-achievement. Homelessness is not just linked to inadequate housing, rather it represents a myriad of marginality within systems of inequity (Broton and Goldrick-Rab 2016; Gupton 2017). Some of the barriers that are attributed to homelessness include: housing instability, displacement, negative family relationships, domestic violence, health conditions, lack of transportation, inadequate nutrition and wellbeing, and other discrimination (Aleman 2016). In particular homeless families experience more stressful life events and financial hardship (Masten et al 2015). Once a young person experiences homelessness, continuing with education is a real challenge. Moving from one hostel to another means that educational establishments also find it difficult to make contact with students (Gupton 2017). In 2016/17, there were 18,573 homeless households in Northern Ireland, of which 3,196 were single households aged 16 to 25 years (DfC 2017). However, for this category, it was noted that there was a decrease of 14% from 2004/05 (DfC 2017).

Prisoners and young offenders also require special considerations in relation to education. There is a need to provide programmes that are time bounded, modular and flexible in delivery. The success of educational programmes is reliant on prisoners conforming to prison norms within a controlled prison regime (Irwin 2003). Research in Ireland has shown that children in the travelling community are at an educational disadvantage with only 14.2% being in school for 11 or more years (Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre and Department of Justice and Equality 2018). This means that few from the Traveller community will go on to enter further or higher education.

The Legacy of the Troubles

The legacy of the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland in relation to barriers to education creates a unique problem. There are perceptions in relation to public safety and travelling outside local communities with the perceived threat of intimidation. Moreover, there is a lack of inter-community engagement in some settings and young people continue to be potential recruits for paramilitary organisations. This encourages young people to live off illegal earnings as opposed to finding legitimate work, as postulated by Harries et al (2015).

The legacy of the Troubles has also had an impact on labour mobility in Northern Ireland, with the 'chill factor' being a barrier to taking up paid employment cited by some people. Oxford Economics (2014, on behalf of DEL) conducted a telephone survey of over 1000 unemployed people in Northern Ireland. The survey findings showed that, in the Belfast area, 20 percent of those surveyed indicated that there were areas, within a reasonable distance of their home, in

which they would not take up employment. Of those who indicated an unwillingness to travel to certain areas for employment, 55 percent indicated that this was because of religious or political reasons and 19 percent indicated that this was because they would not feel comfortable or safe in a particular area. It should be noted that, overall, 89 percent of those surveyed did not feel a 'chill factor' but unskilled and low skilled persons, and those living in urban areas, were more likely to report feeling the 'chill factor'.

Colleges in Northern Ireland, particularly further education colleges in Northern Ireland have a unique role in promoting equality and community relations (Osborne 2003). The further education sector is unique in that it caters for all sections of the community and all abilities. In particular it bridges the religious divide in Northern Ireland (Osborne 2003). McManus (2017) also argues that a programme of 'transformative education' can assist in achieving peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

Structural Barriers

Saar et al (2014) carried out further work in relation to structural barriers to education, which focused on the degree to which institutions encourage participation of adult learners, how open they are to those without traditional entry qualifications, financial support available to learners, institutional flexibility with regard to study and curricula and the existence of short programmes which can act as a gateway for adult learners. Earlier work by Inbar and Sever (1989) addressed possible systemic barriers to second chance education such as possible selective procedures which may prevent certain groups gaining access to education.

McQueen (2014) postulates that many vocational courses introduce a compulsory academic element to what are essentially practical subjects. The introduction of these more academic elements is intended to raise the status of the subject in question, but may negatively impact the learners' intrinsic motivation to learn.

Student Engagement

Student engagement is essential in terms of helping participants overcome barriers to participation and progression in education. Hu and Kuh (2002) defined student engagement "as the amount of time and effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities." These include study time, interaction with staff and fellow students and the use of institutional resources such as the library and technology.

Chickering and Gamson (1999) define good practice in undergraduate education as "encouraging student-faculty contact, as well as co-operation among students, and respecting diverse talents and ways of learning." The importance of active learning and prompt feedback was also emphasised.

In a similar vein, the quality of teaching plays an important part in student engagement at both secondary and tertiary level. At the secondary level, many teachers enter the profession because they want to change the lives of young people. However, there is the future potential of a lesser number of teachers entering the profession due to the competing availability of other professions at higher salary levels (Teach First 2017). The Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2016) notes that there is a need for many universities to raise their game in relation to high quality teaching within the higher education marketplace. The White Paper makes a number of recommendations with regards to the quality of teaching including: upgrading the current regulatory burden across the sector; ensuring that providers are delivering value for money; and encouraging providers to improve validation arrangements. These apply to further education in addition to higher education.

