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Perceptions of Level 4 and 5 Qualifications in Northern Ireland

Dr Noel Purdy, Dr Ken Gibson, Dr Karen Orr, Dr Katie Tsang

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Executive Summary

This mixed methods research study, funded by the Department for the Economy (DfE) in Northern Ireland, and conducted by a team from the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU) at Stranmillis University College, Belfast between January and May 2022, aimed to explore the perceptions, opinions, thoughts and experiences of identified groups in respect of Level 4 and 5 qualifications in Northern Ireland.

The specific research objectives for the study were as follows:

- To explore the perceptions, opinions, thoughts and experiences of identified groups in relation to Level 4 and 5 qualifications in Northern Ireland, including current and prospective learners, parents/carers, school teachers and careers advisors, DfE careers advisors, employers, Higher Education Institution (HEI), Further Education (FE) and CAFRE curriculum leads, and representatives from relevant professional bodies;
- To explore, in particular, the factors which influence prospective students in deciding whether to enrol on Level 4 and 5 qualifications in Northern Ireland;
- To critically consider the challenges and opportunities of developing the appeal, awareness, understanding and uptake of Level 4 and 5 qualifications in Northern Ireland.

In order to accurately reflect current perspectives across the different target groups, a mixed methods research design was adopted consisting of:

- a large scale prospective learners' survey of Year 13 and Year 14 learners in schools, CAFRE and FE Colleges across Northern Ireland (n=331);
- a series of online consultation tools (shorter surveys) for current Level 4 and 5 learners based in FE Colleges and CAFRE (n=126) as well as parents/carers of prospective learners (n=84), and school teachers (n=43);
- a series of individual/group interviews with a sample of prospective learners (n=57), current learners (n=16), parents/carers of prospective learners (n=4), curriculum managers/leads in FE Colleges, CAFRE and HEIs (n=23), school teachers/careers advisors (n=15), lecturers (n=27), FE careers advisors (n=2), DfE careers advisors (n=3), employers (n=5) and members of professional bodies (n=1).

The findings reveal very high satisfaction rates among current Level 4 and 5 learners with an overwhelming majority rating their chosen courses as attractive (90%), useful (94%) and valuable (94%) in their survey responses. There were further positive views expressed by current learners and FE and CAFRE lecturers related to the perceived high level of skills development (both subject-specific competency skills and transversal skills), the strong links with employers (most explicit in the case of Higher Level Apprenticeships [HLAs]), the lower

costs associated with vocational study (both in terms of lower fees and closer proximity to home, thus reducing costs of travel and accommodation), and the greater accessibility of the qualifications. Particularly striking were the positive endorsements of HLAs by the employers interviewed, who spoke of the mutual benefit to employers and apprentices of the HLAs, whose popularity had grown markedly in recent years and was continuing to grow, across all school sectors. There was also clear evidence that many Level 4 and 5 learners benefited from the supportive, pastoral learning environment to be found in FE Colleges and CAFRE (compared to what was sometimes perceived as the more impersonal experience of larger classes at university) and that many also appreciated having more time to decide on future study and employment options through engaging in Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

The findings also reveal however that although three quarters of prospective learners had heard of Level 4 and 5 qualifications, specific knowledge was very limited: there were, for instance, very low levels of awareness and understanding of Level 4 and 5 entry requirements and the subjects offered among prospective learners, parents/carers and teachers, but a strong desire across the participant groups to find out more information about these qualifications. There are many reasons which emerged for this lack of awareness and understanding, including the proliferation of qualifications; confusion around the terminology used; the lack of a universal centralised application and admissions system (to parallel the UCAS system for university admissions); the inconsistent and at times inadequate careers information provided about Level 4 and 5 qualifications in some (but not all) schools; and the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic which has prevented face-to-face work experience placements, open days and employer visits to schools, all of which might have increased awareness and understanding of the Level 4 and 5 qualifications landscape.

It was striking that prospective learners, parents and teachers all rated Level 4 and 5 qualifications as more 'useful' and 'valuable' than 'attractive', suggesting that other factors may be limiting the perceived attractiveness of these qualifications, including a widespread preference for university-based study (over FE) and an enduring 'stigma' surrounding vocational education and training more generally.

The following recommendations are presented for consideration:

- more effective communication and improved branding targeted at all stakeholders (e.g. prospective learners, their parents/carers, teachers and employers) which would emphasise the practical value, employability, subject competency and transversal skills development, lower costs, greater accessibility, closer proximity, and very high levels of learner satisfaction associated with Level 4 and 5 qualifications. It is recommended that such enhanced communication should include face-to-face, first-

hand accounts from FE and CAFRE lecturers, current learners and knowledgeable employers, supplemented with the innovative use of digital technology and social media;

- more consistent careers information provided to Level 3 learners in *all* settings which should provide clear, comprehensive, impartial and up-to-date information on Level 4 and 5 opportunities;
- an extension of the range of Level 4 and 5 qualifications on offer in Northern Ireland, to better correspond with the wider provision in HEIs, with necessary consideration given to appropriate career exit points at Level 5 for those who do not wish to progress to Level 6;
- the need for greater clarity around possible progression routes from Level 4 and 5 qualifications to further study at Level 6 and beyond, and greater clarity around which qualifications are accepted and/or favoured by HEIs;
- the importance of further consideration of the particular academic and pastoral challenges that may face Foundation Degree students in Northern Ireland who articulate to Level 6 HEI-based study;
- further research in Northern Ireland into the most appropriate pathway for Foundation Degree students articulating to Level 6 HEI-based study, with a view to providing a clear evidence-based response to inform the current debate around 2+1 versus 2+2 models of provision;
- the development of a centralised applications and admissions platform (or the universal adoption of the UCAS system) to promote greater understanding and ease of access to the full range of Level 4 and 5 qualifications on offer in Northern Ireland.

Chapter 1: Context/Background

There has been debate around skills and rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy for many years, dating back at least as far as the Department of Employment and Learning's (DEL) Skills Strategy entitled *Success Through Skills – Transforming Futures* (DEL, 2011¹) which identified the need to upskill the workforce to meet the demands of the 'skills hungry' job market. This was followed by DEL's *Structured to Deliver Success* report (DEL, 2015²) which sought to raise the skills levels of the whole workforce, increase levels of social inclusion through enhancing the employability of those currently excluded from the labour market and was linked to the outcomes of the Executive's Programme for Government. More recently, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's report (OECD, 2020)³ identified opportunities and made recommendations to reduce skills imbalances, to create a culture of lifelong learning, to transform workplaces to make better use of skills, and to strengthen the governance of skills policies in Northern Ireland.

Most recently, the 2021 Department for the Economy (DfE)'s *10x Economy* vision⁴ reminds us of the importance of drawing upon our rich heritage of business innovation and entrepreneurialism to recover, rebuild and rebound the Northern Ireland economy as we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic and embark on an ambitious 'decade of innovation'. In the Ministerial foreword, we are reminded of the fact that although we may be standing on the shoulders of former industrial pioneers of the past, it is important now to look ahead and plan for the future. In a later section on addressing the skills imbalance, the *10x* economic vision stresses the importance of boosting the labour force at all levels of qualification (§6.13), since, it claims, increasing the number of people in apprenticeships who gain technical skills and advance to "mid-level sub-degree qualifications will build the capacity of our businesses" (§6.14). In order to achieve this goal, the *10x* economic vision calls for greater collaboration across government department including the Department of Education and the Department for Communities. The *10x* economic vision adds that "at the heart of it all will be our schools, Further Education Colleges and Universities working in unison to ensure that all of our young people have the opportunity to reach their potential" (§6.15).

This *10x* economic vision seeks to address skills shortages which have been highlighted in recent reports such as the *Northern Ireland Skills Barometer*. In the most recently published report⁵, it is predicted that from 2020-2030, although employment patterns have shifted as a

¹ Department of Employment and Learning (2011) *Success Through Skills – Transforming Futures - The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland*. Available at: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/success-through-skills-transforming-futures-0>

² Department of Employment and Learning (2015) *Structured to Deliver Success*. Available at: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/success-through-skills-structured-deliver-success-0>

³ OECD/DfE (2020) *OECD Skills Strategy Northern Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations*. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/publications/oecd-skills-strategy-northern-ireland-united-kingdom-1857c8af-en.htm>

⁴ Department for the Economy (2021) *A 10X Economy*. Belfast: DfE. Available at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/10x-economy-ni-decade-innovation.pdf>

⁵ Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (2021) *Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2021 – Overview Report*. Belfast: DfE/UU. Available at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Skills-Barometer-2021-Summary-Report.pdf>

result of pandemic, the requirement for qualifications has not waned, and employers continue to seek out highly qualified individuals, squeezing those with low or no qualifications out of the labour market. The Skills Barometer report notes further that the overall demand for skills will outstrip the supply, although this is dependent on the qualification level with the most significant undersupply to be found at Levels 3-5. It is estimated, for instance, that there will be an annual shortfall of 1.9k Level 4 and 5 qualifiers over the next decade in Northern Ireland. As the report notes, the shortages will be especially significant in certain fields (e.g. Health, public services and care; Engineering and manufacturing technologies; and Business, administration, finance and law):

“The largest supply gaps are likely to emerge in the mid-tier skills levels across most subject areas, linked primarily to a supply issue. NQF level 4-5 qualifications represent only 7% of the overall supply of labour from the education system. Addressing this undersupply could be met by either increasing the course offering and participation in mid-level qualifications at FE or increasing the number of apprenticeships which achieve at least mid-level qualification.” (UUEPC, 2021, §6.4)⁶

This very timely research study forms part of the Department for the Economy’s wider review into Higher Education provision in Further Education which was initiated in response to declining enrolments (exacerbated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic) and this forecasted under-supply of labour market skills at Levels 4 and 5. Several possible reasons have been identified to date in the DfE review, including the suggestion that there is a lack of appeal, awareness and understanding of Level 4 and 5 qualifications. A recent BBC report (BBC, 2022)⁷ has also highlighted this matter when it reported that “almost 48% of school leavers entered university in both 2020 and 2021, the highest Northern Ireland rates on record” whereas in stark contrast during the same period there was a significant fall in the number of school leavers entering Further Education (FE) Colleges. The impact of the ‘jump’ in A-level results in 2020 and 2021 (linked to changes in how grades were awarded during the Covid-19 pandemic) is clearly acknowledged in the BBC article, and caution is recommended when comparing results in 2020 and 2021 with previous years. Nonetheless, the fall in FE numbers has led to calls for more young people to be encouraged to enter FE or embark on vocational and technical qualifications. As reported in a recent review of the assessment of

⁶ Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (2021) *Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2021 – Overview Report*. Belfast: DfE/UU. Available at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Skills-Barometer-2021-Summary-Report.pdf>

⁷ BBC (2022) see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-61598341> [last accessed 29/05/2022] – News report is in reference to DENI (2022) *Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers 2020 – 2021*, Department of Education for Northern Ireland, Bangor. Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-leavers-202021>

vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland and across Europe (Bloomer et al., 2022)⁸ there is however a significant lack of recent empirical research evidence across the field of vocational education and training generally, and particularly within the Northern Ireland context. This review of academic and policy literature revealed a range of key areas of debate including, but not limited to, the tensions between vocational and academic qualification pathways, and employment outcomes. The review also highlighted that the perceived tensions between vocational and academic study are not confined to Northern Ireland and that similar debates are taking place elsewhere across Europe. It is in this context that the importance of this current research becomes increasingly significant.

The current project, funded by the Department of the Economy in Northern Ireland, and conducted by a team from the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement at Stranmillis University College, Belfast between January and May 2022, aimed to explore the perceptions, opinions, thoughts and experiences of identified groups on the topic of Level 4 and 5 qualifications in Northern Ireland.

The specific research objectives for the study were as follows:

- To explore the perceptions, opinions, thoughts and experiences of identified groups in relation to Level 4 and 5 qualifications in Northern Ireland, including current and prospective learners, parents/carers, school teachers and careers advisors, DfE careers advisors, employers, HEI and FE curriculum leads, and representatives from relevant professional bodies;
- To explore in particular, the factors which influence prospective students in deciding whether to enrol on Level 4 and 5 qualifications in Northern Ireland;
- To critically consider the challenges and opportunities of developing the appeal, awareness, understanding and uptake of Level 4 and 5 qualifications in Northern Ireland.

In order to accurately reflect current insights and understandings into these experiences, a mixed methods research design was adopted consisting of:

- a large scale prospective learners' survey of Year 13 and Year 14 learners across Northern Ireland;

⁸ Bloomer, S., Purdy, N., Gibson, K. and Orr, K. (2022) *The Assessment of Vocational Education and Training Qualifications: a review of European policy and practice* (report commissioned by the Department for the Economy), Belfast: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement, Stranmillis University College, Belfast.

- a series of online consultation tools for current Level 4 and 5 learners based in FE settings as well as parents, teachers and careers advisors in Level 3 school settings;
- a series of individual/ group interviews with a sample of prospective/current learners, parents of learners, curriculum leads in Higher Education Institution and Further Education College settings, school teachers / careers advisors, college lecturers, DfE careers advisors, employer representatives and members of professional bodies.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This study adopted a mixed methodological approach in order to explore and understand current perceptions, opinions, thoughts and experiences of identified groups in relation to Level 4 and 5 qualifications in Northern Ireland.

Quantitative research

Instruments: The main research instruments employed were surveys developed, administered and hosted online using SmartSurvey. A series of bespoke online survey tools were designed for the purposes of this research. This resulted in the development of the following instruments:

- An in-depth survey aimed at prospective learners;
- A shorter online consultation tool aimed at current learners;
- A shorter online consultation tool aimed at parents/carers of prospective learners;
- A shorter online consultation tool aimed at teachers.

Participants, sampling and recruitment: Four different participant groups were invited to take part in the quantitative element of this research, namely: prospective level 4 and 5 learners, current level 4 and 5 learners, parents/carers of prospective learners, and teachers.

With regards to sampling and recruitment, the following techniques were employed:

- Prospective learners – all mainstream post-primary schools which had year 13 and 14 provision, all six Further Education (FE) Colleges and all College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) campuses (i.e., targeting their current level 3 learners) in Northern Ireland were invited to participate in this research. The schools were invited to participate via email, circulated on behalf of the research team by the Department of Education. The FE Colleges and CAFRE were invited to participate via emails from both the research team and follow-up communications from the Department for the Economy. Follow-up emails were sent in order to encourage as much participation in the surveys as possible. A total of 331 prospective learners completed the survey which was open from Thursday 24th February – Friday 25th March 2022;
- Current learners - All six FE Colleges and CAFRE were also contacted (by both the research team and the Department for the Economy) to facilitate student completion of a survey of current level 4 and 5 learners' perspectives. In total, 126 learners responded to this survey which was open from Thursday 24th February – Friday 25th March 2022;

- Parents/carers – Parents/carers of prospective learners were invited to participate in a shorter online consultation tool. In total 84 parents/carers responded to this survey which was open from Thursday 24th February – Friday 25th March 2022;
- Teachers - In total, 43 teachers completed the survey which was open from Thursday 24th February – Friday 25th March 2022.

Table 1. Number of participants per survey.

Level 3 Prospective Learners in schools, FE Colleges and CAFRE	Current Level 4/5 Learners in FE Colleges and CAFRE	Parents/Carers of school-based prospective learners	School teachers
N= 331	N= 126	N=84	N=43

Procedure: All surveys were completed online. The surveys were open for a period of 5 weeks 24th February – 25th March 2022. School pupils and college learners were provided time during school/college hours to complete the survey.

Qualitative research

Instruments: Semi-structured interview and focus group protocols were developed to suit the specific requirements and experiences of each of the different participant groups. All interviews and focus groups were recorded using an audio recorder for transcription purposes.

Participants, sampling and recruitment: Interviews and focus groups were conducted across the following groups:

- *Prospective Learners (schools): year 13 and 14 pupils from post-primary schools across Northern Ireland.* Schools were selected to ensure representation from different management types and geographical location. Five schools were initially selected for supplementary fieldwork interviews with pupils and teacher groups. However, due to Covid-19 staffing difficulties, two schools were not in a position to facilitate any data collection. Two additional schools were approached for fieldwork interviews. The final sample involved one controlled grammar school, one controlled non-selective school, one Catholic maintained grammar school, one Catholic maintained non-selective school, and one integrated post-primary school. All schools were co-educational (boys and girls), with a spread of school size and geographical location across Northern Ireland, and a range of urban and rural catchment areas;
- *Teachers from the same five post-primary school settings as detailed above;*

- *Parents/carers of prospective learners*: accessed through the principals of the five post-primary schools as detailed above;
- *Prospective Learners (Level 3 learners from FE Colleges and CAFRE) across Northern Ireland*. All six FE Colleges and CAFRE were invited to participate. In the end three of the FE Colleges and CAFRE agreed to participate and contact was made through a nominated staff member;
- *FE and CAFRE lecturers and curriculum leads*: from three of the FE Colleges and CAFRE (as detailed above);
- *HEI curriculum leads*: Relevant curriculum leads were also identified and approached by email from the four Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Northern Ireland that offer courses leading to Level 4 and 5 qualifications: Open University; Queen’s University, Belfast; Ulster University; and Stranmillis University College, Belfast;
- *Employers/Professional bodies*: a total of 20 employers and professional bodies were approached by email and invited to participate in the research. Those contacted were from a range of sectors including banking, construction, finance, the law, hospitality and manufacturing. In each case employers and representatives of professional bodies were invited to participate in a short interview. However, despite several follow-up emails from the research team and DfE, response rates remained low. In the end, participation was agreed by five employers and one representative of a professional body.

The precise number of interview participants per target sample category is detailed in the tables below:

Table 2. Breakdown of qualitative interview participants.

School-based Interviews	
Participant Group	Number interviewed
Year 13 and 14 learners	39
Teachers	10
Heads of Careers (CEIAG)	3
Head of Sixth Form	1
School Principal	1
Parents/carers	4
FE/CAFRE Interviews	
Participant Group	Number interviewed
Level 3 learners	18
Level 4 and 5 learners	16
Lecturers	27
Curriculum leads/managers	17

FE Careers staff	2
HEI Interviews	
Institution	Number interviewed
Queen's University	1
Stranmillis University College	1
Ulster University	3
Open University	1
DfE Careers Advisors	
DfE careers advisors	3
Employers and professional bodies	
Sector	Number interviewed
Agri-Food	1
Civil Engineering	1
Construction	1
Hospitality	1
Manufacturing	1
Professional Body	1

Procedure

All learner interviews involved face-to-face focus group discussions (held in the schools/colleges during class time) with approximately 6-8 participants in each group. It was felt that the necessary relationship building required for effective group interviews would be more easily realised through face-to-face engagement in schools and FE settings. Due to student apprenticeship arrangements, however, one current learner focus group had to be conducted online via the Microsoft Teams meeting platform. Students were not obligated to keep their camera functions on during the 30-minute interview.

Parent/carer interviews were largely conducted via telephone with the exception of two parents (from the same school) who consented to an online group interview via Microsoft Teams. Employer interviews were all conducted via Microsoft Teams. For all other participants, a range of focus group and one-to-one interviews (online via Teams and face-to-face at the participants' preferred location) were employed depending on the availability and preference of the participants. All focus groups and one-to-one interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 20 and 60 minutes. Interview durations varied greatly between groups and was highly dependent upon both the availability of the participants (e.g., some schools requested that interviews last no longer than 30 minutes in order to fit within the time scheduling of a lesson), the number of participants and the nature of the conversation.

Incentives were given to participating prospective and current learners. For the survey, a competition draw was held for two £25 Amazon gift vouchers for both the prospective and current learner survey participants. Winners were drawn at random from those willing to participate in the draw/competition. Additionally, all prospective and current learners across school and FE/CAFRE settings who took part in focus group discussions (n=76) received a £15 Amazon gift voucher.

Analysis

All qualitative data transcripts were transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai (Artificial Intelligence empowered transcription service) in preparation for a wider thematic analysis. This qualitative analysis method further facilitated the identification, analysis and interpretation of inter-related patterns throughout the wider target sample data. Micro-thematic analyses were subsequently conducted from interview transcripts throughout each target sample group for comparative purposes, e.g., school-based prospective learners' thematic analysis, FE prospective learners' analysis. All qualitative data extracts were grouped using a focused deductive coding approach, wherein the analyst begins with a pre-determined set of themes. These themes were based on the main interview topics across all protocols which were designed to test:

- (A) code; Knowledge and awareness of Level 4 and 5 qualifications;
- (B) code; Appeal and value of Level 4 and 5 qualifications;
- (C) code; Utility and relevance of Level 4 and 5 qualifications;
- (D) code; Factors relevant to the uptake of Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

The quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics, frequency analysis and cross-tabulation techniques using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel software.

Ethical considerations

Full ethical permission for the study was sought and granted by the Research and Ethics Committee of Stranmillis University College, Belfast, in line with the College's Code of Ethics in Research⁹ and the 4th edition of the *Ethical Guidelines for Ethical Research* (British Educational Research Association, 2018)¹⁰. Every effort was made throughout the research project to ensure that participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the study, their right to withdraw, confidentiality and anonymity, and data storage arrangements. All

⁹ Stranmillis University College (2022) *Code of Ethics in Research*. Belfast: Stranmillis University College, Belfast. Available at: <https://www.stran.ac.uk/research/research-integrity/>

¹⁰ BERA (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* 4th edition. London: BERA. Available at: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018>

participants in interviews were required to read and sign a consent form prior to the start of the interview. These were either in the form of paper copies collected by the research team (in the case of face-to-face interviews) or by completed forms sent by email to the research team in advance (in the case of online interviews). With the permission of the participants, the interviews were audio recorded for transcription purposes.

Research limitations

The research limitations must be acknowledged: the survey sample sizes vary considerably (from 43 to 337) and the focus group interviews are representative only of the small sample of FE Colleges, CAFRE and schools who consented to participate in our research. Consequently, this research does not claim to represent the full range of perspectives of Level 4 and 5 qualifications. Nonetheless, the data presented in the following chapter offer many interesting insights into the perspectives of the different target groups.

