



Education Opportunities Needed: Recommendations of the YP (Young People's) Research Group Research Briefing

Background

Northern Ireland (NI) is the only devolved region of the UK without an integration policy or ESOL policy. Unlike other devolved regions of the UK, NI education is only compulsory until a child reaches the age of 16 – with no requirement for local authorities to ensure education opportunities over 16. In Wales and England, the Education Skills Act 2008 means young people have a protected right to full-time education, employment or training until they are 18 – and the local authorities are responsible for identifying children outside of education (Participation, 2022). The Children's legal centre Wales says:

“In Wales, all children have the right to education. It doesn't matter where you have come from. If you are aged between 5 and 16, you have to go to school in Wales. If you want to stay in school and study for A levels or another qualification this should be possible whatever your immigration status, until you are 18.”

In Scotland, “All children aged 3-18...learn through the Curriculum for Excellence”. Policy protection is not in place for young people in Northern Ireland, where education matters are further complicated by the school systems.

A qualitative research report on the “Experiences of Education among Minority Ethnic Groups in Northern Ireland” (Loader et al, 2023) presented in June 2023 confirms that “navigating the complex NI education system is a challenge for migrant parents” (Loader et al., 2023). Significantly, the report only examines the experiences of education for children under 15. However, it also notes the discrimination experienced at compulsory levels, identifying that “Newcomer pupils, and particularly children from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds, often experience a protracted wait for school places. While most schools are accommodating, there were reports of schools declining to admit newcomer pupils even though places were available.”

The closer a young person from refugee or asylum seeker background is to 15 or 16 – the longer the wait or more difficult to enter traditional education routes. All too often, the only recommendation for these young people are English classes – the same ones adults are in, and the same programmes that “The NI Department of the Economy (DfE) [who are] responsible for funding the NI-ESOL provision and is aware of the concerns that the current provision is no longer fit for purpose” (NATECLA-NI, 2020 cited by Flanagan & O'Boyle, 2022).

This sets the stage for the 16+ Education Equality Campaign in NI. Part of an ongoing MSCA PhD project, this study aims to empower and highlight the knowledgeable voices of young people from refugee and asylum seeker (RAS) backgrounds. In order to overcome systemic injustice, and the testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007) often faced by people from RAS backgrounds, participants were taught researching skills to apply to the 16+ Education Equality Campaign and other community issues. They seek to understand what education opportunities young people from RAS backgrounds need and want in Northern Ireland.

Methodology

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is the guiding methodology of the research. PAR values the co-production of knowledge with a community, shaping the primary role of the researcher as one which facilitates and empowers (Ukowitz, 2023). The research comprised of a series of 19 qualitative interviews and co-researching with a participatory advisory group, YP Research Group, who learned academic English and researching skills in an accredited QUB Open Learning Course. It equipped the group to conduct reflexive thematic analysis on interview excerpts and survey data. Interpreters were provided where requested. Primary data was collected between Nov. 2022 – Oct. 2023 and February - March 2024.

Key Findings from the YP Research Group's Data Analysis

Themes from Interviews

- Certificates / Qualifications as Barrier
 - Previous education not acknowledged
 - Hard to find classes with accreditation
- Language as Barrier to Education Access
 - English is not participants' first language
 - Understanding native speakers / accent can be difficult
 - Environment in NI is unknown
- Lack of Chance / Opportunity
 - Lack of options
 - Long waiting lists for accredited courses
 - GCSE requirements to enter FE or HE Education
- Age as Barrier
 - The requirements for this age group to enter education are inflexible or limited options
 - Difficult above age 16 because less opportunities
 - No school (or places) specifically for this age group
- Motivation for Learning in NI:
 - Relaxed / more freedom due to teaching style
 - Different to previous education
 - Many native speakers can aid language learning
 - Enables a person to join the community

Key Points from Preliminary Survey Quantitative & Qualitative Analysis:

- All participants ($n=10$) want to study in Northern Ireland
- Formal education is most desired by YP ($n=9$)
 - Observation by group: Informal is more common
- The majority ($n=7$) want full-time education
- Reflexive Thematic Analysis
 - For those currently in classes, these tend to be English or GCSE Essential Skills (Math and English) focused
 - Observation by Group: GCSE is the first 'step' to University
 - For those who left Secondary School
 - Left because placed in the wrong course/track
 - There was no consideration of background or social needs, or specific support
 - Some told there were no places at Secondary School and later (once 16) told they were too old
 - Observation by Group: Some people may not consider this a denial because they believe it is 'normal' to be turned away
 - English is the most commonly desired course, but there are other subject courses desired
 - Observation by Group: Everyone wants to study, and has goals beyond the starting point of English

- The overall factor preventing young people from studying is a lack of access because of inability to find a school/class, waitlists, language difficulties, transportation and class times
- More RAS specific support systems are needed to help young people continue their education: language support, fee-free, application support to get into a university or college
 - Observation by Group: The NI/ UK Education System ignores and does not support entry of people from 'outside' this system, with little guidance for 'outsiders' (Overall theme, The system is not fit for purpose)
- All young people have goals and dreams

Recommendations

- What is the problem?
 - The problem is the Northern Irish / UK Education System ignores those who come from 'outside', offering little to no support to those unfamiliar with it.
- How can we address this problem?
 - Listen to the problems shared – act upon this testimony
 - Need better education advisors/guidance for those 'outside' the NI System
 - Need **formal** language opportunities that lead to a continuation of education (not ending at 16)
 - Need a better system of recognition for past education
 - Even young people who finished Secondary School have an issue with recognition of their education
 - Education should start as soon as someone arrives (or at minimum, within one month)
- Where do we need these changes?
 - Within Northern Irish Education Policy
 - Extend right to education places (regardless of status) to 18
 - Include Education in Refugee Integration Strategy
 - At Further Education Institutions (Colleges) and Higher Education Institutions (Universities)
 - Clarify / Simplify acceptance procedures for RAS
 - Special Advisors to help with application / enrolment
 - Special Programmes for this age group to be with peers
 - In Schools
 - Special Programmes for 16-18 with sufficient support (like tutors, GCSE exam specific prep, career advisors, Subject-specific ESOL)
 - Extend similar support to under 16 (especially in Secondary School)
 - Encourage schools to accept young people from RAS backgrounds
- Who should make these changes?
 - The NI Government
 - Education Authority Northern Ireland (EANI)
 - FE & HE Institutions
 - Charities working with RAS in Education
- When?
 - ASAP / This Year / Now
 - Top-Down policy change & Bottom-Up change should occur simultaneously
- Why?
 - Education helps build a better future for people & society
 - These young people want to contribute to society
 - Making access to education opportunities / studying easier makes life better

Call to action:

As soon as possible, individuals and institutions should create formal (full-time) programmes which consider background (with subject specific ESOL options) and work toward policy change.

Consider these ideas:

If you could create an education opportunity in NI, what would it be? (Use your imagination & describe in detail)

- An English class that suits our background and does not start from the beginning
- I think there should be groups to know about each region (Middle East) and how they had their education system and start from this point.
- I would like to get support in language. Also if the exams were available in several languages, to avoid failure only because of the language and not because of lack of information. Help will be available at any time if needed, and not just the time we spend during teaching hours, then we will have to wait for days to meet again and ask about anything related to the lesson or outside it.
- More fee-free education opportunities and extra support for refugees
- I think about online speaking group that all the refugee and asylum seeker can talk to people from here. It could be an app or a website. + Learning through games, it could be football or any games and online games.
- I would get a place in the college or a university for the people who are not in school or education and separating the hours depending on what they want to study. For example, from 8am-12pm for GCSE, and from 12pm-3pm for ESOL, etc...
- I would get a place in a college or school for over 16.
- I would offer more opportunity for more English class in different places with certificate, and they have to do special class for who is +16.
- I'd like to do the Scotland Model.
- I would change the whole idea about GCSEs for people who are not from NI or UK and create something else for them that would be fair for those English is not their first language.

More to come via the open survey launching today!

Survey: Education Opportunities
for 16-24 year old refugee or
asylum seekers in NI