It is also important to point out that some students may drop out of further or higher education for a variety of reasons. In relation to further education colleges, the retention rate of students was 90.2% in 2016/17, while the success rate (enrolments who stayed on their course and achieved their qualifications) was 77.5% (Department for the Economy 2017b). In Northern Ireland 5.1% of full-time first degree entrants who enrolled in 2015/16 failed to continue in Higher Education in 2016/17. The equivalent figure for part-time learners who started first degrees in 2014/15 and failed to continue in higher education in 2016/17 was 36.2%. Over four-fifths (84.4%) in Northern Ireland of those who started their degree in 2015/16 are expected to gain a degree (Department for the Economy 2018).

Second Chance Education Programmes

Savelsberg, Pignata and Weckert (2017), in their evaluation of second chance education programmes in Australia, note three common themes which are present in the literature. Second chance education programmes should be customised to the learner, services should be collaboratively linked with multidisciplinary, or 'wrap around' services and should be contextualised to be relevant to the individual, local community and the needs of industry. The need for a multidisciplinary approach is underlined by Considine et al (2005), who argue that a balance is needed between economic goals such as improved labour market outcomes and social goals such as developing closer connections between the programme participants and the wider community. Barnett and Spoehr (2008) emphasise the importance of a case management approach to address multiple and complex needs; an individualised approach to teaching; linkages and collaborative relationships with the vocational education and training sector and other relevant sectors; and a structural framework for the continuation of support for individuals.

Conclusion

Those facing barriers to participation and progression through education and into the labour market are not a homogeneous group by any means. In order to further encourage participation, a flexible and multi-faceted policy response is required.

Economic barriers are the easiest to remedy from a policy perspective. In many cases improved information and guidance on available support will help individuals to overcome these barriers.

It is important that policy responses are developed in partnership with relevant public, private and community and voluntary sector stakeholders and that employers are encouraged to collaborate with the public sector to improve outcomes; this is of particular relevance to Northern Ireland as a devolved administration without access to fiscal policy levers.

Suggested actions for policy makers to consider are included in the final section of the report.

Section 2:
Feedback from DfE Consultation Days on Barriers to Participation and Progression in Education

In March 2018, three open-day consultations were held with educators, employment providers and the wider community in three locations – Belfast, Newry and Londonderry. Here, attendees were asked to provide input by use of Mentimeter, on a range of issues relating to barriers to education.

The results were then combined together and analysed. This information is presented below, where possible, quantitatively. Readers should exercise caution when interpreting the quantitative information as the results are based on small numbers of observations. In addition to this, all information that was qualitative was considered to look for specific themes that were found in the literature relating to barriers.

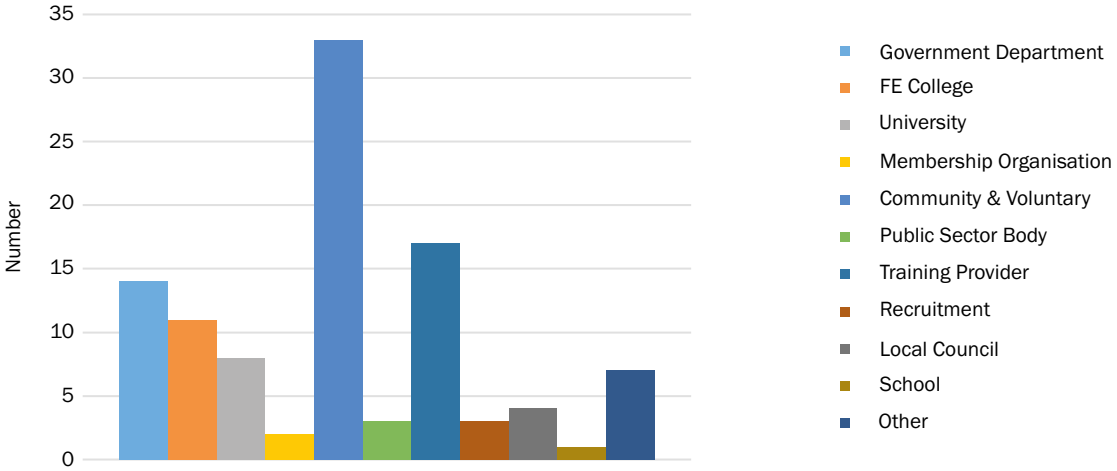
Key Points

Two-fifths of attendees (41%) thought that the government should prioritise social inclusion. This was followed by intergenerational worklessness (11%), mental health (10%) and student needs (10%).