Chapter 3: Quantitative Results

Quantitative Findings: Level 3 Prospective Learners' Survey

Respondent Demographics

In total, 331 students responded to the prospective learners' survey, the majority of whom were female (71%) and aged 17 or younger (42%) or 18-20 (37%). With regards to community background, 45% were from a Catholic background and 37% from a Protestant background. There was an equal 50/50 split between those living in a rural community and those living in an urban area. Almost one third (31%) reported that they were entitled to Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) or to a DAERA Further Education Award (as an indicator of low income family background). Similarly, 36% reported that they have been entitled to a free school meal whilst at school, whereas a smaller proportion of respondents (8%) have been in receipt of a hardship fund.

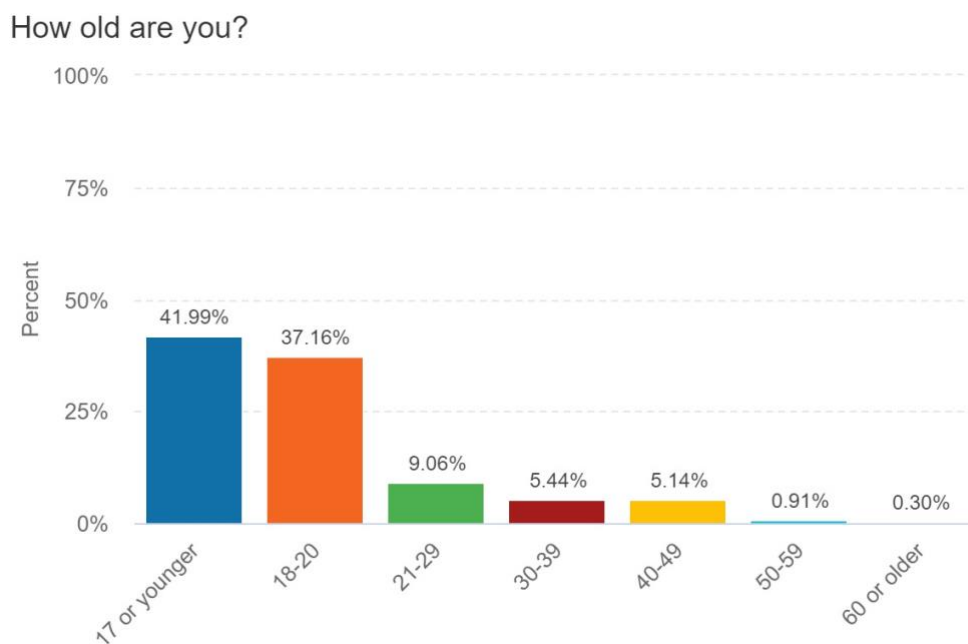


Figure 1. Age groups of prospective learner respondents.

Where are you currently studying?

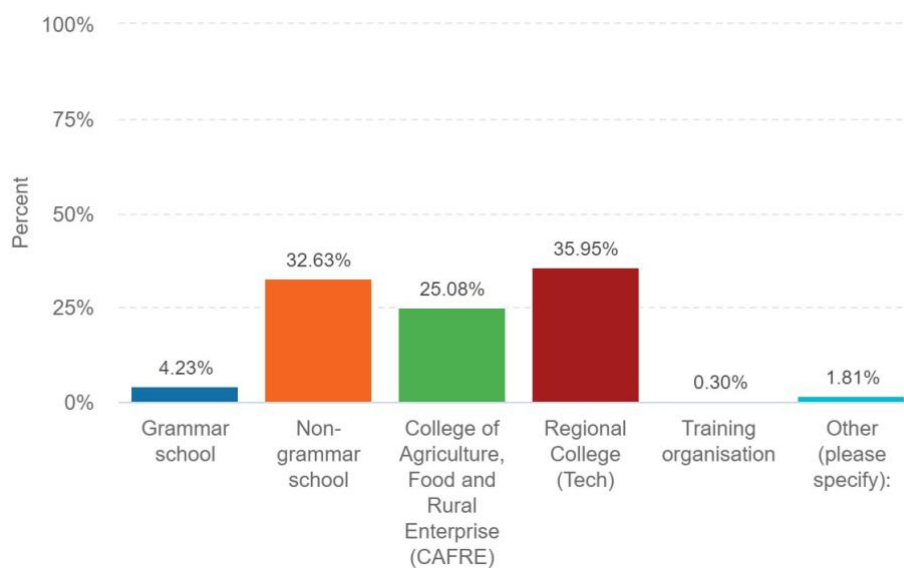


Figure 2. Current place of study for prospective learners.

Current Education of Prospective Learners

The majority of respondents came from FE colleges (36%), non-grammar schools (32%) and the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (25%). Just 4% of respondents (n=14) came from grammar schools. The most popular course of study was AS/A Levels (40%). The majority of respondents (67%) reported that their chosen career path does require further training or qualifications and the most popular choice for further study was university-based study. 42% of the respondents reported that they plan to pursue further university-based study.

What (Level 3) qualification are you currently studying for?

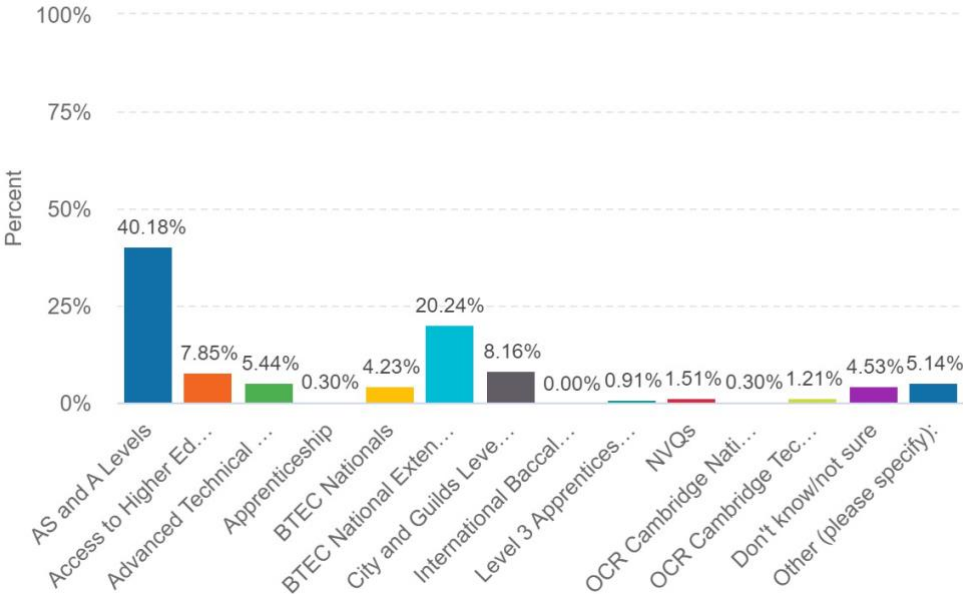


Figure 3. Current course of study for prospective learners.

Does your chosen career path require specific training or qualifications?

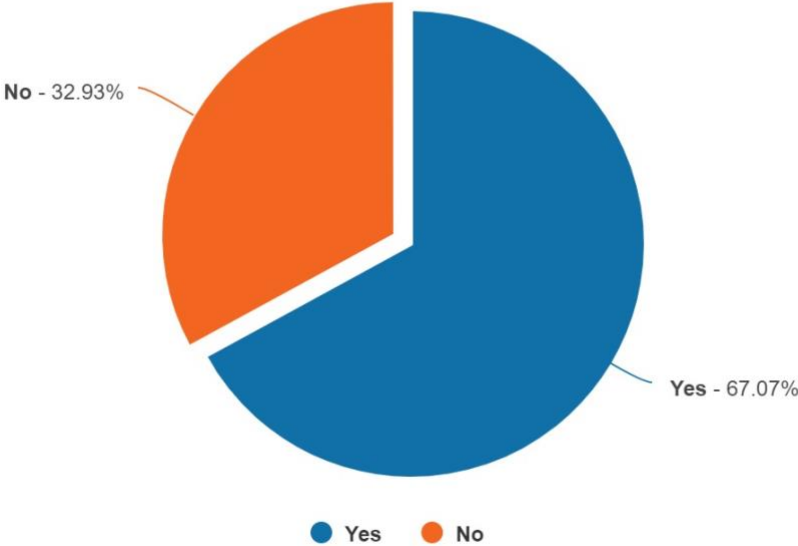


Figure 4. Estimations of further training/qualifications for prospective learners.

What are your plans for after your current course ends?

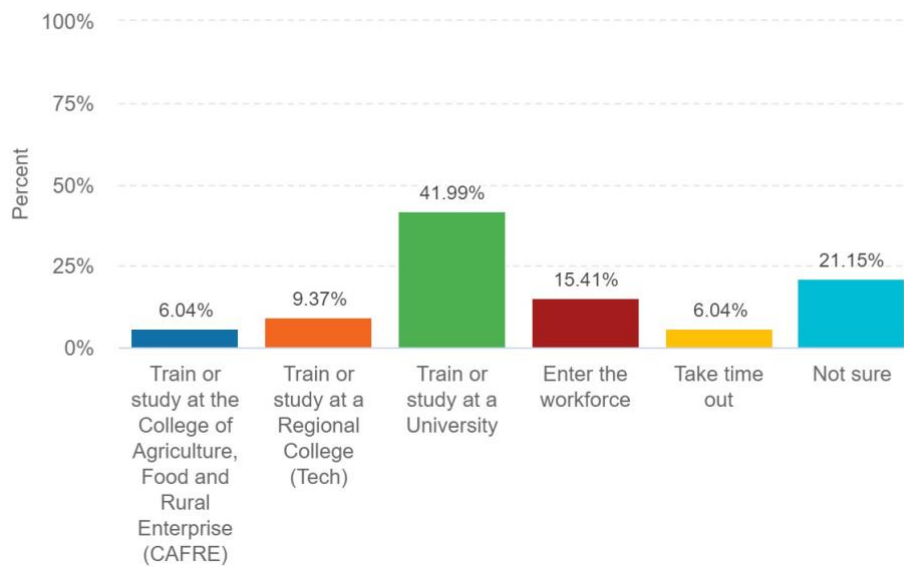


Figure 5. Prospective learner plans for post course completion.

Awareness and understanding of Level 4 and 5 qualifications

The majority of respondents (77%) reported that they had heard of Level 4 and 5 qualifications. The most common ways in which people had heard of Level 4 and 5 qualifications was through: doing their own research (27%); a regional college (27%); a family member (25%); or a careers advisor (25%).

Before today, had you ever heard of Level 4 and 5 Qualifications, e.g., HNCs / HNDs/ Foundation degrees?

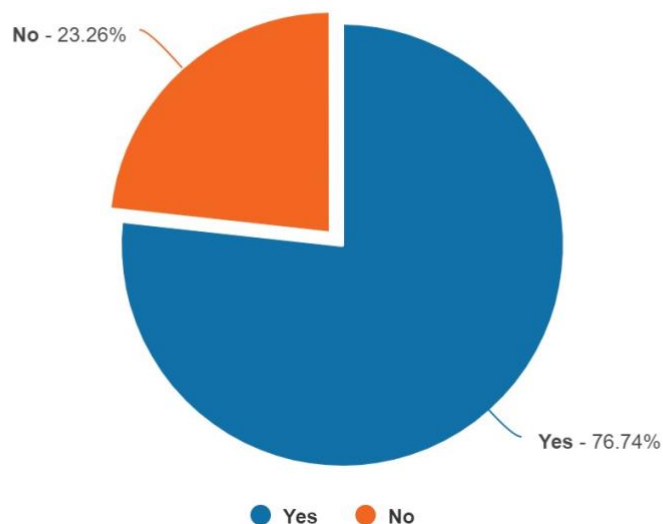


Figure 6. Prospective learner awareness of Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

We would like to better understand how you have become aware of these qualifications, please tick all that apply.

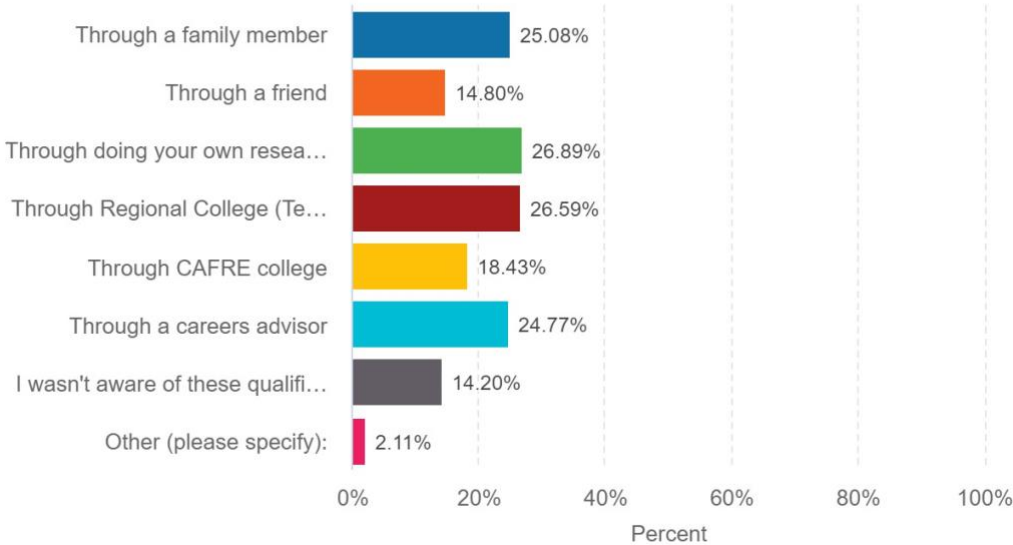


Figure 7. Sources of prospective learner knowledge on Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

There was variation in terms of awareness across the different Level 4 and 5 qualifications available. In general, more people had more awareness of foundation degrees (50% of respondents answered that they had 'quite a bit/a lot' of awareness), compared to other courses. In terms of respondents' understanding of the specific details regarding these courses, over half of the respondents (53%) reported that they had little or no knowledge of the entry requirements for Level 4 and 5 qualifications or of the subjects which can be studied. Over a quarter of the respondents (27%) felt that it was 'easy'/'very easy' to understand the different courses available at Level 4 and 5. A large proportion of the sample (55%) were not sure.

On a scale from 1-5, rate your level of awareness of the following Level 4 and 5 qualifications, where 1 means you have no awareness and 5 means you have a lot of awareness.

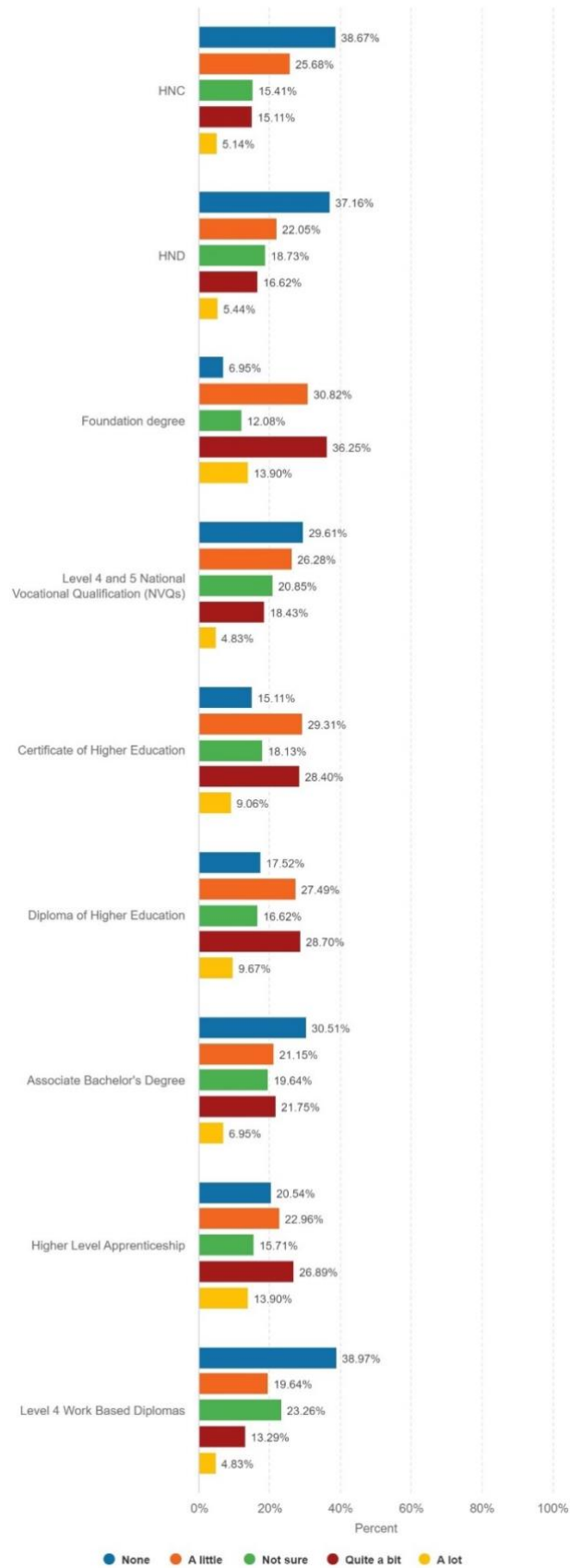


Figure 8. Levels of awareness for specific Level 4 and 5 qualifications for prospective learners.

On a scale from 1-5, how much knowledge do you have of the following (where 1 means no knowledge and 5 means a lot of knowledge)?

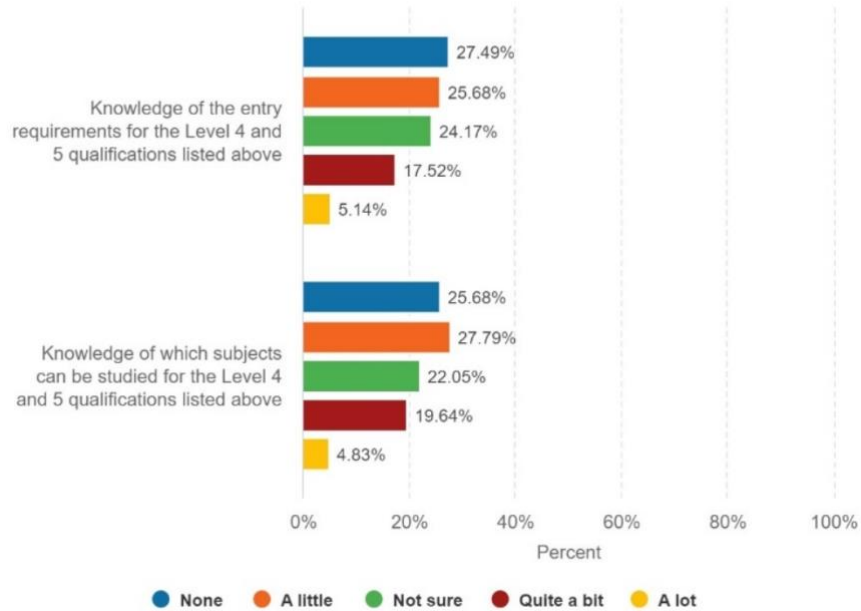


Figure 9. Prospective learner knowledge of Level 4/5 subject availability/entry requirements.

In your opinion, how easy is it to understand the different courses currently available for Level 4 and 5 qualifications?

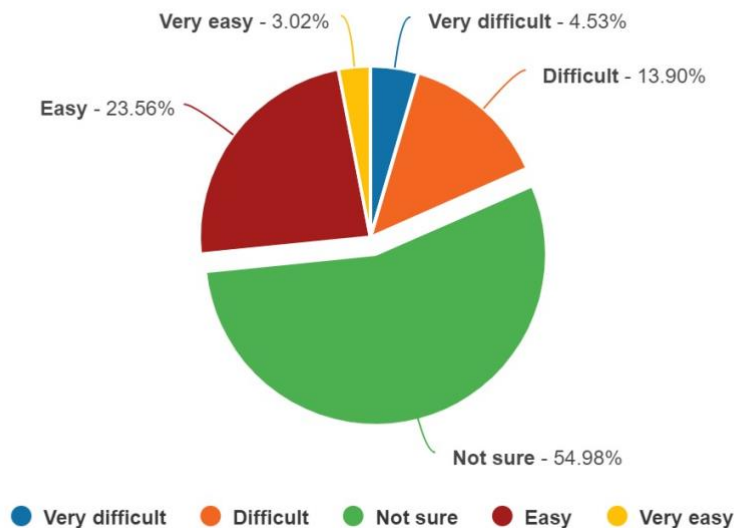


Figure 10. Prospective learners' understanding of course availability in Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

Appetite to learn more

There is evidence of some appeal for Level 4 and 5 qualifications amongst the sample of respondents. For example, over a third (39%) reported that they would be 'very/interested' in learning more about the range of level 4 and 5 qualifications available. Additionally, less than one fifth of respondents (17.5%) were completely closed off to the idea (i.e., reporting that they were 'not at all likely' to pursue a Level 4 and 5 qualification).

To what extent would you like to learn more about the range of Level 4 and 5 qualifications listed above?

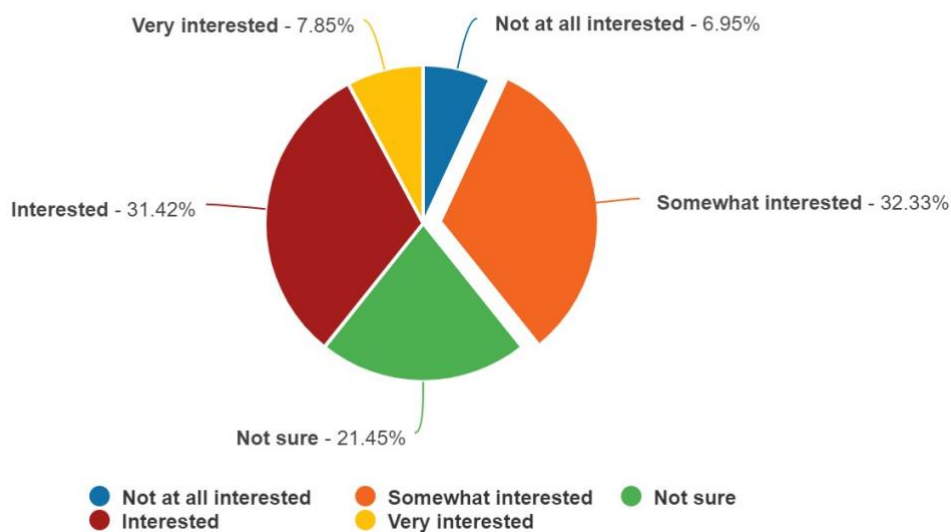


Figure 11. Prospective learner desire to learn more.