Key themes emerging from the feedback are the need for greater collaborative working and early intervention to address barriers. The 'benefits trap' and issues relating to mental health were also seen as key areas to be addressed.

A detailed breakdown of responses is presented below.

Organisations represented



The majority of attendees came from the community and voluntary sector and to a lesser extent, training providers.

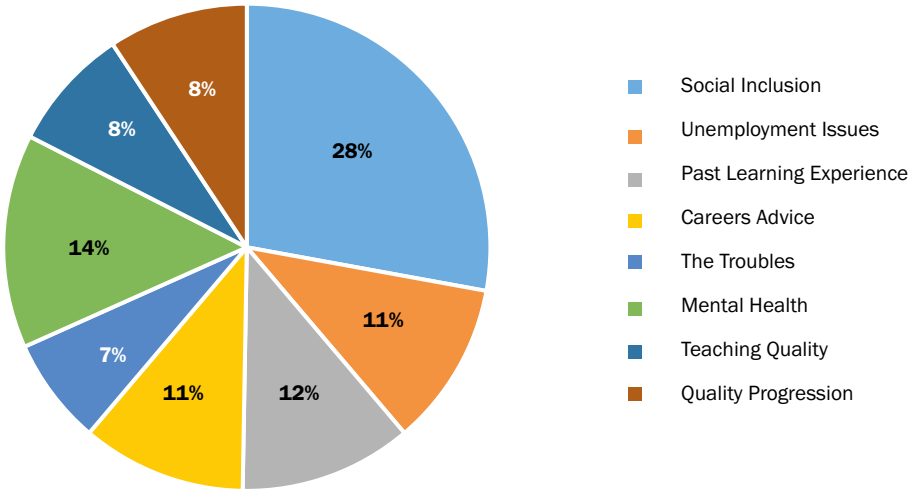
What are the main Barriers to Further and Higher Education?

Themes	No. of responses
Poor aspirations, lack of motivation, poor confidence.	45
Economic Factors - lack of funding, fees, cost (direct and indirect), threat of losing benefits etc.	40
Health issues (mental and physical).	21
A lack of knowledge and/or support for people with disabilities (in particular ASD).	20
Poor support for parents who have caring responsibilities.	19
Lack of entry level qualifications (numeracy, literacy, GCSES etc).	18
Poor access or awareness of careers advice and other applicable support services.	17
Poor previous academic experience discouraging learners.	14
Poor clarity of outcomes (i.e. no perceived employment outcome).	10
Transport/accessibility.	9
Not enough relevant courses.	8
Lack of collaboration between providers across sectors.	7
Language barriers - particularly for migrants and asylum seekers.	4
Greater support in primary and post primary needed to support transition to further education and employment.	3

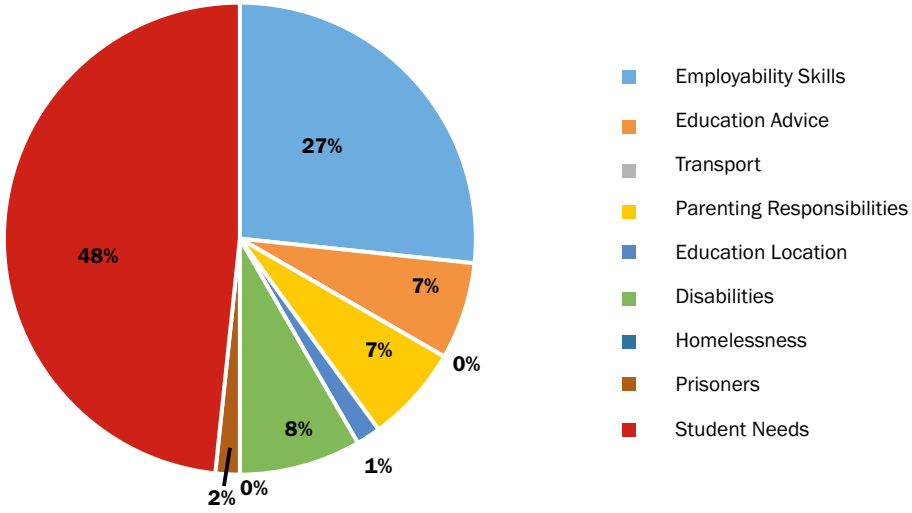
Barriers to Employment were viewed as:

Options	No. of responses
Poor prior educational attainment, lack of work experience and poor employability skills.	14
Limited employment options i.e. zero hours contracts and other precarious appointment. Means benefits are the more attractive option.	14
Lack of social/personal skills.	12
Lack of confidence, motivation, fear of trying something new.	10
Childcare costs & availability to flexible childcare especially for shift work.	7
Transport/accessibility.	6
Health issues (mental and physical).	5
Unrealistic employer expectations (re: qualifications / experience).	3
Lack of knowledge re: job search/qualifications.	3
Poor work ethic.	2

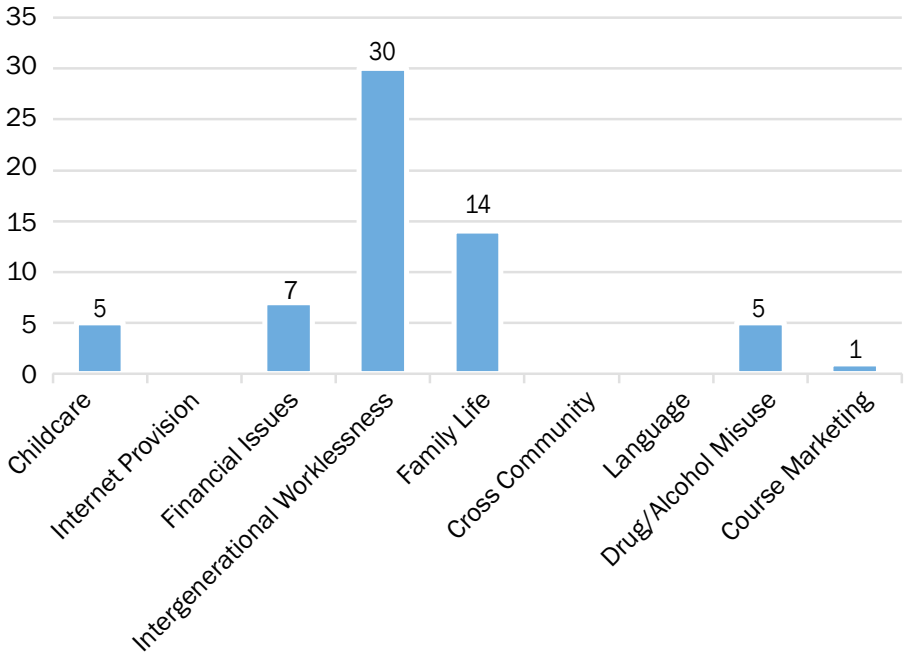
The most important barriers to address in relation to education were:



The most important barriers to consider for those in employment were:



Other important barriers to consider were:



Suggestions for closing gaps in provision were as follows:

Themes	No.
Better collaborative working between government and local government and relevant stakeholders.	37
Early intervention. Target nursery and primary school as this is where most issues/barriers develop. Too late to be left with secondary and further education.	13
A one size fits all approach has been shown not to work. Adapt to individual learners needs.	13
Training for educators in relation to ASD to support teaching staff and children.	13
More funding and support available for community and voluntary organisations who are providing programmes.	9
Provide meaningful work experience and opportunities.	9
Longer term initiatives with funding and support.	7
No more strategies. Look at what has worked from past programmes and build on these. New initiatives with new branding aren't always needed.	7
Create a talent pipeline. Link employers to schools and FE to support transitions out of education.	6
Increased financial support for students (academic and non-academic costs) - grants and loans must rise with the pace of inflation.	5
Make information more accessible regarding careers advice and interventions.	5
Ensure learner voice is one of the core aspects of decision making.	5
Tackling issues surrounding mental health.	5
Programmes that address the personal and social development needs of young people.	5
Provide mental health support and resources.	4
Reduce replication of services - too much sign-posting not enough doing.	4
Ensure returners to education are not penalised by having benefits removed.	3
Provide trained mentors in all schools.	3
Lobby government as to what replaces ESF post-'Brexit'.	2

Areas which respondents thought they could help were in relation to:

Themes	No.
Improving and increase collaborative working to reduce duplication of services.	21
Sharing knowledge, information and best practice relating to our sector.	10
Ensuring the voice of service users is heard by those who have influence on their lives.	8
Providing research and case study/qualitative data.	7
Building strong links and lobby/network with relevant stakeholders.	7
Providing equality/disability training for schools, colleges and employers to help them understand what adjustments can be made. Also general disability support.	5
Ensuring young people have access to the right information and support.	4
Continuing the work of the PfG (outcomes based approach).	4
Building links and involve the community and voluntary sector.	4
Offering work experience and graduate schemes.	3
Focusing on improving mental health and combating addictions.	3
Engaging with employers and create more links to schools and colleges.	2
Adapting to individual learners needs. Providing a holistic and tailored service.	1

The following were areas attendees thought the government could help with:

Themes	No.
Improving and increasing collaborative working to enhance and reduce duplication of services.	20
Providing additional funding for existing supports/models of good practice.	15
Looking at the evidence/best practice to see what works and implement it.	14
Involving service users in developing strategies more effectively.	10
Focusing on infrastructure for North West region. Develop roads, university and airport.	9
Providing better incentives and financial supports.	4
Longer term initiatives with funding and support.	3
Planning for the future sensibly. Prepare for and plan what replaces ESF and incentives.	2
Greater recognition of equivalent qualifications that are not part of mainstream route (i.e. GCSE).	2
Providing more appropriate training courses for participants.	2
Build links and involve the community and voluntary sector.	1

Section 3:
Key Points and Recommendations

Drawing on the literature review and feedback from the consultation days, some key messages have emerged:

1. Support must be tailored to the needs of the individual; a 'one size fits all' approach does not work due to the wide spectrum of barriers which may be faced by any given person and the effect of external factors such as local labour market conditions.
2. The policy response required to address barriers to participation in education and employment is complex and cross-cutting. There is a clear need for greater collaborative working to address issues relating to health, social inclusion, poverty and access to transport.
3. Many issues relating to barriers to education and employment would be better addressed when young people are at nursery or primary school, rather than waiting until they reach secondary and/or tertiary education.
4. Feedback from the consultation days and anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a duplication of services in Northern Ireland and 'recycling' of people in the system, i.e. being enrolled on multiple courses at the same level.

Possible Actions:

- DfE could consider a review of current provision with a view to streamlining service delivery where duplication is identified and ensuring that there is a clear progression pathway for those enrolled in post-school education. The scope of the review could take in services currently being delivered by local government and other NICS departments or their ALBs.
- Consider reviewing existing guidance and information in order to ensure that young people, their families and education practitioners are able to easily access information on the services and support currently available to them.
- DfE could give consideration to the development of suitable strategies, in conjunction with DE, aimed at early intervention for young people and facilitating the move from secondary education to FE/HE and vocational training.
- DfE may wish to investigate the development of a 'wrap around' service for young people, which takes a holistic view of addressing the particular barriers to education and employment they face and provides an individually tailored solution.

Further research:

- A focused survey of education practitioners could provide a valuable insight on their views in relation to how best to address barriers to education and which of these they feel could be prioritised. The feedback from the consultation days was useful but the findings are based on very small numbers and hence are unlikely to be representative. The unstructured nature of mentimeter also meant that some of the feedback was a little vague at times, although the use of this and similar software packages at these events encourages honest feedback and audience participation.
- A survey of employers could be useful to establish what they feel are the key barriers to progression in the labour market and which of these DfE may want to prioritise. It may also be useful to seek their views on how best to promote social inclusion in the workplace.
- Research is being commissioned which will focus on barriers to participation in education and employment for those at risk of becoming involved with paramilitary organisations. This research will provide recommendations on how best to address some of the issues relating to the legacy of the Troubles.
- The creation of a Longitudinal Education Outcomes database for Northern Ireland will allow further research to be carried out on labour market outcomes (earnings and sustained employment) for young people in Northern Ireland. This will allow DfE to assess the effectiveness of current provision.

Summary of Key Barriers

Young persons – experience barriers in relation to social exclusion, transition from school to work, exploitation during transition from school to further and higher education, and problems relating to low self-esteem and a lack of motivation.

Adult learners – experience barriers in relation to lack of availability of childcare facilities, flexibility of learning, lack of internet provision and on-line learning.

NEETs – experience barriers in terms of the quality of advice and guidance for young people, available financial support and suitable transport infrastructure. There are also issues in relation to lack of relevant work experience, qualifications, low levels of confidence, self-esteem and motivation.