How likely are you to pursue a Level 4 or 5 qualification at CAFRE/ a Regional College? (E.g. HNC, HND, Foundation Degree)

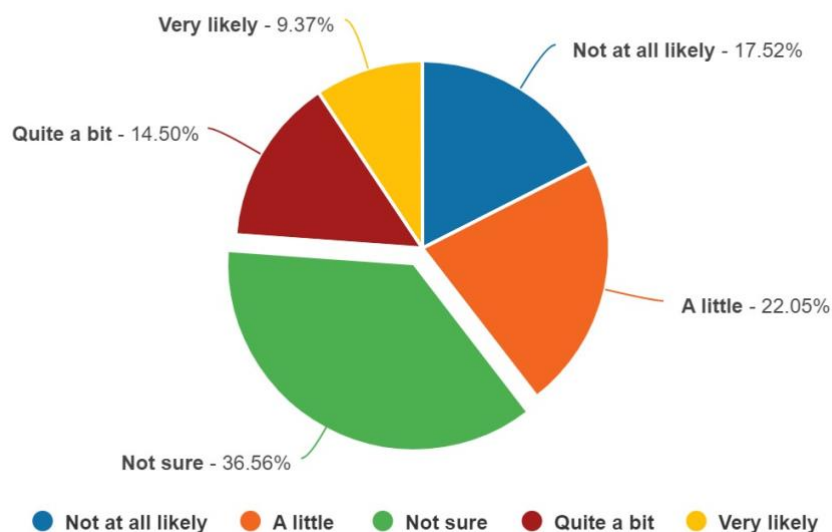


Figure 12. Prospective learner desire to study Level 4 and 5 at CAFRE or a regional college.

In order to increase the appeal of these courses, the most popular recommendations were to offer a wider variety of courses (58%), across different regions in Northern Ireland (44%) and improved recruitment/marketing (37%). Note that 55% of respondents reported that after having completed this survey, they would be more inclined to find out more about Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

In your opinion, what do you think could make Level 4/5 courses more appealing to students? Please tick all that apply

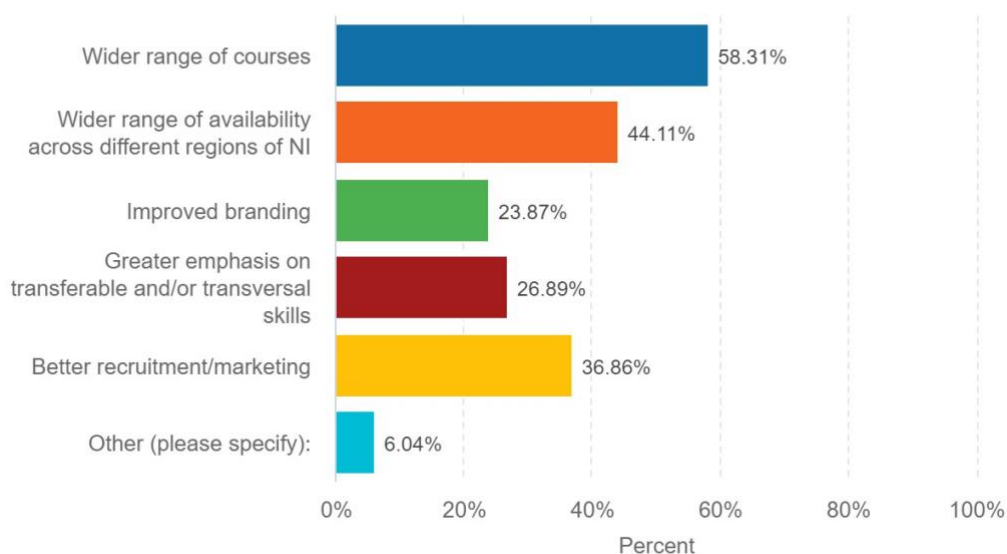


Figure 13. Improving appeal of Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

Based on your participation in this survey, would you now be more inclined to find out more information about Level 4 or 5 qualifications?

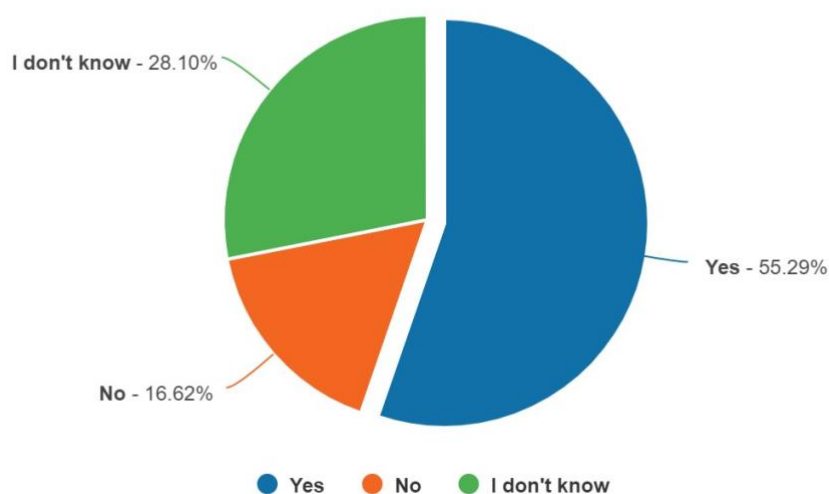


Figure 14. Prospective learners' desire to learn more about Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

Communications

The most popular way in which respondents would like to learn was via in-person information sessions delivered by college teaching staff (33%). Similarly, when asked about the best way to engage potential students in learning about Level 4 and 5 qualifications, almost half (48%) chose in-person information sessions.

How would you most prefer to hear about Level 4 and 5 qualifications? (Please choose one answer)

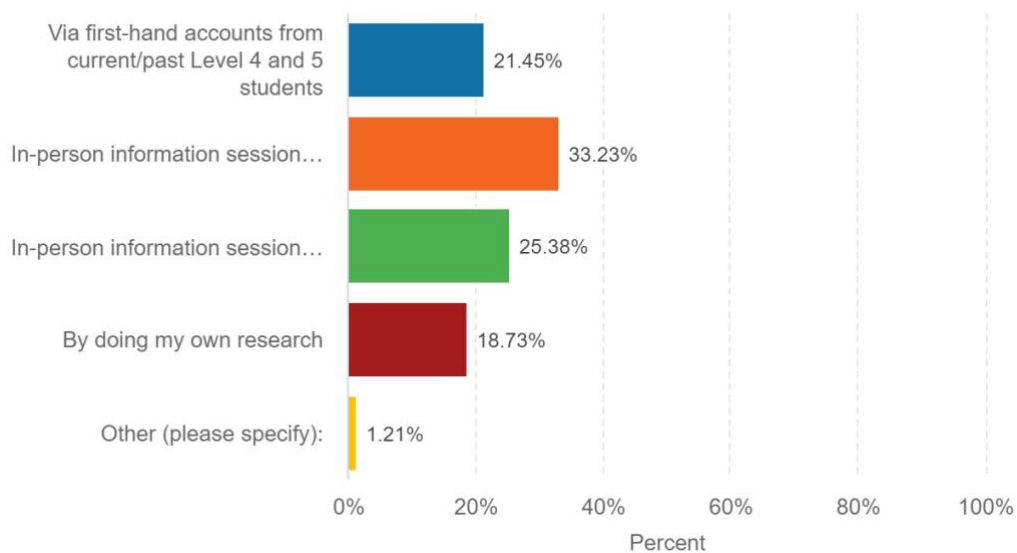


Figure 15. Marketing preferences for prospective learners.

What's the best way to engage potential students in learning about Level 4 and 5 qualifications? (Please choose one answer)

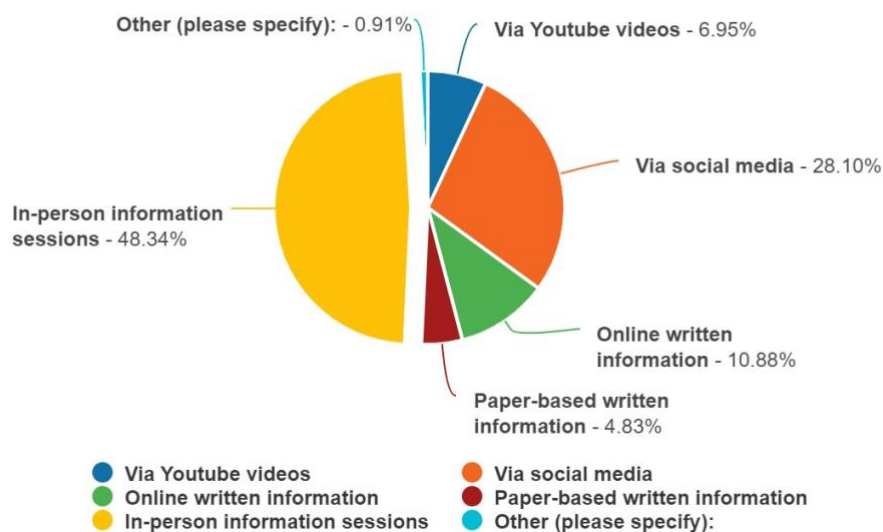


Figure 16. Preferences for delivery of marketing information for prospective learners.

Perceptions

In general, there was positivity expressed towards Level 4 and 5 qualifications but this was far from overwhelming across this sample of prospective learners. Perspectives were assessed across four domains, notably perceived attractiveness, usefulness, value and popularity. Across each domain there was high degrees of uncertainty ('not sure/don't know').

As Figure 17 (below) illustrates, prospective learners gave higher ratings for the usefulness and value of Level 4 and 5 qualifications than they did for their attractiveness. For instance, 56.2% of prospective learners reported that Level 4 and 5 qualifications were 'quite a bit' or 'very' valuable, and 42.3% reported that they were 'quite a bit' or 'very' useful, while only 30.2% deemed them to be 'quite a bit' or 'very' attractive. This was a common finding among parents/carers and teachers too.

When asked to judge which Level 4 and 5 qualification was most desirable (see Figure 18 below), the most common response among the prospective learners (36%) was that they lacked sufficient knowledge to make an informed judgement. Of those who did express a preference, the most desirable qualification was the Foundation Degree (18.2%) followed by the Associate Bachelor's Degree (10.6%) and Higher Level Apprenticeship (9.7%).

On a scale from 1-5, please answer the questions below, where 1 means not at all attractive/ useful/ valuable and 5 means very attractive/ useful/ valuable.

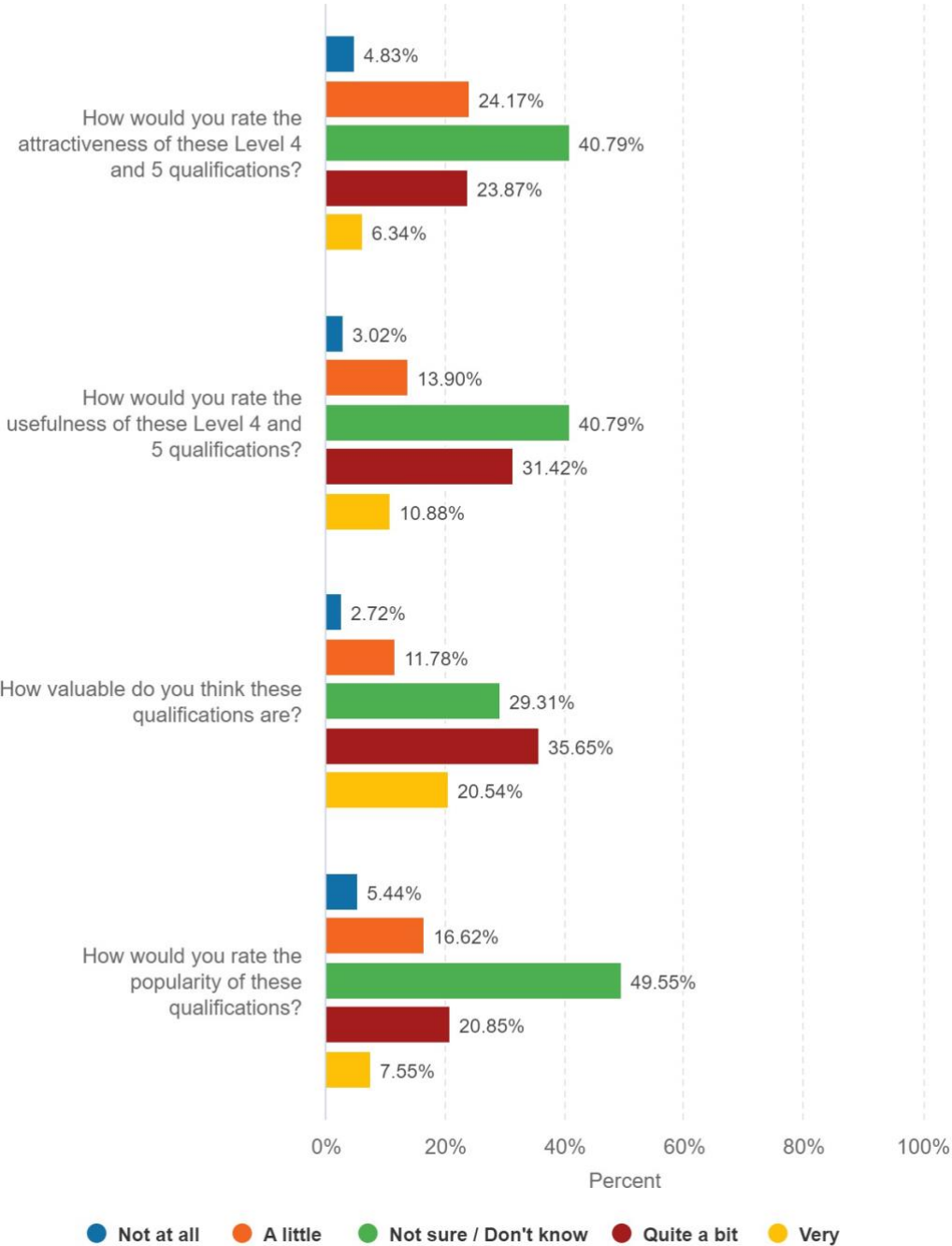


Figure 17. Level of attractiveness/utility/value/popularity for prospective learners.

Which of the Level 4 and 5 qualifications below do you think is the most desirable? (Please choose one answer)

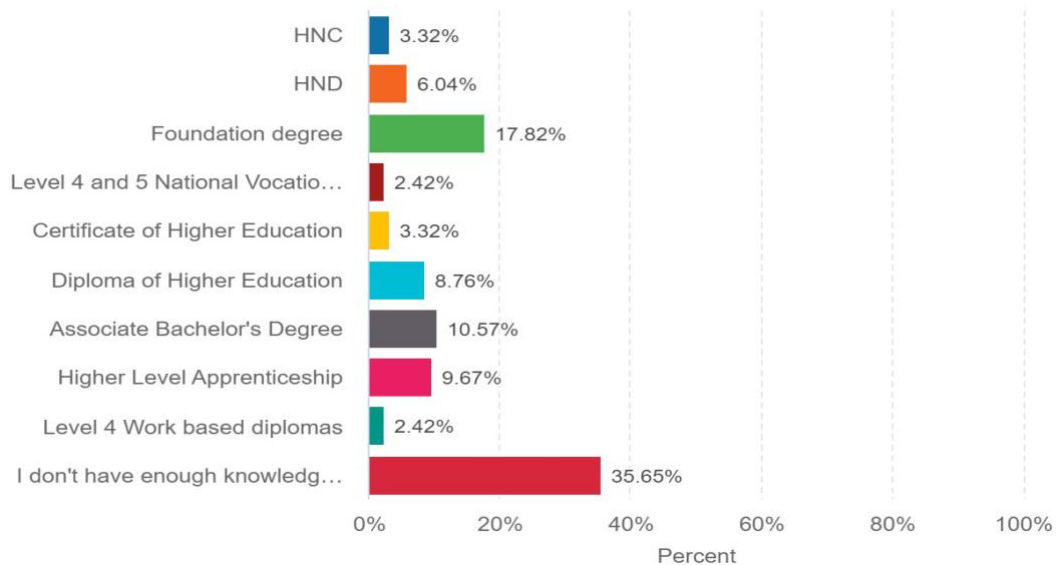


Figure 18. Most desirable Level 4 and 5 qualifications for prospective learners.

In terms of how appealing different institutions were to the respondents, few reported that they found it 'quite a bit' or 'very' attractive to attend CAFRE (16%). More respondents (32%) found FE colleges an attractive option. That said, when given the choice between all three, the largest proportion of learners (46%) said that they would prefer to study at university. When comparing Level 4 and 5 qualifications to university-based degrees, Level 4 and 5 compared favourably, in terms of accessibility (easy to get on to and easier to complete the course), likelihood to lead to employment, and (in)expensiveness.

How attractive is it to attend the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) for Level 4/ 5 study?

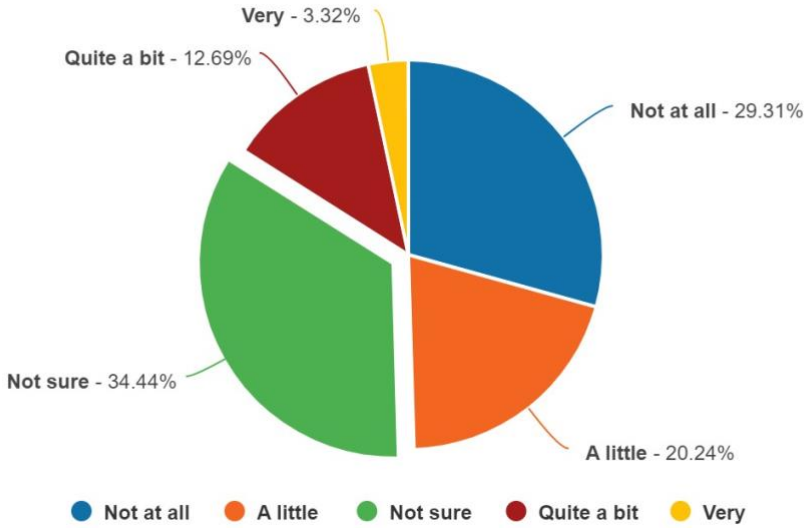


Figure 19. Level of attractiveness for CAFRE study.

How attractive is it to attend a Regional College (Tech) for Level 4/ 5 study?

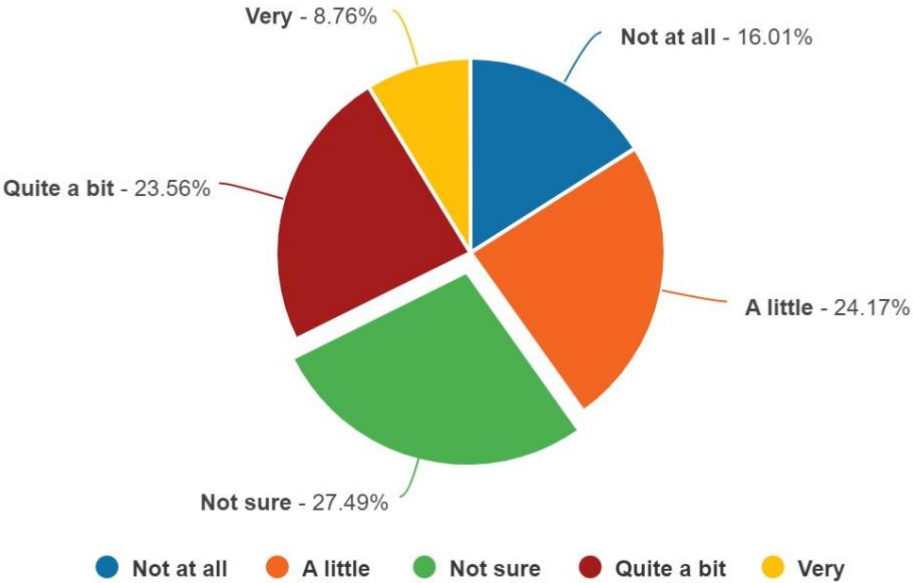


Figure 20. Level of attractiveness for Regional College study.

How attractive is it to study an undergraduate degree course at University? (for example, a BA, BEng, BSc)

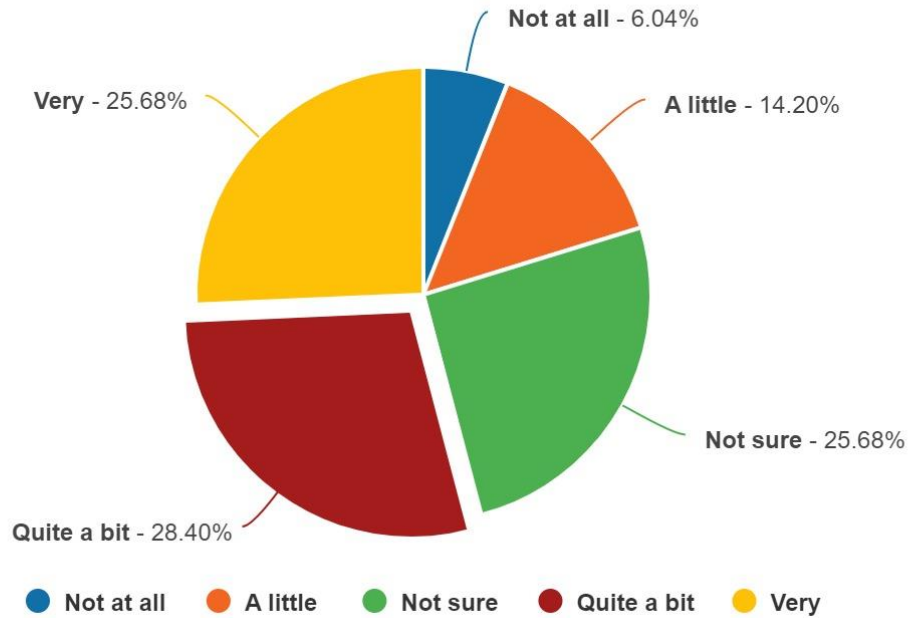


Figure 21. Level of attractiveness for university study.

If you had the choice, would you choose to continue further studies at CAFRE, Regional College (Tech) or a University?

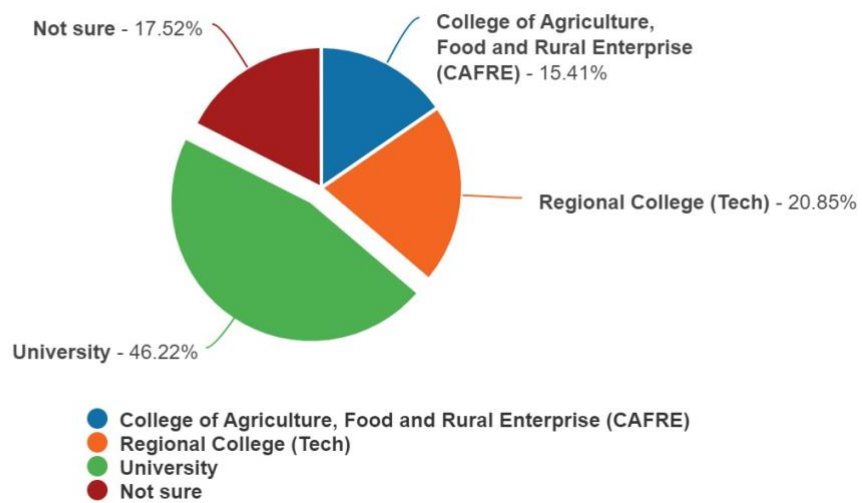


Figure 22. Prospective learner first choice for further study.

In comparison to university-based degree level courses, how would you rate Level 4 and 5 qualifications according to the following factors?

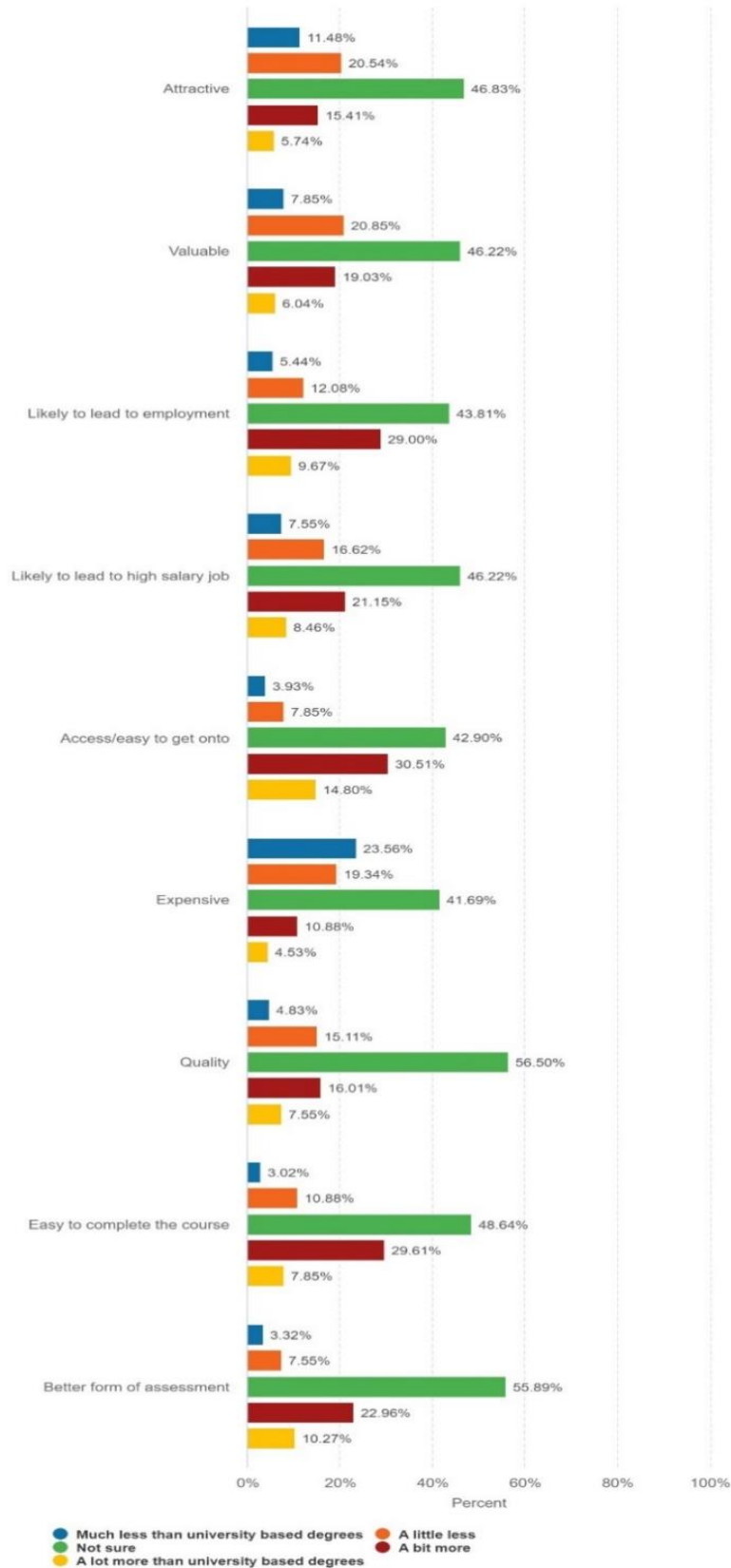


Figure 23. Factors of comparison between university and FE courses.

The biggest appeal of Level 4 and 5 qualifications was that it can provide a pathway to employment (selected by 52% of the sample), followed by providing work experience (47%) and because it is less academic/more practical (42%).

What do you think might attract you to consider choosing Level 4 and 5 qualifications? Tick all that apply.

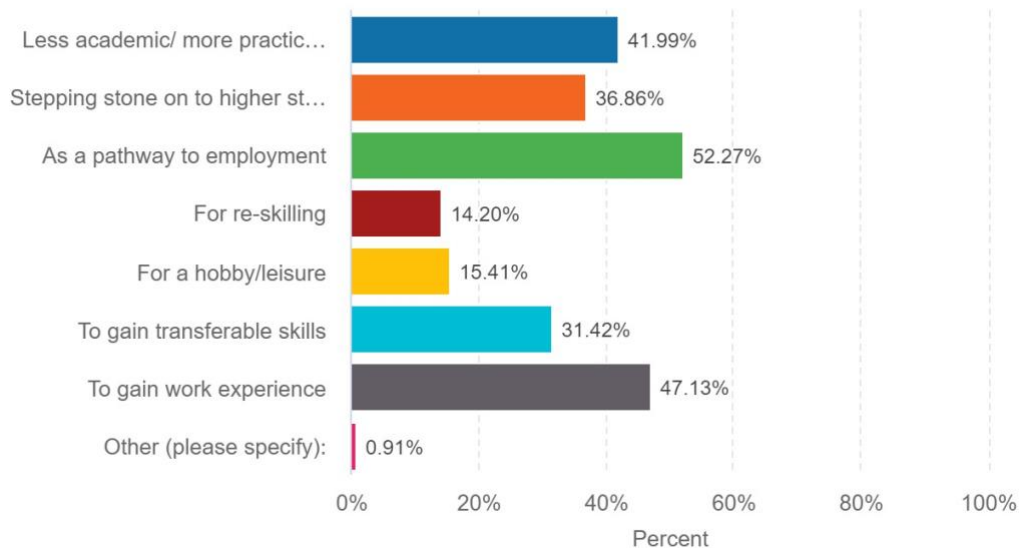


Figure 24. Perceptions of Level 4 and 5 attractiveness.

Financial implications

The majority of respondents were either unsure (39%) or a little (21%) or not at all (28%) aware of government financial support available for those undertaking level 4/5 qualifications. Only 26% of respondents felt that these courses would be quite a bit/very costly.

How aware are you of available government financial support for students undertaking Level 4 and 5 qualifications?

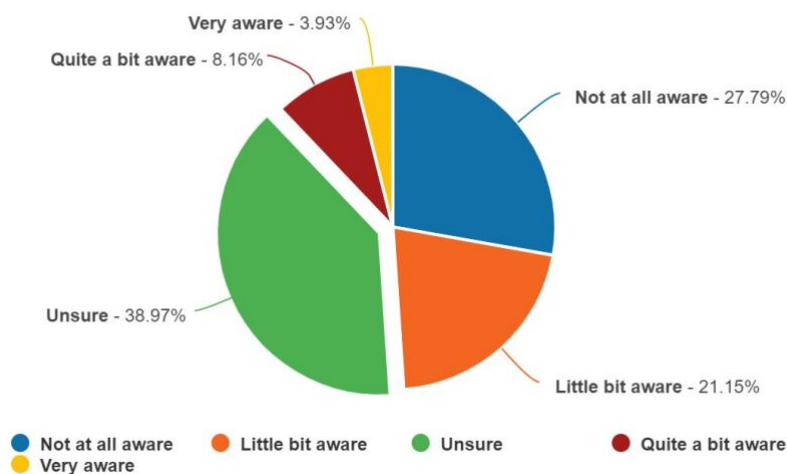


Figure 25. Prospective learner awareness of government financial support.

How costly do you think it is to study for Level 4 and 5 qualifications compared to university-based degree courses?

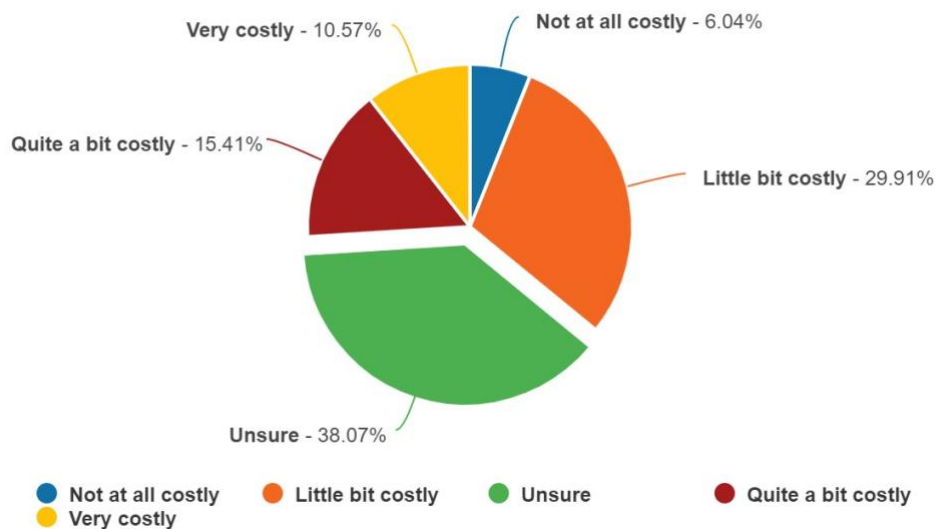


Figure 26. Estimations of cost comparison between university and Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

Disaggregation of key questions from the prospective learners’ survey

The data from the prospective learners’ survey were disaggregated by the prospective learners’ current place of study to explore if these different groups responded differently to any of the items on the survey (note, any differences emerging are descriptive only). Several interesting findings emerged:

First, when asked what the learners’ plans were after their current course of study (Q12), larger proportions of school students (grammar: 86%, n=14 [note, the small sample size]; non-grammar: 59%, n=108) chose university compared to those from CAFRE (12%) and the FE Colleges (39%).

Second, when asked to rate their knowledge of Level 4 and 5 entry requirements (Q18i), the overall average across the sample who claimed that they knew ‘quite a bit’ or ‘a lot’ about entry requirements was just 22.4%. As might be expected, the greatest level of knowledge was found among FE College students (29.4%) but there was little difference in the knowledge of grammar pupils (21.4%) and non-grammar pupils (21.3%). In other words, knowledge of Level 4 and 5 entry requirements was very low, irrespective of school type attended (grammar or non-grammar).

Third, when asked to rate their knowledge of which subjects can be studied for Level 4 and 5 qualifications (Q18ii), there was only a small difference between FE College students (of whom 37% claimed that they know ‘quite a bit’ or ‘a lot’) and grammar school pupils (of whom 35.7% claimed that they know ‘quite a bit’ or ‘a lot’).

Fourth, more interesting still was the high level of interest from the grammar school pupil respondents to learn more about Level 4 and 5 qualifications. This can be seen through the disaggregated responses to Q20 and Q36 of the prospective learners' survey.

In Q20 prospective learners were asked to what extent they would like to learn more about the range of Level 4 and 5 qualifications listed on the survey. Here, the average is relatively low: just 39.1% of respondents said that they were 'interested' or 'very interested' to learn more. However, the highest level of interest was found among the grammar school pupils, of whom 64.3% were 'interested' or 'very interested' to learn more, compared to just 47.9% of FE College students and 35.2% of non-grammar school pupils, and 27.7% of CAFRE students.

Similarly, high levels of interest among grammar school pupils were found in the disaggregated scores from Q36 which, at the end of the survey, asked prospective learners whether, based on their participation in the survey, they were more inclined to find out more information about Level 4 and 5 qualifications. On this occasion, the overall average showed that 55.1% of respondents were inclined to find out more, but when analysed by place of study, we find once again high levels of interest among grammar school pupils: 71.4% of grammar school pupils were inclined to find out more information about Level 4 and 5 qualifications, surpassed only by FE students (73.1%) and far outstripping levels of interest among non-grammar school pupils (38.9%) and CAFRE students (48.2%).

Table 3. Cross-tabulation of willingness to find out more and current place of study.

Crosstabulation: Q9. Where are you currently studying? * Q36. Based on your participation in this survey, would you now be more inclined to find out more information about Level 4 or 5 qualifications?						
			Q36. Based on your participation in this survey, would you now be more inclined to find out more information about Level 4 or 5 qualifications?			Total
			Yes	No	I don't know	
Q9. Where are you currently studying?	Grammar school	Count	10	2	2	14
		% within Q9. Where are you currently studying?	71.4%	14.3%	14.3%	100.0%
	Non-grammar school	Count	42	20	46	108
		% within Q9. Where are you currently studying?	38.9%	18.5%	42.6%	100.0%
	College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)	Count	40	18	25	83
		% within Q9. Where are you currently studying?	48.2%	21.7%	30.1%	100.0%
	Regional College (Tech)	Count	87	14	18	119
		% within Q9. Where are you currently studying?	73.1%	11.8%	15.1%	100.0%
Training organisation	Count	0	1	0	1	
	% within Q9. Where are you currently studying?	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
Total		Count	179	55	91	325
		% within Q9. Where are you currently studying?	55.1%	16.9%	28.0%	100.0%

There are several other interesting results by place of learning. For instance, as might be expected, the highest ratings for attractiveness of Level 4 and 5 qualifications (Q24i) were found among current FE College students (41.1% rating them as 'quite a bit' or 'very' attractive), and this was replicated in Q24ii for ratings of the value of Level 4 and 5 qualifications (67.2% of FE College students rating them as 'quite a bit' or 'very' valuable).

When Q27 was analysed by current place of learning, perhaps unsurprisingly, the results show that university study was most attractive to current grammar school pupils (85.7% rating university as 'quite a bit' or 'very' attractive) compared to 62.2% of FEC students, 57.4% of non-grammar school pupils and 31.3% of CAFRE students.

Disaggregation by eligibility for Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)

Prospective learners' higher/further education plans were also disaggregated by their receipt (or not) of Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA). The findings demonstrate that both groups (those prospective learners in receipt of EMA and those not in receipt of EMA) responded similarly. For example, the prospective learners' plans after their current course ends were explored, revealing similar aspirations: 47% of those entitled to EMA plan to attend university, compared to 46% of those not entitled to EMA (see Appendix 1, Table 6).

Similarities also emerged with regards to their likelihood of pursuing Level 4 and 5 qualifications, where 23.3% of those entitled to EMA reported that they were 'quite a bit/very likely' to pursue a Level 4 or 5 qualification at CAFRE/FE College, compared to 24% of those who were not entitled to EMA (see Appendix 2, Table 7).

Prospective learners' perceptions of Level 4 and 5 qualifications were also disaggregated by their receipt (or not) of EMA. While a larger proportion of prospective learners entitled to EMA rated the attractiveness of these qualifications highly (32% of those entitled to EMA reported that they rated these qualifications as 'quite a bit/very attractive', compared to 29.2% of those not entitled to EMA, (see Appendix 3, table 8), there was a larger proportion of those not entitled to EMA who rated the usefulness and value of these qualifications highly (45% of those not entitled to EMA rated these qualifications as 'quite a bit/very useful' compared to 35% of those who are entitled to EMA (see Appendix 4, table 9); and 57% of those not entitled to EMA rated these qualifications as 'quite a bit/ very valuable' compared to 51% of those who are entitled to EMA (see Appendix 5, table 10).

Disaggregation by Community Background

The 331 respondents to the prospective learners' survey comprised 148 Catholics (44.7%), 121 Protestants (36.6%) and 39 who preferred not to say (11.8%). When asked about their future plans, a larger proportion of Catholic learners (45.9%, n=68) reported that they intend to train or study at university after their current Level 3 studies, compared to Protestant learners (38%, n=46). Similarly, a larger proportion of Protestant learners (20.7%, n=25) plan to enter the workforce, compared to Catholic learners (9.5%, n=14, see Appendix 6, table 11).

With regard to perceptions of Level 4 and 5 qualifications, reports were similar across prospective learners from Catholic and Protestant communities. For example, 27% of Protestant respondents reported that they thought these qualifications were 'quite a bit/very' attractive, compared to 30% of Catholic participants and 36% of those who preferred not to offer their community background (see Appendix 7, table 12). Additional similarities were found across ratings of usefulness (41% of Protestants rated these qualifications as 'quite a bit/very useful', as did 41% of Catholics, and 44% of those who chose to not select their community background (see Appendix 8, table 13), and value (57% of Protestants rated these qualifications as 'quite a bit/very valuable', compared to 52% of Catholics, and 62% of those who chose not to select their community background, (see Appendix 9, Table 14).

Disaggregation by Age of Learner

Prospective Learners

In general, a greater proportion of more mature students (aged 21 years and over) were more positive about the attractiveness, usefulness and value of Level 4 and 5 qualifications, compared to the younger students (aged 20 or younger). For example, a larger proportion of older students rated the attractiveness of Level 4 and 5 qualifications highly (46.4 % rated as 'quite a bit' or 'very attractive'), compared to the younger students (25% of 18-20 year olds and 27% of those 17 or younger who rated these qualifications as 'quite a bit' or 'very' attractive). (See Appendix 10, Table 15). Similarly, in terms of usefulness, 62% of mature students rated these qualifications as 'quite a bit' or 'very useful', compared to 33% of 18-20 year olds and 40% of those 17 or younger (See Table 16, Appendix 11). Additionally, a larger proportion of older students rated the value of Level 4 and 5 qualifications highly (70% rated as 'quite a bit' or 'very valuable'), compared to the younger students (53% of 18-20 year olds and 53% of those 17 or younger rated these qualifications as 'quite a bit' or 'very valuable'). See Table 17, Appendix 12).

Current learners

A slightly larger proportion of more mature current learners (note, for this sample, this category involves those 30 years of age and over) were more positive about the attractiveness, usefulness and value of Level 4 and 5 qualifications, compared to younger current learners (aged 29 and younger). For example, 96% of those aged 30 and over rated these qualifications as 'very' attractive, compared to 85% of 18-20 year olds and 86% of 21-29 year olds. (See Table 18, Appendix 13). Additionally, 100% of those aged 30 and over rated these qualifications as 'somewhat' or 'very' useful, compared to 88% of 18-20 year olds and 91% of 21-29 year olds (see Table 19, Appendix 14) and 98% of those aged 30 and over rated them as 'somewhat' or 'very valuable', compared to 94% of 21-29 year olds and 89% of 18-20 year olds (see Table 20, Appendix 15).

Quantitative Findings: Parents of Prospective Learners' Survey

Respondent Demographics

In total, 84 parents responded to the survey (88% female and 12% male; 54% Catholic, 32% Protestant and 5% preferred not to say; 76% urban, 24% rural). The majority of parents (83%) reported that they have a son/daughter currently studying a third level qualification in school/college. The majority (77%) were studying at a non-grammar school (21% at a grammar school and 1% at a FE College).

Next steps

When considering next steps, securing employment and studying a course of interest were the most popular factors considered to be important both for the parents themselves and for their children.

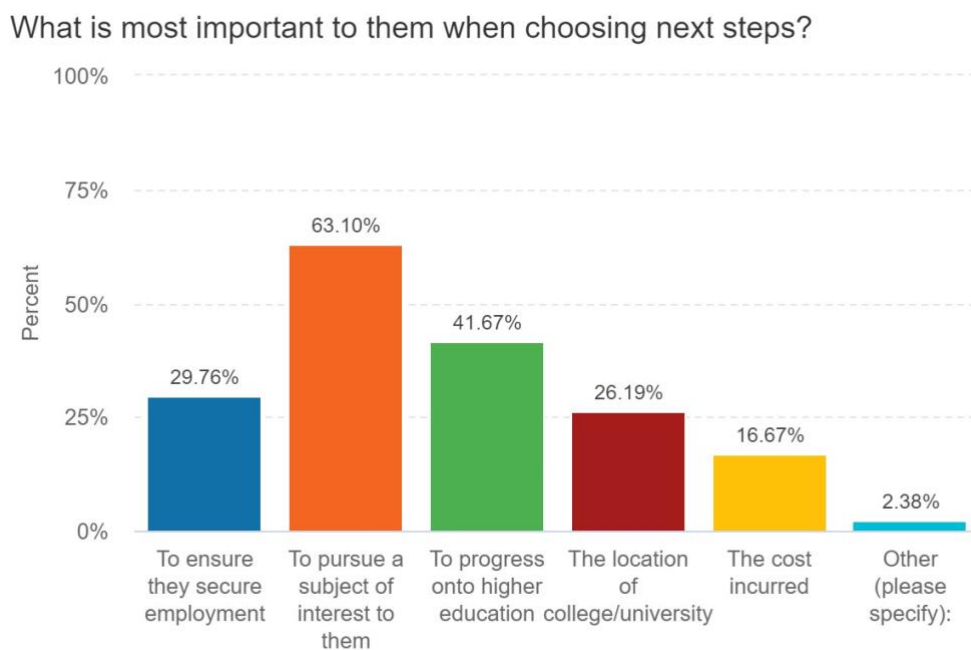


Figure 27. Parents' most important factor for choosing next steps.