Intergenerational unemployment and parental worklessness – experience barriers related to attitudes to education and employment among family and peers, as well as lack of opportunities in areas of high unemployment.

Higher Education – barriers related to life events, employment, family life and parenting responsibilities, early educational attainment and past learning experiences.

Secondary/Grammar school education – Perception of a two-tier education system, barriers related to peer group attitudes to learning and/or a lack of access to certain social networks which may advantage those in grammar school education. More research is needed on education and labour market outcomes for those who attend secondary school in Northern Ireland.

Economic – barriers in relation to financial support, value for money and location of, and transport to, learning centres. A lack of awareness of available financial assistance may contribute to the perceived difficulty of overcoming this barrier.

Social exclusion – those facing social exclusion may experience barriers related to language, previous educational attainment, attitudes to education within their community, discrimination in relation to ethnicity, gender and/or sexual identity, disability, drug and alcohol misuse, mental health, homelessness and having a criminal record.

The Legacy of the Troubles – barriers in terms of course location, labour mobility and a lack of cross-community courses.

Structural – issues in relation to entrance/eligibility and employer engagement.

Student engagement – barriers in terms of quality of teaching, study skills support and career guidance.

Second chance education programmes – problems due to different target needs of teaching groups, attitudes of employers, marketing of training and progression to further qualifications.

Annex 1:
NEETs in Northern Ireland

Although conducted some years ago, the Northern Ireland 2011 Census provides some evidence of the diversity of characteristics of the NEET population. The family circumstances of NEETs is important as it gives some pointers as to the type of support that may be available through the family (or not as the case may be).

Only about 12,000 out of 33,000 NEETs live in a two parent family i.e. as a child of one or both members of the couple.

The next largest category of NEETs (8,000) are young people being looked after by a lone parent.

The next largest category of NEETs are themselves lone parents (5,000) with caring responsibilities for their own child/children.

Almost 5,000 are living independently as single people 'not in a family' and just over 3,000 are living as a married/cohabiting couple. 500 are living in communal establishments.

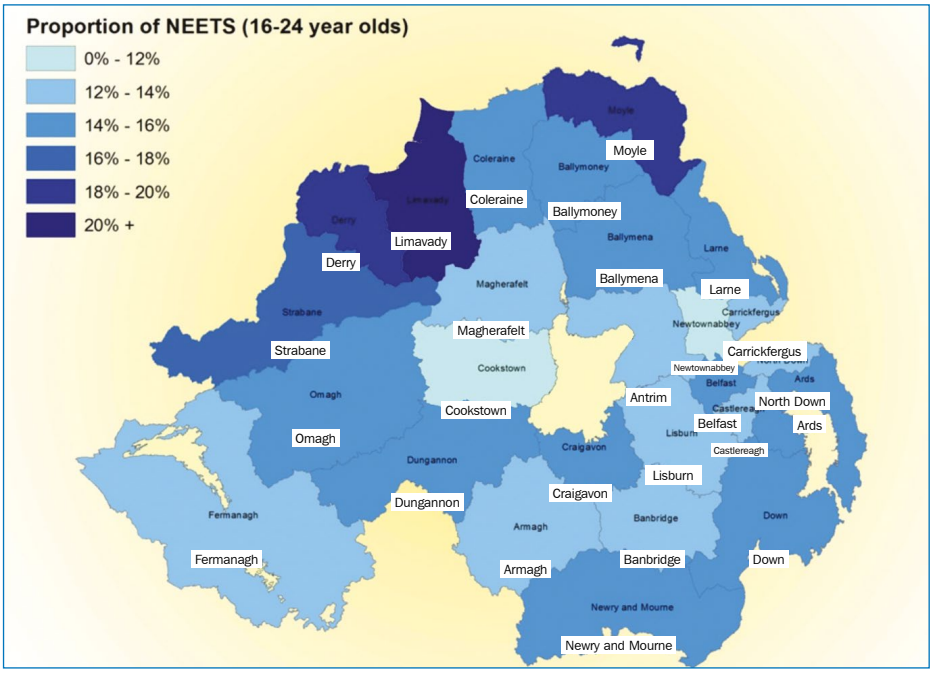
These findings shed important light on the diverse family circumstances of NEETs, which in turn will have implications for policy and policy interventions.