What is most important to you when helping them choose their next steps?

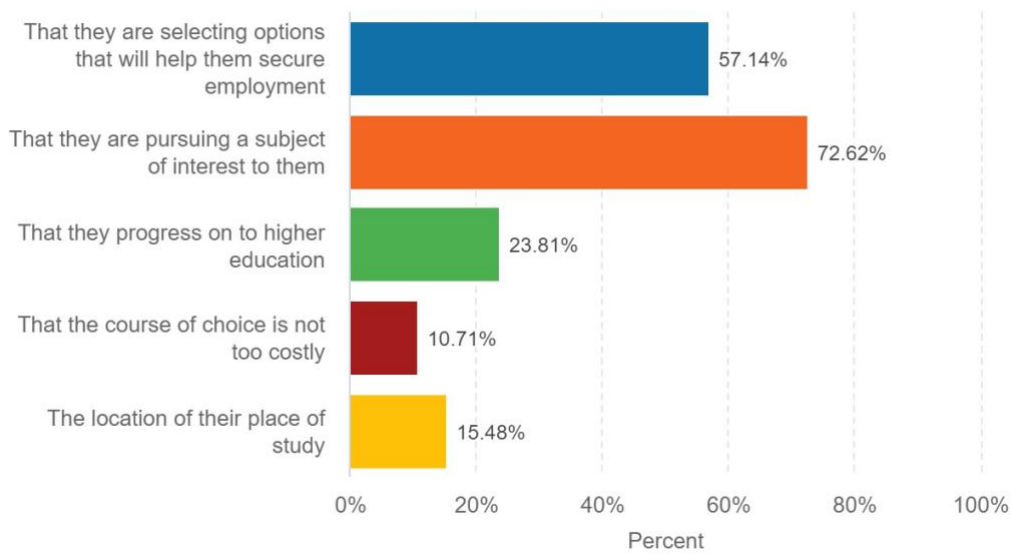


Figure 28. Most important factor for parents to help their child choose next steps.

Awareness of Level 4 and 5

The majority (65.5%) of parents reported that they had heard of Level 4 and 5 qualifications. Foundation degrees, NVQs and HNDs appear to be the courses that parents are most familiar with. (See overleaf)

On a scale from 1-5, how would you rate your level of awareness of the following level 4 and 5 qualifications, where 1 means you have very little awareness and 5 means you have a lot of awareness.

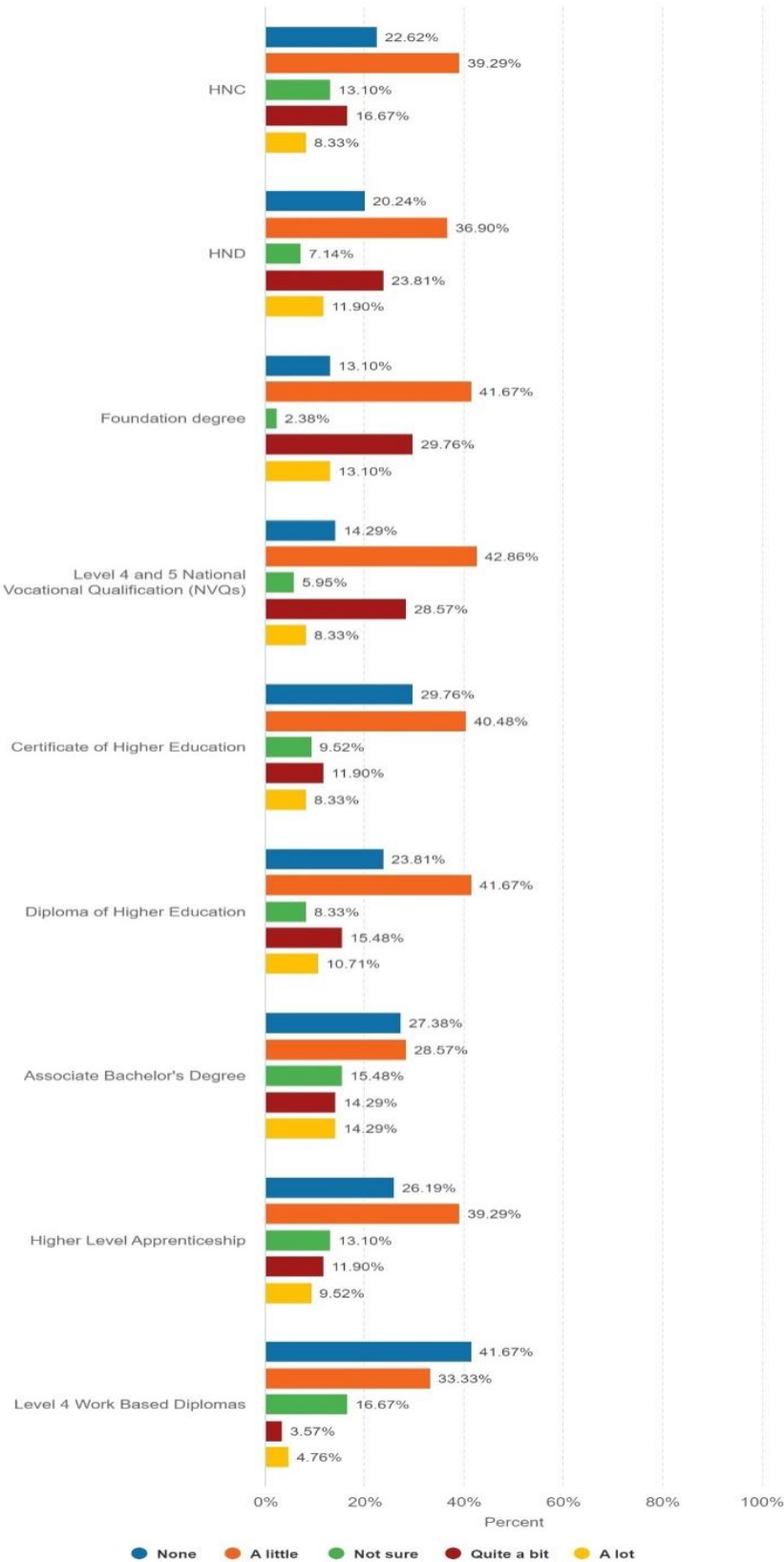


Figure 29. Parental level of awareness of Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

However, the majority of parents knew ‘a little’ or ‘nothing’ about the entry requirements (67% selecting these options) or subjects which could be studied at Level 4 and 5 (70%). Additionally, only one quarter (25%) of parents reported that it was easy or very easy to understand the different options available at Level 4 and 5.

On a scale from 1-5, how much knowledge do you have of the following (where 1 is very little and 5 is a lot)?

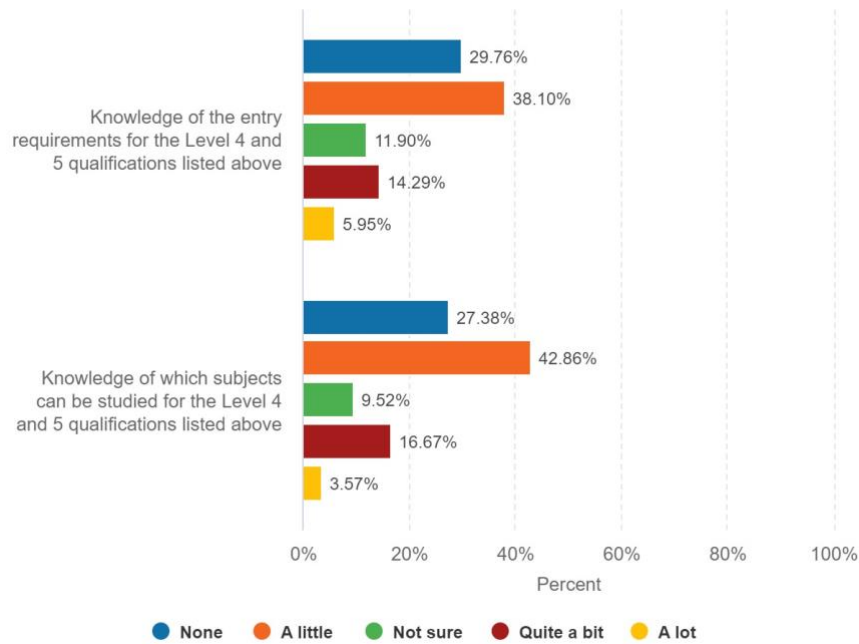


Figure 30. Parental level of Level 4 and 5 entry requirements and subject availability.

In your opinion, how easy is it to understand the different options available for Level 4 and 5 qualifications?

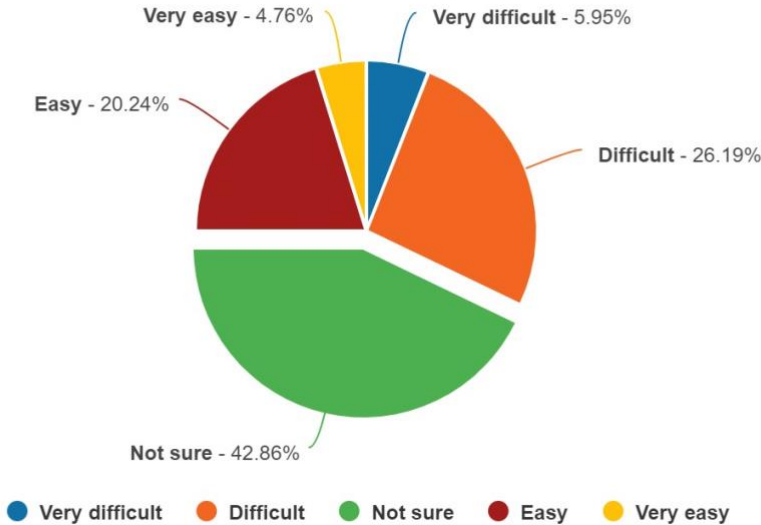


Figure 31. Parental levels of understanding Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

Additionally, reported familiarity of courses across institutions was low (81% reported that they had none/a little familiarity with the courses available at CAFRE, 69% reported the same for FE Colleges, and 66% reported the same for university).

How familiar are you with the range of Level 4 and 5 courses available at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise? (CAFRE)

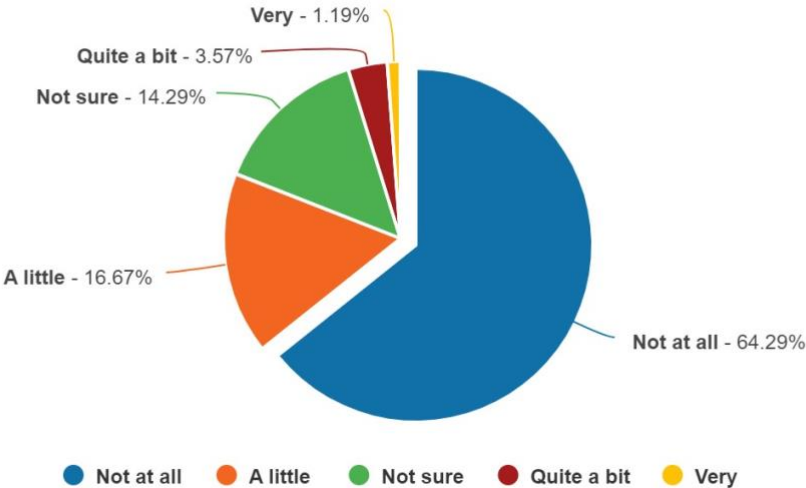


Figure 32. Parental familiarity with CAFRE course provision.

How familiar are you with the range of Level 4 and 5 courses available at your local Regional Colleges?

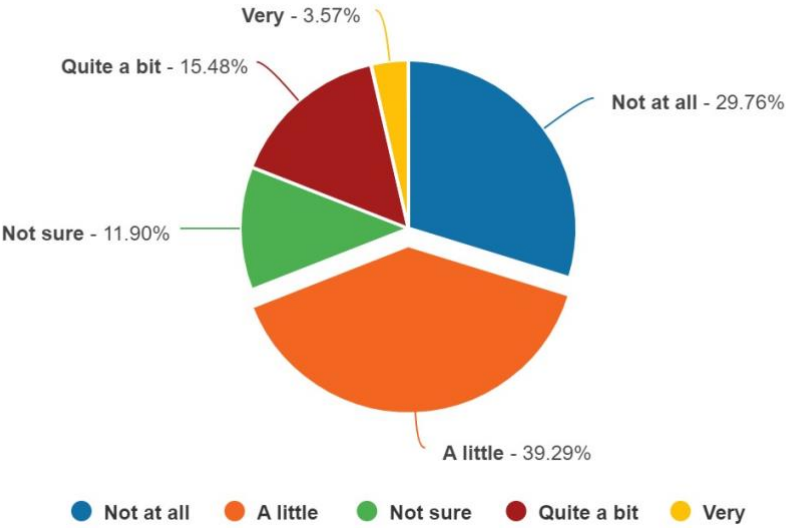


Figure 33. Parental familiarity with Regional College course provision.

How familiar are you with the range of Level 4 and 5 courses available at your local universities?

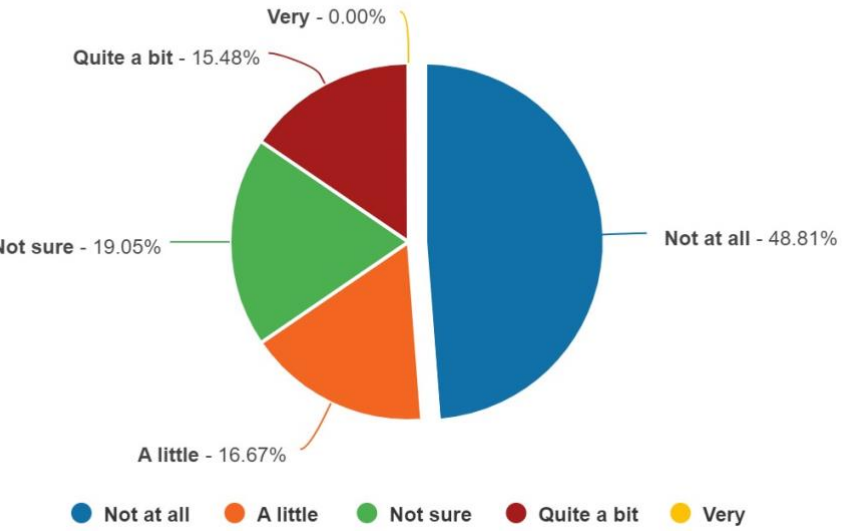


Figure 34. Parental familiarity with university course provision.

Perceptions of Level 4 and 5 qualifications

Almost half of the parents surveyed reported that they thought level 4 and 5 qualifications were attractive (42% selecting that they were ‘quite a bit’/‘extremely attractive’). 50% reported that they were quite a bit/extremely useful and 62% reported that they were quite a bit/extremely valuable.

However, despite this moderate positivity, only 30% reported that they felt they were quite a bit/extremely popular. When asked which Level 4 and 5 qualifications were the most desirable, the most popular choice was NVQs.

On a scale from 1-5, please answer the below questions, where 1 means not at all attractive/ useful/ valuable and 5 means very attractive/ useful/ valuable.

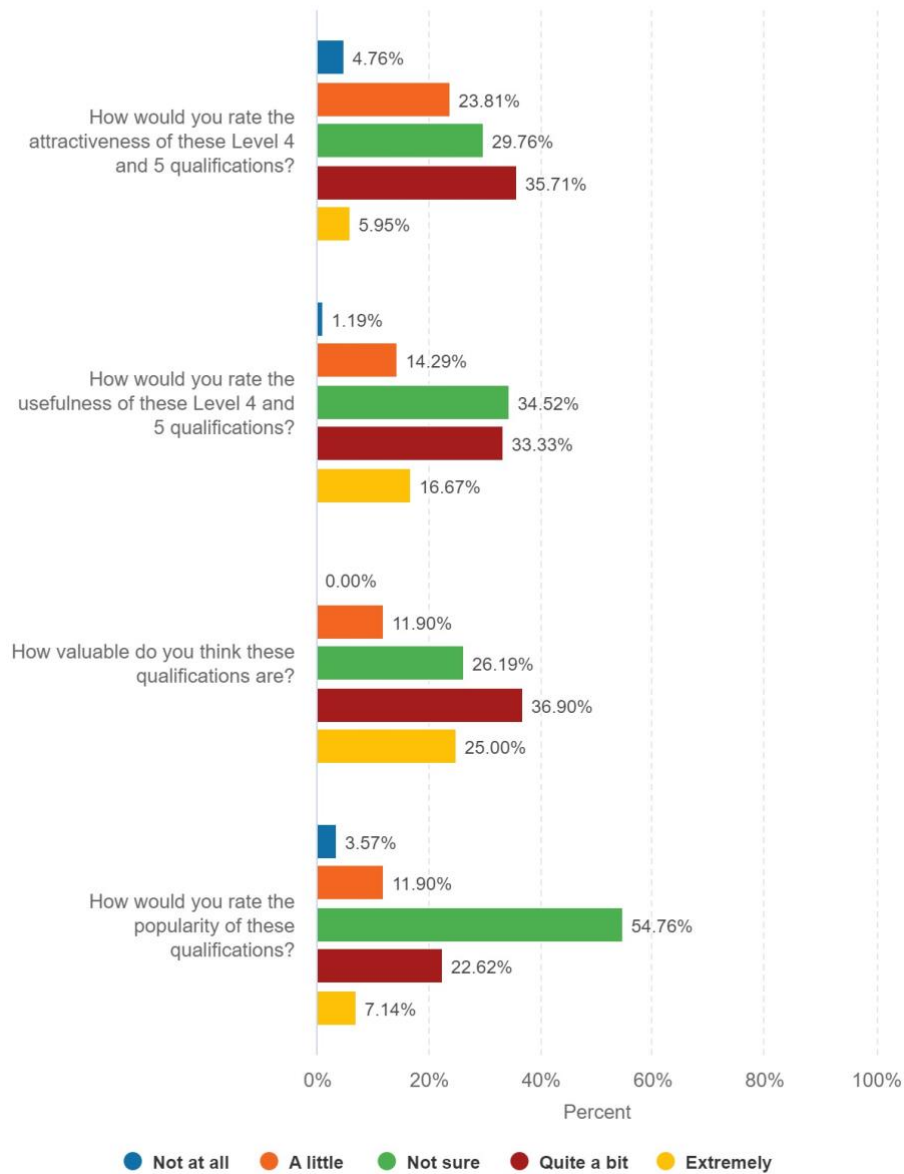


Figure 35. Parental perceptions of attractiveness/utility/value/popularity of Level 4 and 5 qualifications

In your opinion, which of the Level 4/5 qualifications below is the most desirable?

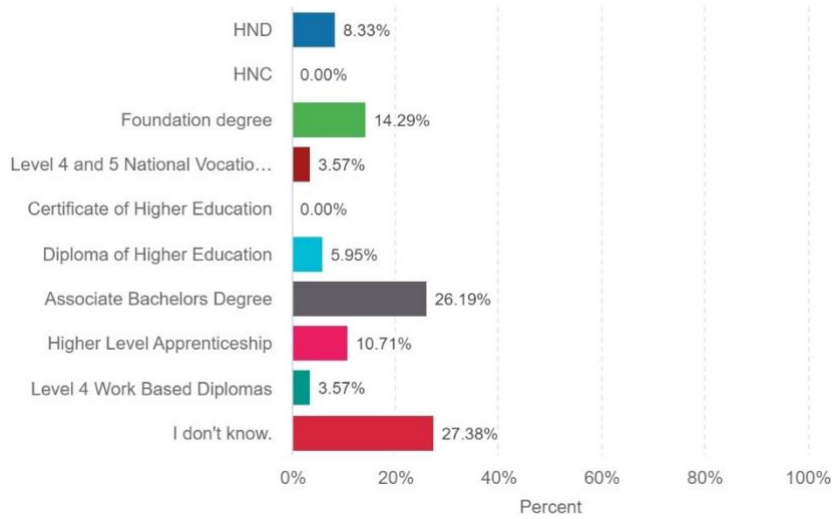


Figure 36. Parental ranking of most desirable Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

Appeal of Level 4 and 5 qualifications

When asked what the parents thought would make their son/daughter consider studying for a Level 4 or 5 qualification, several key factors emerged as popular, including: they are less academic/more practical (selected by 52% of respondents); they act as a stepping stone to higher study (46%); they provide a pathway to employment (61%); and because of the transferable skills gained (38%). However, despite this recognition of potential benefits, if given the choice, 66% would choose a university-based degree for their child.

What do you think would make your son/daughter consider studying for a Level 4 and 5 qualifications? Tick all that apply.

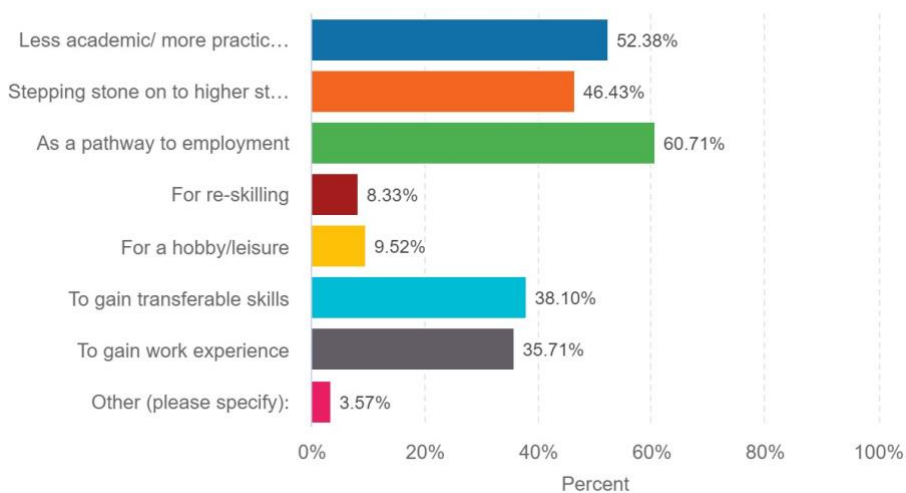


Figure 37. Parental perceptions of child's considerations in applying for Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

If you had the choice, which path would you choose for your child?

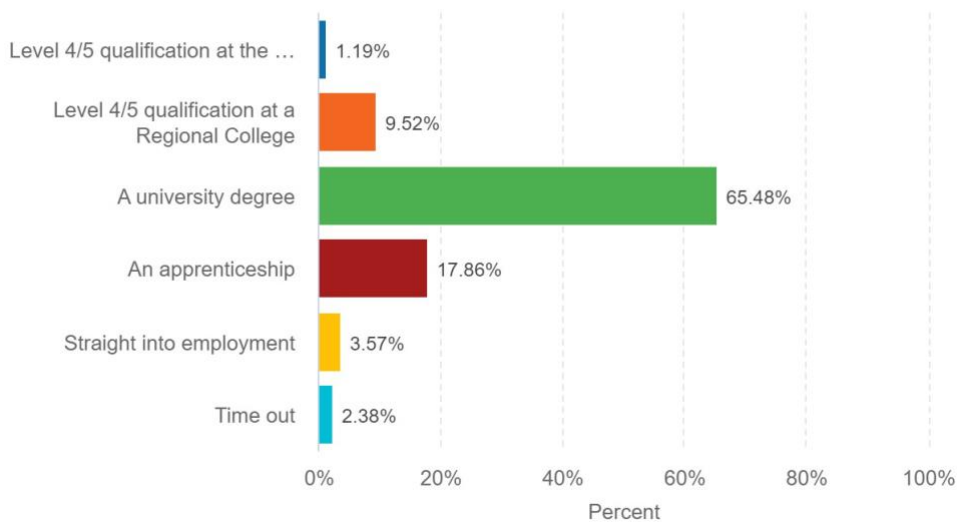


Figure 38. Parents' preferred study/employment path for child.

When asked to directly compare Level 4 and 5 qualifications to university-based degrees, the majority of parents (67%) reported that they would prefer their child to study at a university, if given the choice. When making specific comparisons, it appears that parents are relatively unsure. On the whole, parents tended to believe Level 4 and 5 qualifications were less expensive compared to university degrees (62% reported that they were much less/a little less expensive compared to university degrees), easier to access (47% felt Level 4 and 5 qualifications were a bit more/lot more easier to get on to compared to university degrees) and more likely to lead to employment (43% felt Level 4 and 5 qualifications were a bit more/lot more likely to lead to employment compared to university degrees).

If you had your choice, would you prefer your child studied continued further studies at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), a Regional College or a University?

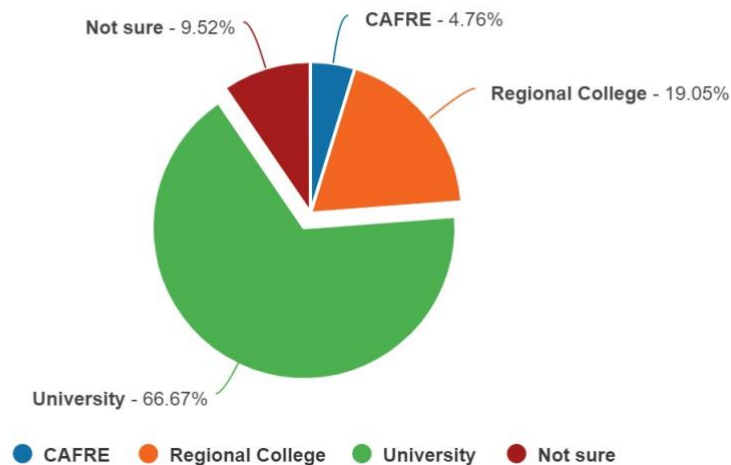


Figure 39. Parents' preference of location for further study.

In comparison to university-based degree level courses, how would you rate Level 4 and 5 qualifications according to the following factors?

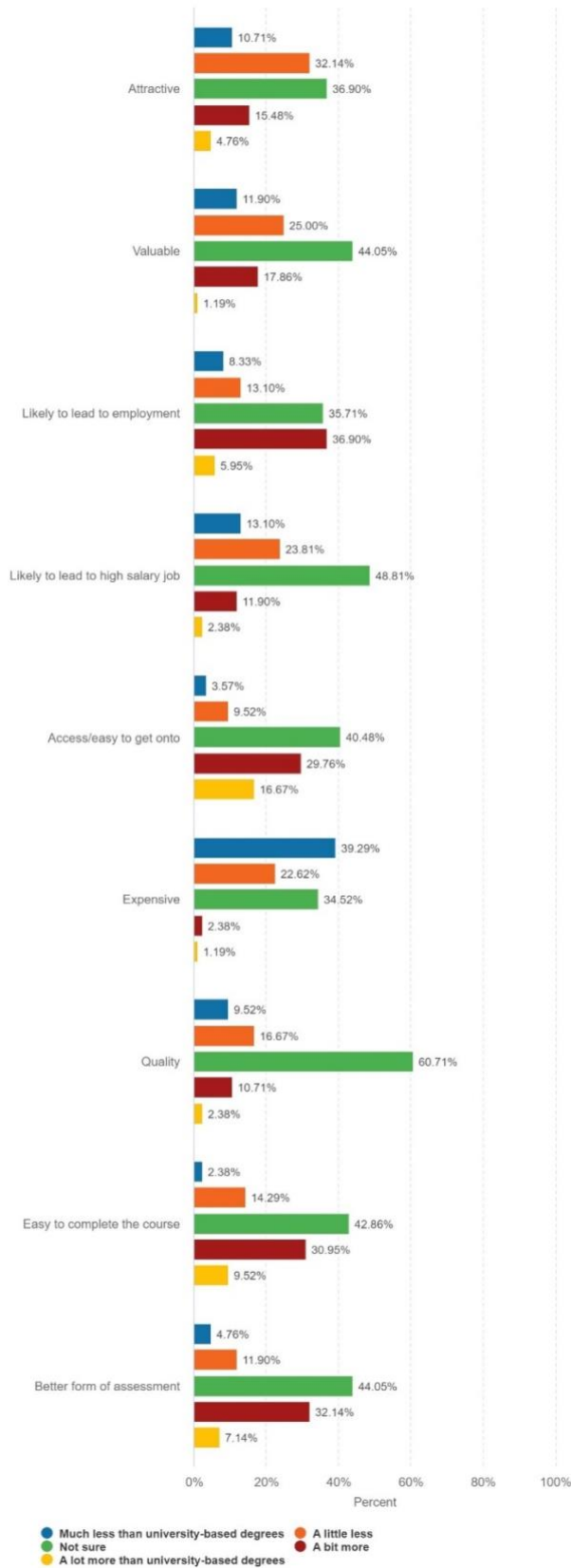


Figure 40. Parents' rating of Level 4/5 qualifications compared to HEI-based degree study.

Financial implications

With regards to finances, more than half of the parents (58%) were unsure of the costs incurred for Level 4 and 5 qualifications. Only 6% viewed these courses as being quite a bit/very costly, compared to university-based degrees. Furthermore, the majority of parents (76%) were unsure of the available government financial support for undertaking Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

How aware are you of available government financial support for students undertaking Level 4 and 5 qualifications?

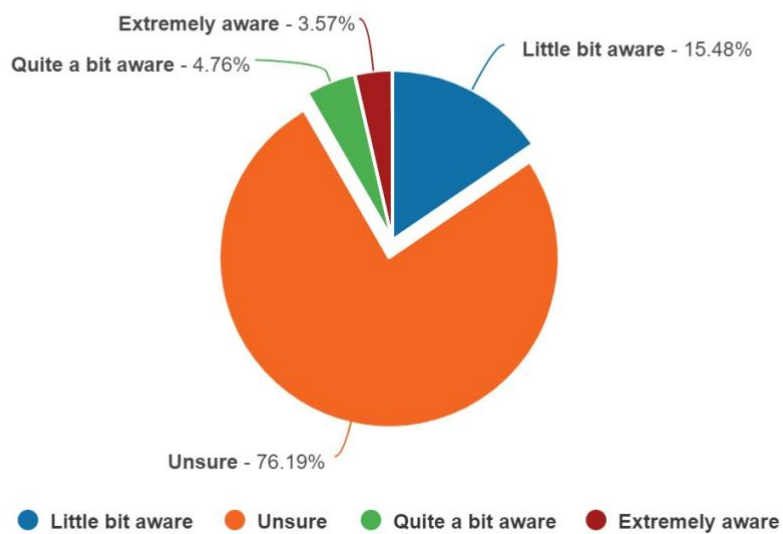


Figure 41. Parents' awareness of financial support for Level 4/5 qualifications.

How costly is it to study for Level 4 and 5 qualifications compared to university-based degree courses?

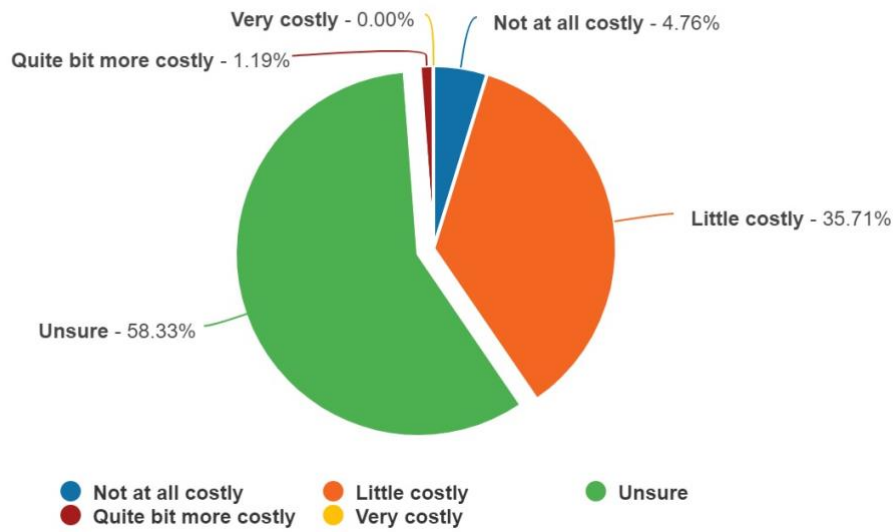


Figure 42. Parents' awareness of cost comparisons between Level 4 and 5.

Table 4. Cross-tabulation of students' current place of study and parents' preferred education/employment path.

Crosstabulation: - Q7. Are they currently at school or further education college? * Q15. If you had the choice, which path would you choose for your child?			Q15. If you had the choice, which path would you choose for your child?						Total
			Level 4/5 qualification at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)	Level 4/5 qualification at a Regional College	A university degree	An apprenticeship	Straight into employment	Time out	
Q7. Are they currently at school or further education college?	Grammar school	Count	0	2	12	2	0	2	18
		% within Q7. Are they currently at school or further education college?	0.0%	11.1%	66.7%	11.1%	0.0%	11.1%	100.0%
	Non-grammar school	Count	1	6	43	12	3	0	65
		% within Q7. Are they currently at school or further education college?	1.5%	9.2%	66.2%	18.5%	4.6%	0.0%	100.0%
	Regional College (Tech)	Count	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
		% within Q7. Are they currently at school or further education college?	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	1	8	55	15	3	2	84
		% within Q7. Are they currently at school or further education college?	1.2%	9.5%	65.5%	17.9%	3.6%	2.4%	100.0%

When the parental responses were disaggregated by the school type of their child, the results show higher ratings of attractiveness, usefulness and value for Level 4 and 5 qualifications among parents of children currently attending non-grammar schools compared to grammar schools. For instance, 44.6% of non-grammar parents rated Level 4 and 5 qualifications as 'quite a bit' or 'extremely' attractive, compared to 27.8% of grammar school parents; 50.8% of non-grammar parents rated Level 4 and 5 qualifications as 'quite a bit' or 'extremely' useful, compared to 44.4% of grammar school parents; and 63% of non-grammar parents rated Level

4 and 5 qualifications as 'quite a bit' or 'extremely' valuable, compared to 55.5% of grammar school parents.

When asked which future educational path they would choose for their child, interestingly there was only a very small difference between the groupings of parents: 66.7% of grammar school parents would choose a university path for their child, compared to 66.2% of non-grammar school parents. Similarly, there was little distinction between the 11.1% of grammar school parents who would choose Level 4 and 5 qualifications for their child compared to 9.2% of non-grammar school parents.

However, the sample sizes involved were small ($n=84$), so a note of caution must be expressed in relation to generalisability of these findings.

Quantitative Findings: School teacher survey

Demographics

In total, 43 teachers responded to the online survey, of whom 21% were male and 79% were female. There was a relatively even split in terms of community background (Protestant – 40%; Catholic – 47%; and ‘prefer not to say – 12%). Approximately one quarter (26%) of the respondents were from grammar schools (74% were from non-grammar schools) and the majority (72%) reported that their schools were in an urban area (23% reported rural).

Awareness of Level 4 and 5 qualifications

The results reveal low levels overall of teacher awareness of Level 4 and 5 qualifications, but that teachers had greatest awareness of foundation degrees and least awareness of level 4 work-based diplomas (see Figure 43 below).

On a scale from 1-5, how would you rate your level of awareness of the following level 4 and 5 qualifications, where 1 means you have no awareness and 5 means you have a lot of awareness.

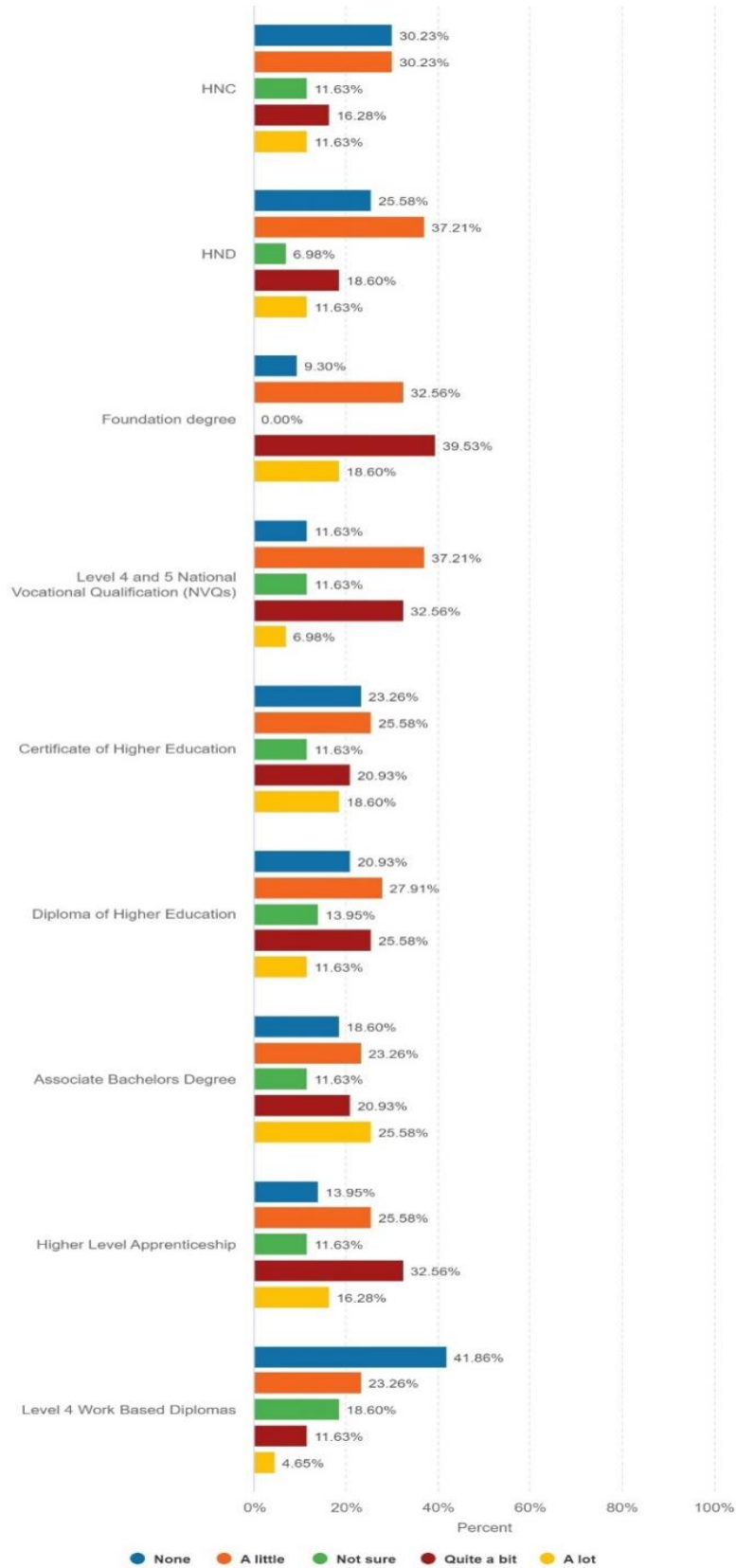


Figure 43. Teachers' awareness of level 4 and 5 qualifications.

In general, teachers were not very familiar at all with the range of courses available at FE colleges, CAFRE or universities (see Figures 44-46).

How familiar are you with the range of Level 4 and 5 courses available at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)?

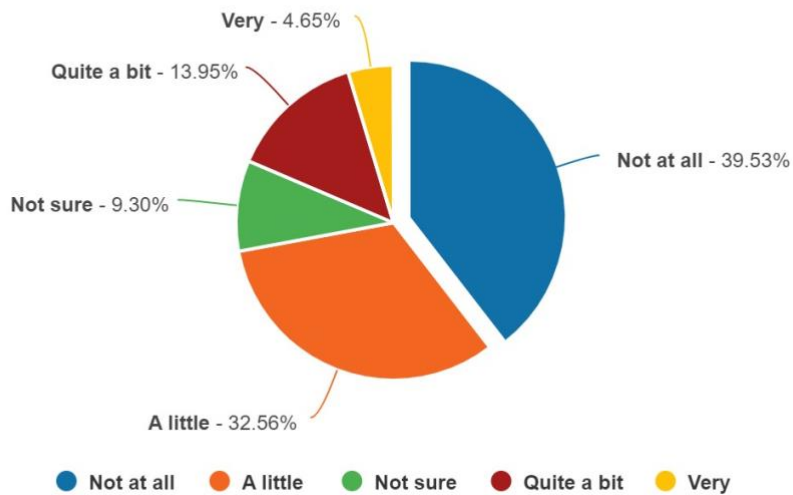


Figure 44. Teachers' familiarity with courses at CAFRE.

How familiar are you with the range of Level 4 and 5 courses available at your local Regional Colleges?

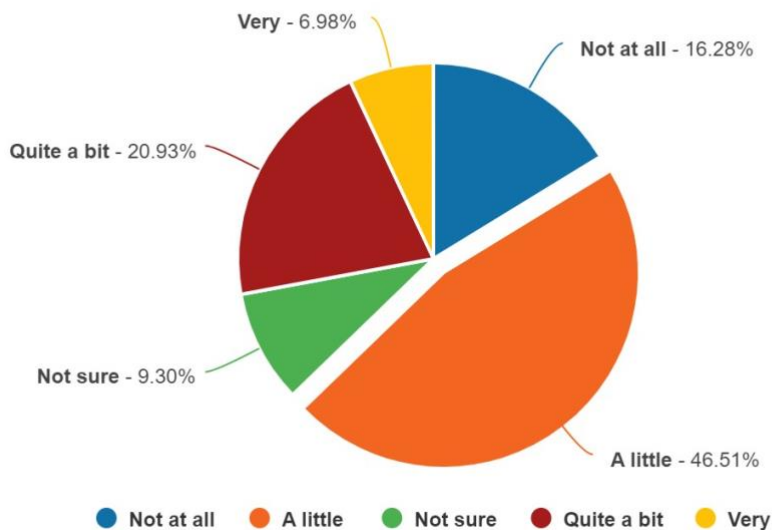


Figure 45. Teachers' familiarity with courses at Regional colleges.

How familiar are you with the range of Level 4 and 5 courses available at your local universities?

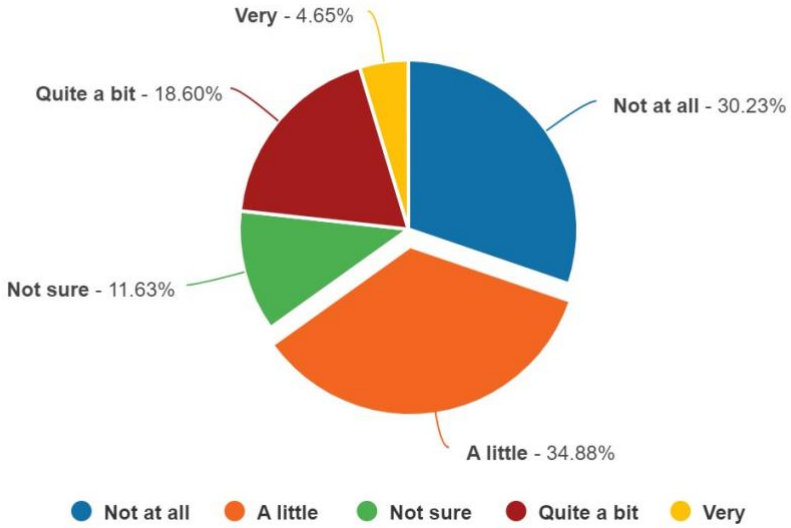


Figure 46. Teachers' familiarity with courses at University.