Family Type (NEETs aged 16-24) Census 2011

1.	Not in a family	4,800	Living independently (single)
2.	Member of a couple	3,200	Cohabiting / Married
3.	In a couple family	12,000	NEET plus 2 parents (includes step-parents)
4.	Parent in a lone parent family	5,000	NEET is a lone parent themselves
5.	Child in lone parent family	8,200	NEET is a child in a lone parent family
6.	Communal establishment	500	NEET living in a communal establishment

Figures rounded to the nearest 100

Figure 1:



NEETs are found in all geographic areas but are concentrated in some regions:

	Age band		
Qualification	**All 16-19**	**All 20-24**	**All 16-24**
No qualifications	32%	28%	29%
Level 1 qualifications	29%	22%	23%
Level 2 qualifications	21%	20%	20%
Apprenticeship	2%	4%	4%
Level 3 qualifications	12%	14%	13%
Level 4 qualifications and above	1%	10%	8%
Other qualifications	2%	3%	3%
Total	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

NEETs tend to have low level qualifications but by no means are they all poorly qualified.

The example of NEETs clearly shows that they are a diverse group in terms of their access to family support mechanisms, their qualifications and their distribution. All of these issues will impact on the design of intervention and package of support appropriate for each group. While not shown here, there will be other factors such as disability and ethnicity that will cut across these NEET categories making the group even more diverse than illustrated here.

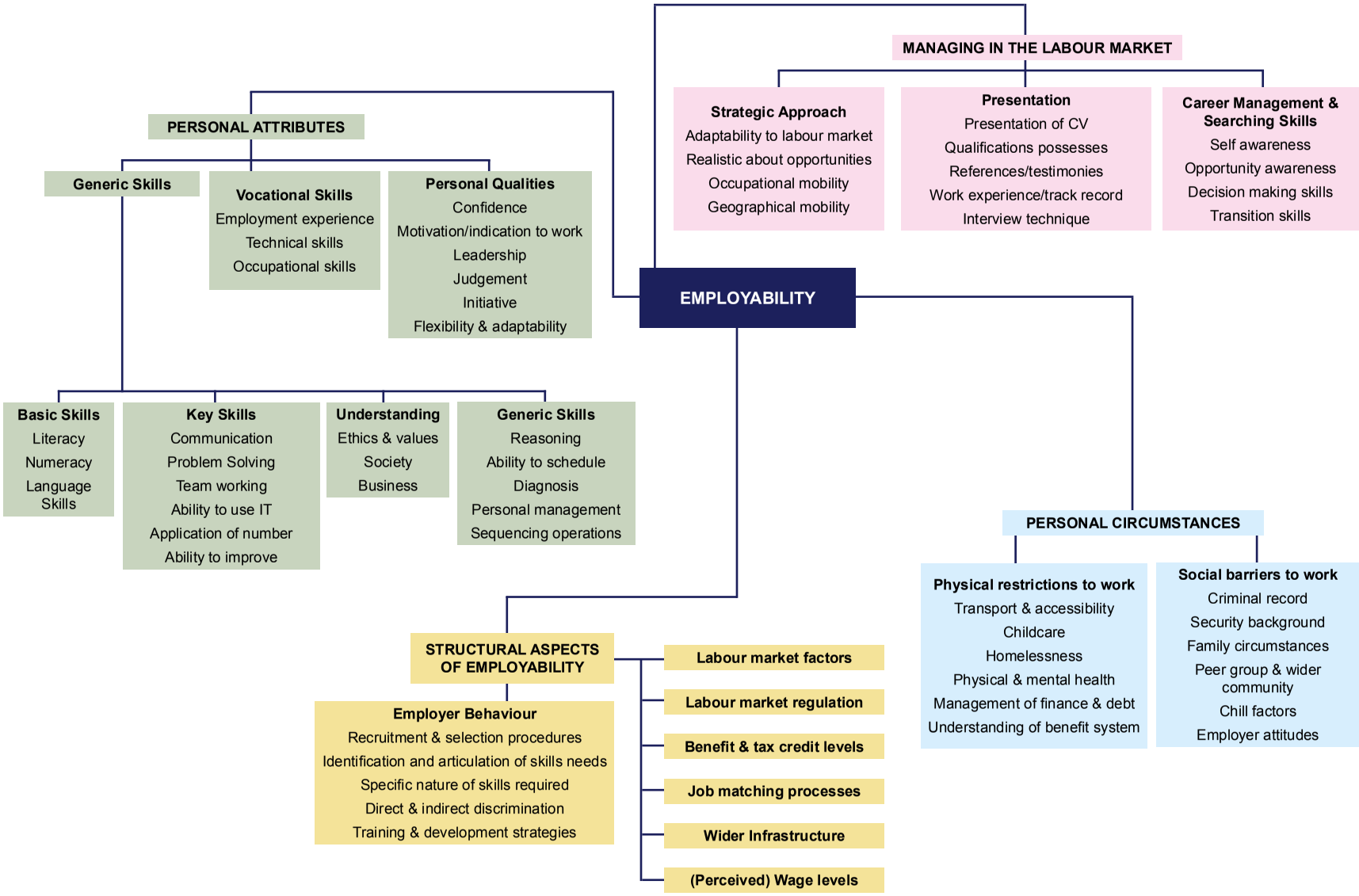
Annex 2: Numbers in Education and Employment who have a potential to become NEET or face social exclusion