Perceptions of Level 4 and 5 qualifications

With regard to their appreciation for the attractiveness, usefulness and value of Level 4 and 5 qualifications, the majority of teachers responded that they felt these courses were attractive/useful/valuable (see Figure 47). Note, that whilst a large majority reported that these courses are useful (75% reported that they were quite a bit/very useful) and valuable (79% reported that they were quite a bit/very valuable), a smaller majority (63%) reported that they were quite a bit/very attractive.

On a scale from 1-5, please answer the below questions, where 1 means not at all attractive/ useful/ valuable and 5 means very attractive/ useful/ valuable.

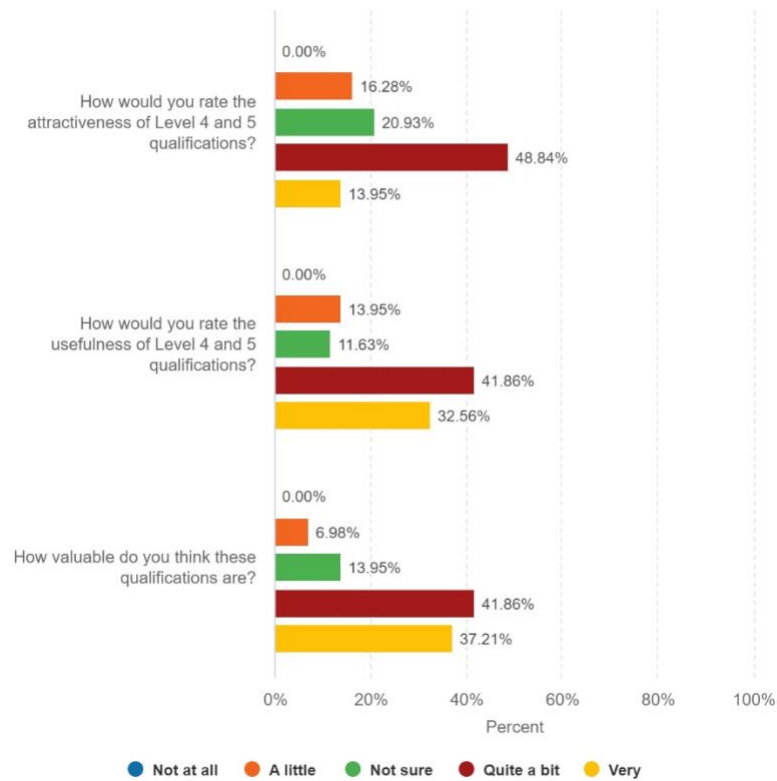


Figure 47. Teachers’ rating of the attractiveness, usefulness and value of Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

Teachers were asked to consider Level 4 and 5 qualifications against a range of factors and compared to University-based degrees, to assess if any key findings emerged. Level 4 and 5 qualifications compared favourably to university-based degrees across a range of factors, including being ‘easy to complete the course’, ‘easy to get on to’, and ‘likely to lead to employment’ (see Figure 48).

In comparison to university-based degree level courses, how would you rate Level 4 and 5 qualifications according to the following factors?

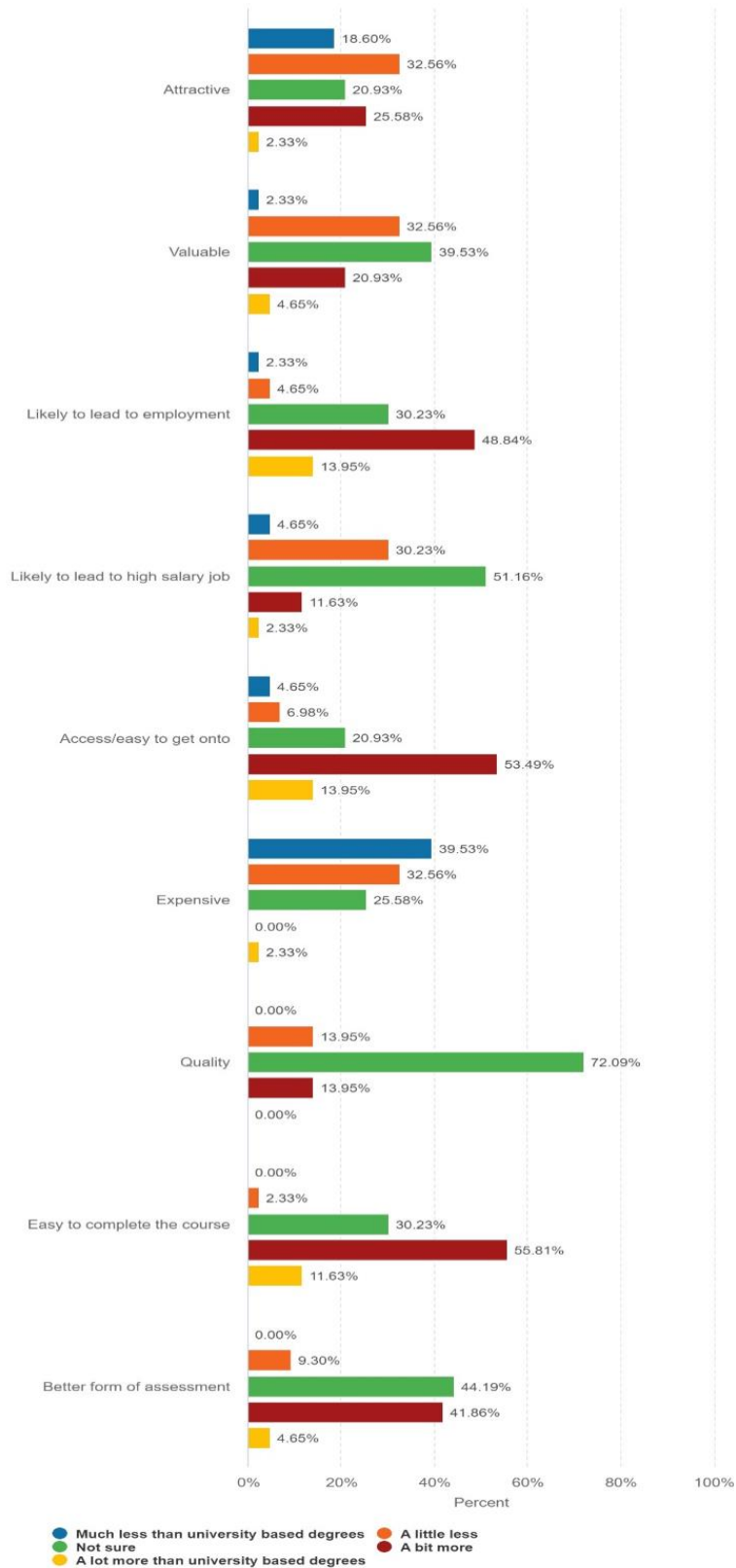


Figure 48. Teachers' ratings of Level 4 and 5 qualifications compared to University degrees.

With regards to teachers' perspectives on the popularity of Level 4 and 5 qualifications amongst their students, 23% felt they were popular. Foundation Degrees and Higher Level Apprenticeships¹¹ were considered most desirable (see Table 14). Furthermore, when asked what might attract their students to consider choosing Level 4 and 5 qualifications, the most popular response (88%) was because it provided a pathway to employment. Followed closely (at 74%) by the fact that they are less academic/more practical focus (see Figure 48). The majority of teachers (72%) reported that they would be likely/very likely to encourage their students to consider Level 4 and 5 qualifications (see Figure 51). And finally, when asked what they thought would make these qualifications more appealing to their students, the most popular choice was better use of recruitment and marketing strategies (see Figure 52).

In your opinion, how popular are Level 4 and 5 qualifications amongst the students in your school?

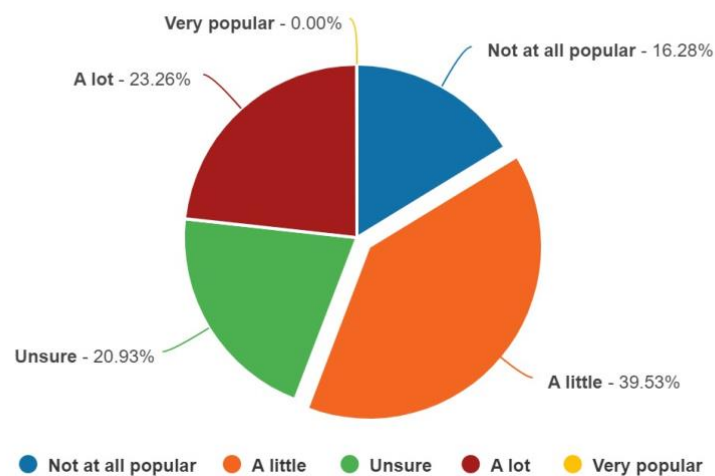


Figure 49. Teachers' perceptions of the popularity of Level 4 and 5 qualifications among their pupils.

¹¹ It is acknowledged here and throughout that Higher Level Apprenticeships (HLAs) are programmes of study rather than qualifications in their own right.

What do you think might attract your students to consider choosing Level 4 and 5 qualifications? Tick all that apply.

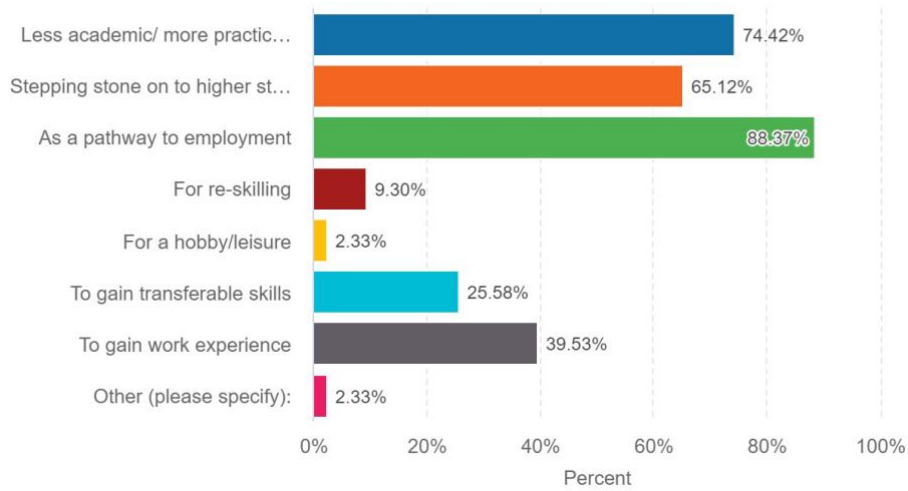


Figure 50. Teachers' perceptions of what might attract their pupils to consider Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

How likely are you to encourage students to consider Level 4 and 5 qualifications?

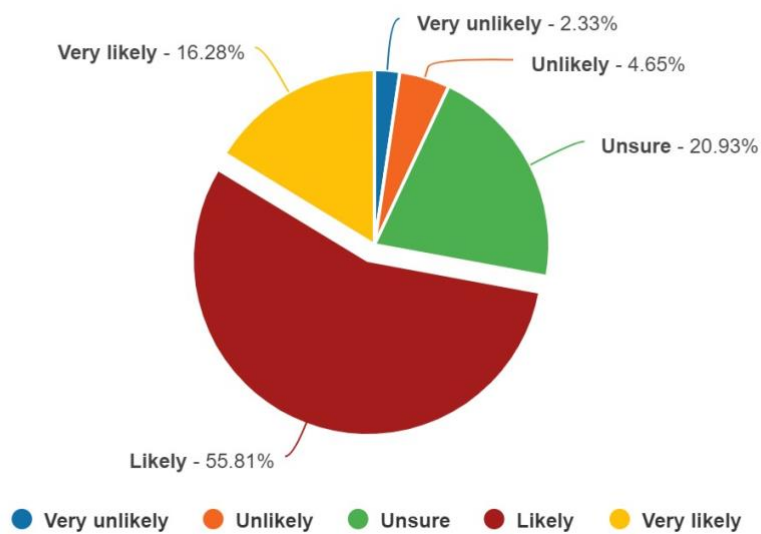


Figure 51. Teacher likelihood to encourage pupils to choose Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

In your opinion, what do you think could make Level 4/5 courses more appealing to students? Please tick all that apply.

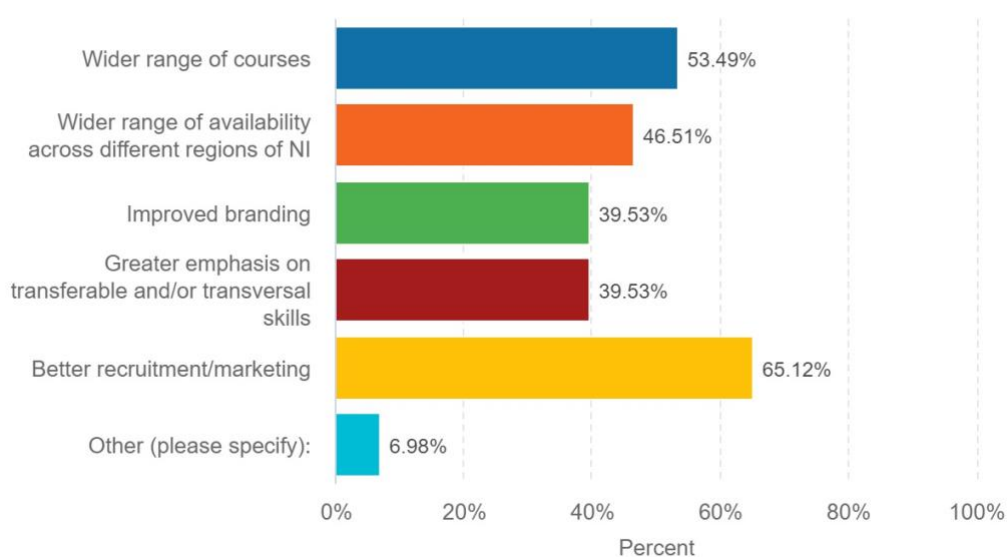


Figure 52. Teachers' perceptions of what could make Level 4 and 5 qualifications more appealing.

Table 5. Desirable Level 4 and 5 qualifications

Which of the Level 4 and 5 qualifications below is the most desirable?			
Answer Choice		Response Percent	Response Total
1	HNC	0.0%	0
2	HND	2.3%	1
3	Foundation degree	20.9%	9
4	Level 4 and 5 National Vocational Qualification (NVQs)	7.0%	3
5	Certificate of Higher Education	2.3%	1
6	Diploma of Higher Education	2.3%	1
7	Associate Bachelor's Degree	7.0%	3
8	Higher Level Apprenticeship	23.3%	10
9	Level 4 Work Based Diplomas	2.3%	1
10	I don't know.	32.6%	14
answered			43

Quantitative Findings: Current Learners' Survey

Demographics

In total, there were 126 current learners who responded to the survey. The majority of the sample were female (60%, 38% were male and 2% other). A large proportion (60%) of the sample were aged between 18 and 29 years. There was a relatively even urban (47%) and rural (53%) split. With regards to community background, 46% were from a Protestant background and 33% from a Catholic background.

How old are you?

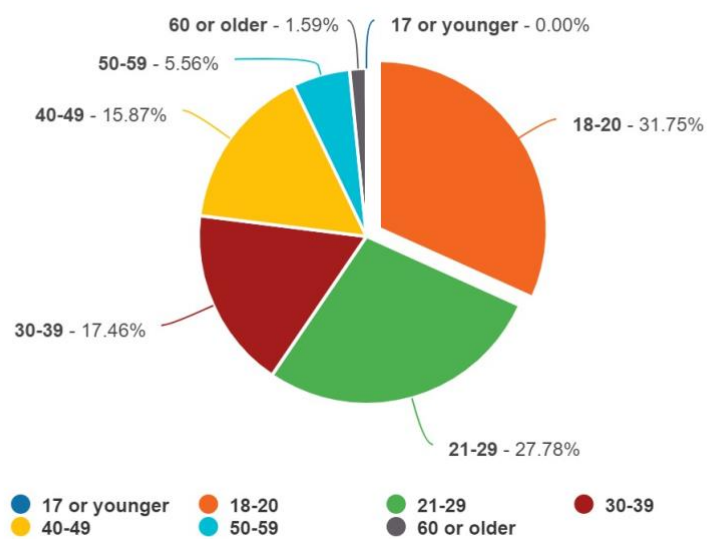


Figure 53. Age of current learners.

What is your community background?

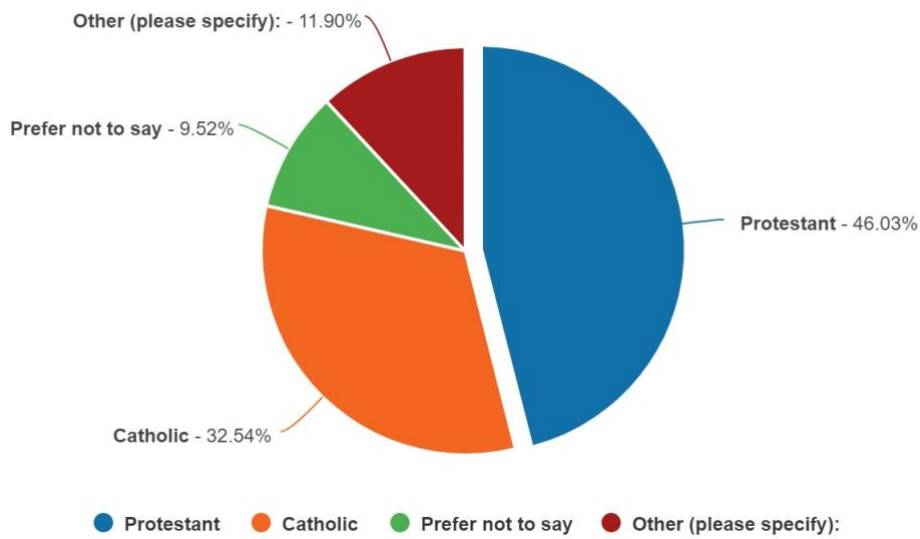


Figure 54. Community background of current learners.

Current Learners' place of study

The majority (64%) of respondents reported that they were currently studying at a FE college, while 31% were studying at CAFRE. See Figure 55 below¹².

Where are you currently studying?

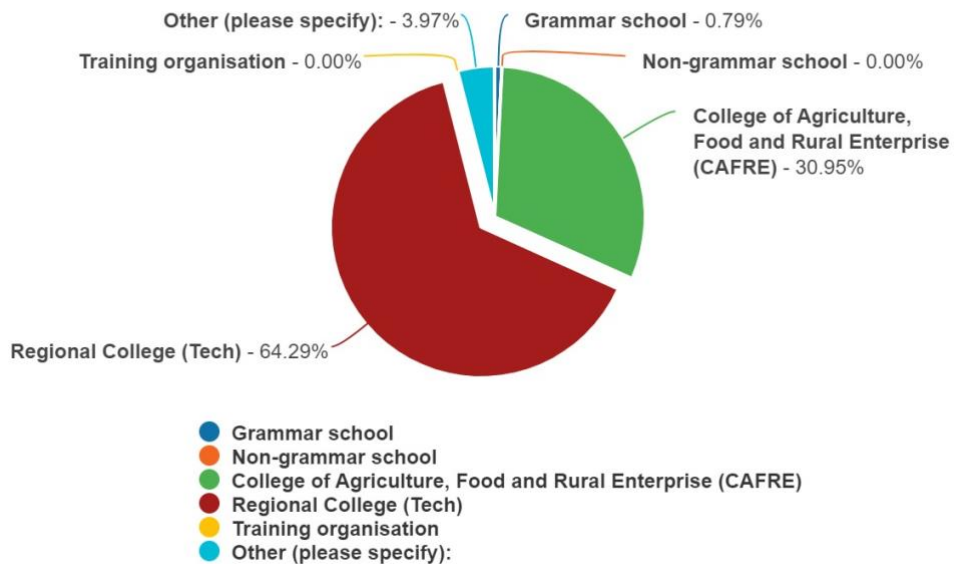


Figure 55. Current place of study for current learners.

¹² NB the grammar school option was erroneously selected by one respondent.

For the majority (92%), their current course of study was their first preference. And the most common reason for choosing their selected course was to use it as a stepping stone to another higher education qualification.

What was your main reason for choosing this course?

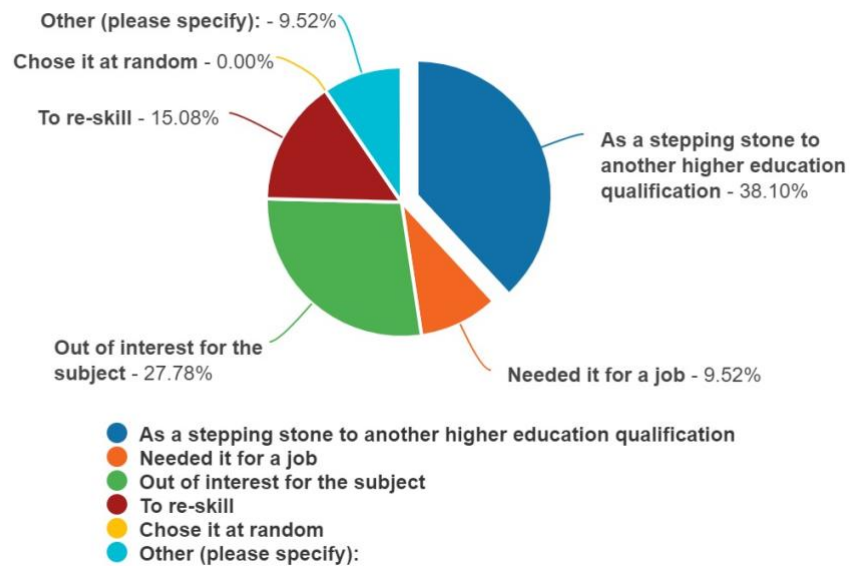


Figure 56. Current learners' main reason for choosing course.

Awareness and understanding of Level 4 and 5 qualifications

There was a greater awareness of some Level 4 and 5 qualifications (e.g., most awareness was of Foundation degrees, HNCs and HNDs) compared to others (see Figure 57 below). In general, mostly, the students found it easy to understand the Level 4 and 5 options available to them, in terms of understanding the available subjects as well as the entry requirements.