	Male	Female	Total
Population in care (end of Sept 2015)	1,160	1,009	2,169
First committed to a YOC/Prison aged 18 to 24 2016/17	263	60	323
Number of magistrates' courts and youth court convictions (aged 10 to 17 years) 2016	700	117	817
Number of Crown Court convictions (aged 10 to 17 years) 2016	6	0	6
Number of convictions for drug related offences 2016	-	-	45
Number reoffending after one year (age 10 to 17) 2013/14 cohort[1]	465	72	537
School leavers not achieving 5+ GCSEs A*C (FSM group) 2016/17	1,092	693	1,785
School leavers not achieving 5+ GCSEs A*C (non-FSM group) 2016/17	1,181	592	1,773
Number on DfE training programmes (a) TfS (Aug-Oct 17 occupancy)	3,564	1,391	4,955
Number of enrolments on DfE training programmes (b) Essential Skills 16-24 years 2016/17	15,901	11,521	27,422
Number of births to teenage mums (aged 12 to 17) 2015	198	-	198
Number of children in material poverty 2015/16	-	-	38,700
Proportion of children in households below 60% of the median (relative poverty) 2015/16	-	-	21%
Behavioural and emotional disorders with onset usually occurring in childhood and adolescence (ICD10 – F90-F98)	-	-	4,570
Single male and female households that the NIHE has designated as homeless (16-25 years) 2016/17	1,708	1,488	3,196

1 Cohort is made up of all adults and youth who have been given a non-custodial disposal at court, a diversionary disposal or who have been released from custody following the completion of a sentence (excluding fine defaulters, those bailed or released following a period of remand, subject to extradition or transfer to another secure hospital facility) during the financial year 2013/14. Under one year proven reoffending methodology an offence is counted as a re-offence if it:

- Occurs within the one year observation period
- Has been committed in Northern Ireland
- Is prosecuted by the PSNI and not a third party eg Department for Communities for benefit fraud
- Is not a breach offence eg breach of a probation order
- Has been 'proven' meaning that a court conviction or diversionary disposal has been imposed within the observation year or by the end of the 6 month follow up period.

Figure 2: Factors which affect employability in the Northern Ireland Context



Annex 3:
Qualifications by economic activity, 16-64

	In employment (%)	Econ. Active (%)	Econ inactive (%)	All (%)
Degree or higher	30.2	29.7	8.7	23.6
Other higher below degree	10.2	10.0	5.3	8.6
A level or equivalent	24.6	24.4	25.5	24.7
GCSE A-C or equivalent	18.3	18.6	25.6	20.6
Other qualifications	6.6	6.9	5.6	6.5
No Qualifications	10.0	10.5	29.3	15.9
All 16-64[1]	**784,000**	**818,000**	**330,000**	**1,148,000**

Source: Labour Force Survey, July - September 2017

[1] All 16-64 excludes those who did not state their highest level of qualification.

Annex 4:
Broadband speed by Local Government District 2017

Local Government District	% of premises with Superfast Broadband[1]	% of premises with Ultrafast Broadband[2]
Antrim and Newtownabbey	51	38
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	82	1
Belfast	12	85
Causeway Coast and Glens	81	0
Derry City and Strabane	44	44
Fermanagh and Omagh	63	0
Lisburn and Castlereagh	73	17
Mid and East Antrim	82	0
Mid Ulster	69	1
Newry, Mourne and Down	74	1
Ards and North Down	84	6

[1] 30Mbit/s to less than 300Mbit/s coverage

[2] 300Mbit/s or greater coverage

Source: Ofcom 2017

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