On a scale from 1-5, rate your level of awareness of the following Level 4 and 5 qualifications, where 1 means you have very little awareness and 5 means you have a lot of awareness.

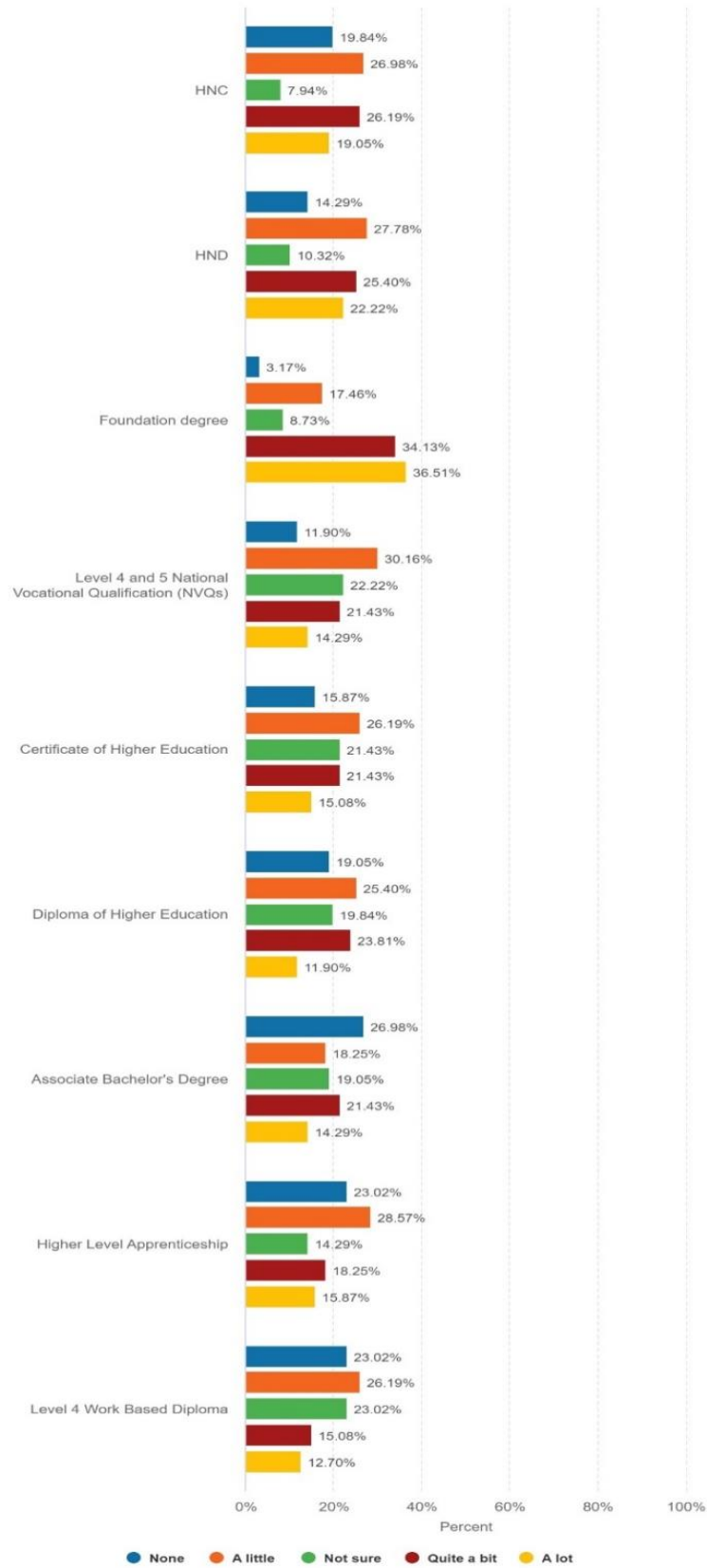


Figure 57. Current learners' level of awareness for different Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

When you were considering applying for your course, how easy did you find the following?

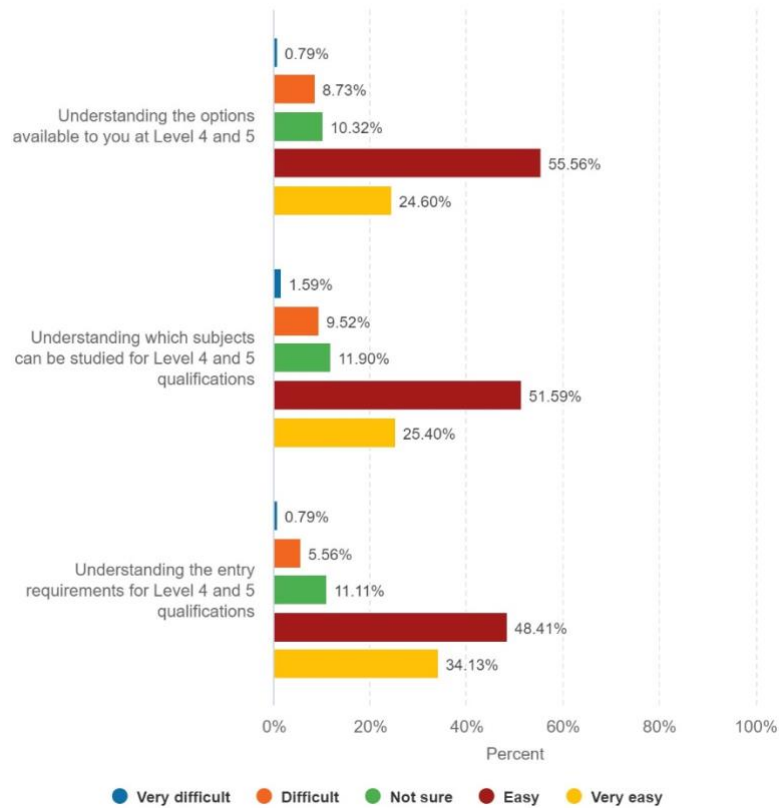


Figure 58. Current learner understanding of subject availability/entry requirements.

Perceptions of Level 4 and 5 qualifications

The students were very positive about the attractiveness, usefulness and value of their chosen courses. As illustrated in Figure 59 (below) an overwhelming majority of current learners rated their chosen courses as ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ attractive (90%), ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ useful (94%), or ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ valuable (94%). These extremely high satisfaction rates are very significant and will be further discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

On a scale from 1-5, please answer the below questions, where 1 means not at all attractive/ useful/ valuable and 5 means very attractive/ useful/ valuable.

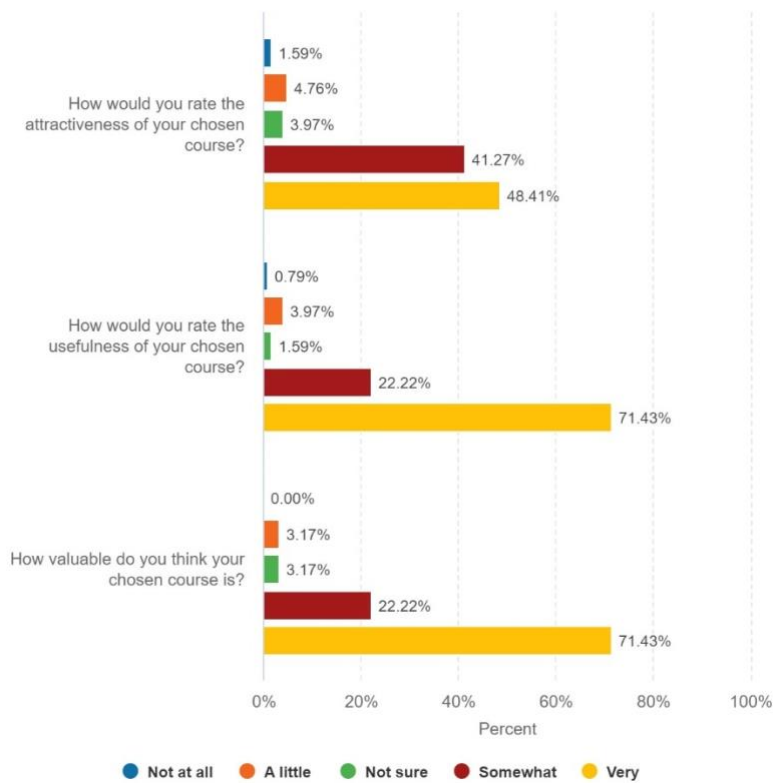


Figure 59. Current learners’ perceptions of the attractiveness, usefulness and value of their course.

In terms of desirability of a range of Level 4 and 5 qualifications more generally, Foundation Degrees were the most popular selection (27%), when current learners were asked which was the most desirable qualification.

In your opinion, which of the Level 4/5 qualifications below is the most desirable?

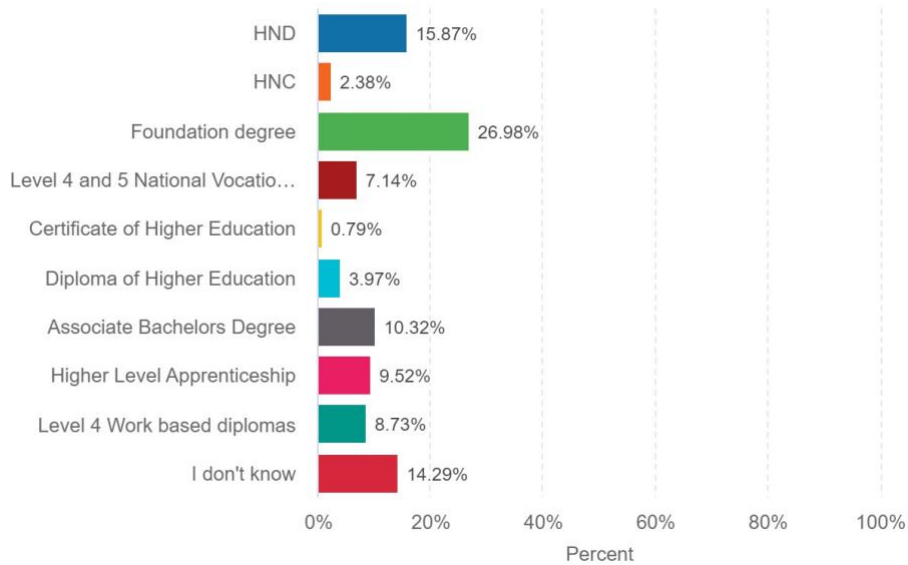


Figure 60. Current learners' perception of the desirability of different Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

FE colleges were rated as the most 'attractive' institution by current learners. That is, when asked how attractive it is to study across a range of institutions, more respondents reported that it would be 'quite a bit' or 'very' attractive to study at a FE college (62%) compared to CAFRE (32%) and at university (52%). Similarly, almost half of the respondents (48%) responded that if given the choice, they would choose to pursue their Level 4 and 5 qualifications through studying at a FE college.

How attractive is it to attend the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) for Level 4/ 5 study?

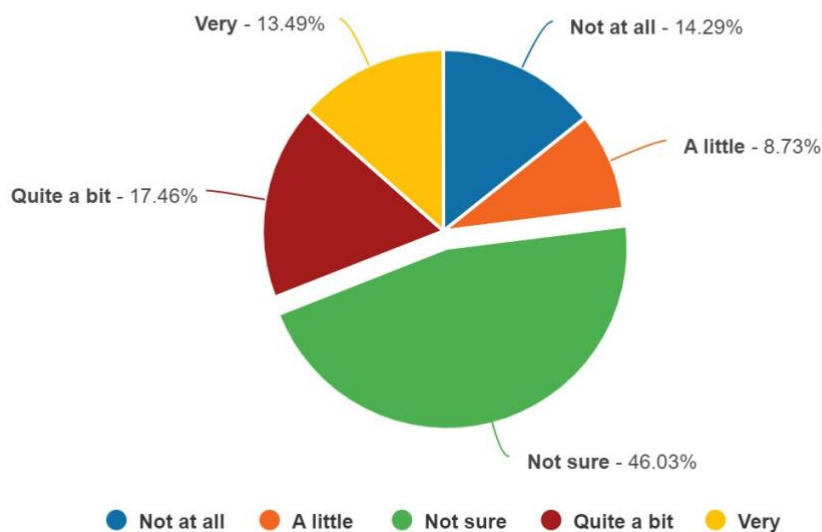


Figure 61. Current learners' perception of the attractiveness of studying at CAFRE.

How attractive is it to attend a Regional College (Tech) for Level 4/ 5 study?

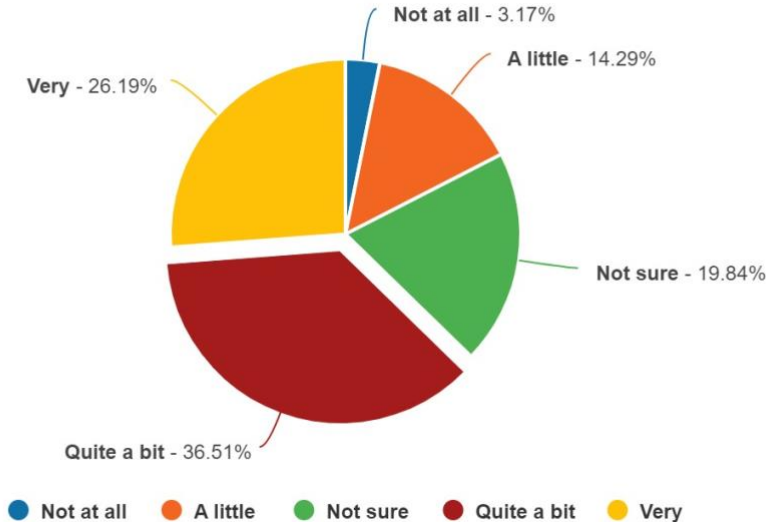


Figure 62. Current learners' perception of the attractiveness of studying at a Regional College.

How attractive is it to study an undergraduate degree course at University? (for example, a BA, BEng, BSc)

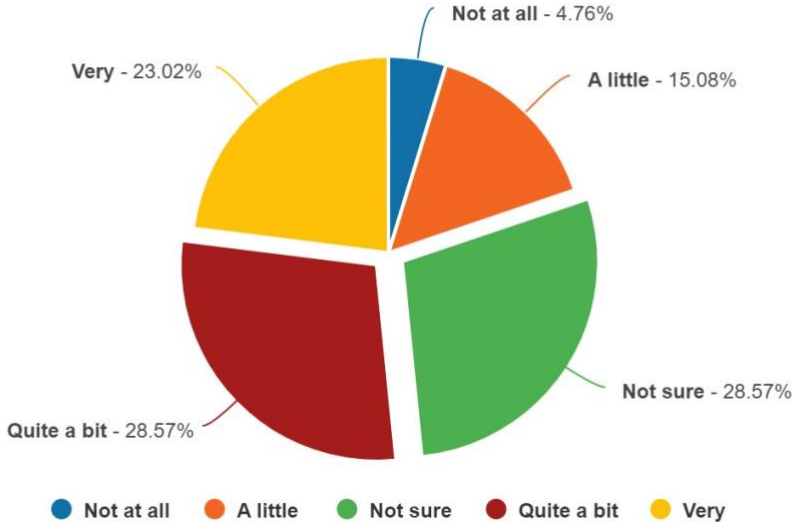


Figure 63. Current learners' perception of the attractiveness of studying at university.

If you had the choice, which of the options below would you choose as your first preference for Level 4/5 study?

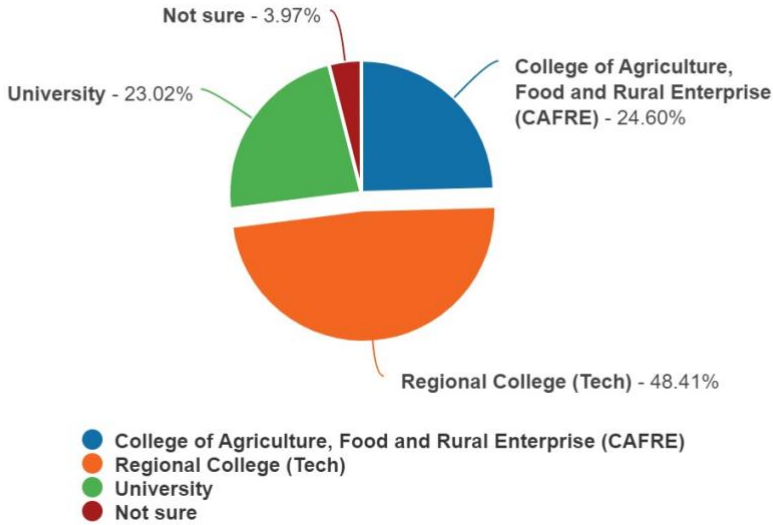


Figure 64. Current learners' first choice for further study.

When compared to university degree-level courses, Level 4 and 5 qualifications compared favourably in terms of access (83% of respondents felt that Level 4/5 qualifications were 'a bit more' or 'a lot more' easy to get on to) and cost (73% felt they were 'a little less' or 'much less' expensive).

Compared to university-based degree level courses, how would you rate level 4 and 5 qualifications?

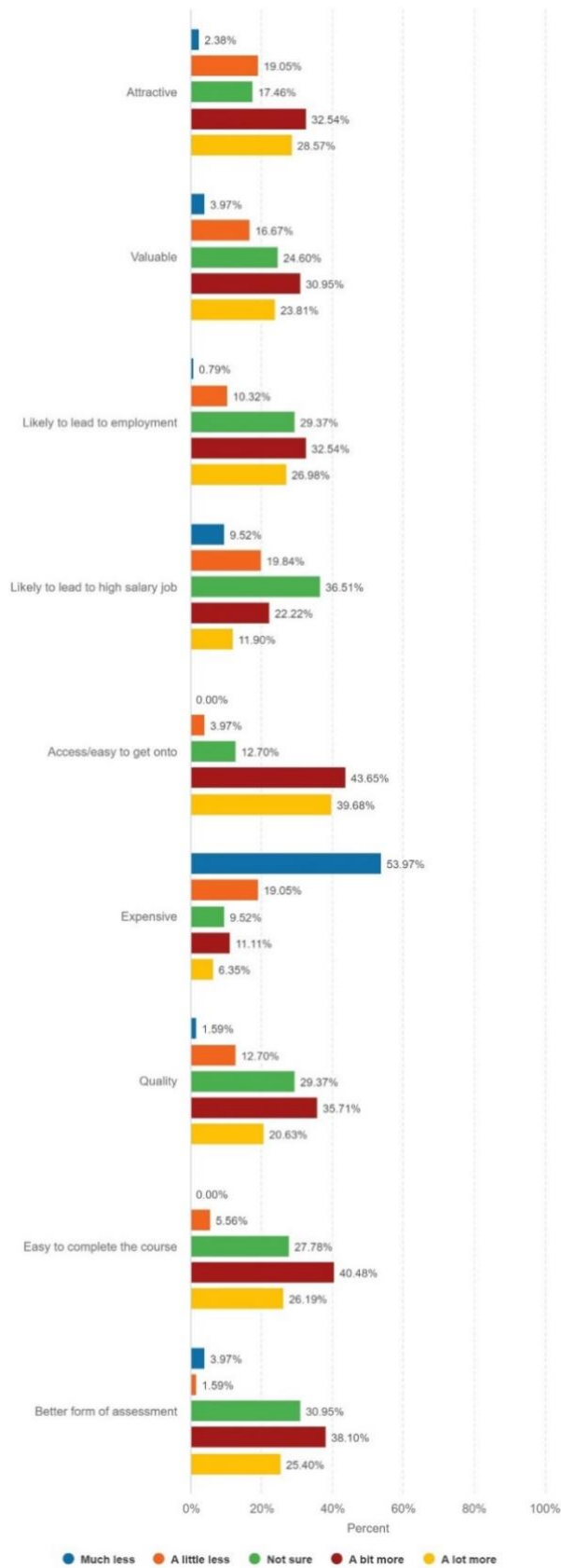


Figure 65. Current learners' comparison of university degrees and Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

Appeal of level 4 and 5 qualifications

When current learners were asked what they thought would make others consider applying for Level 4 and 5 qualifications, the most common responses were to gain employment (selected by 77% of the respondents) or to act as a stepping stone to higher study (selected by 64% of the respondents).

In your opinion, what would make other people consider studying for Level 4 and 5 qualifications? Tick all that apply.

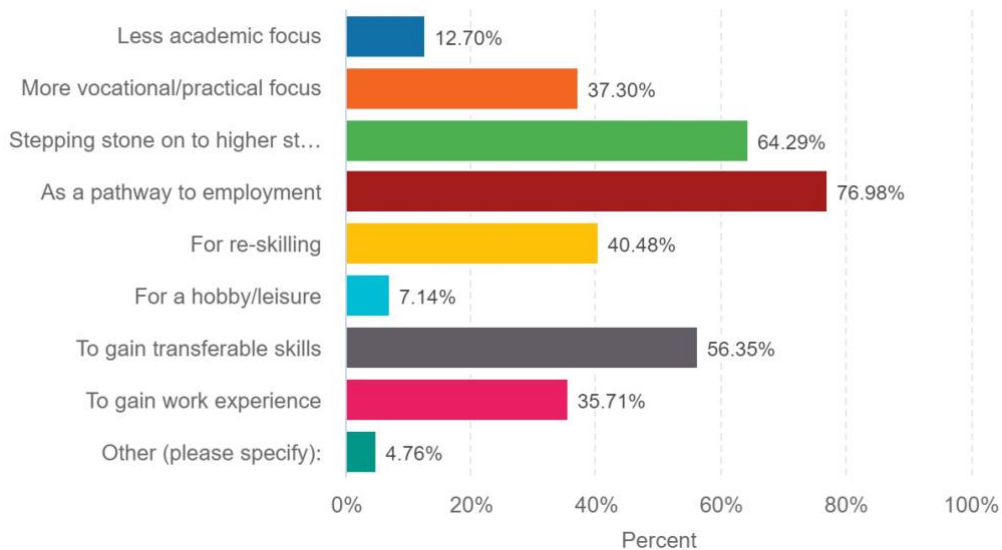


Figure 66. Current learners' perceptions of how to boost appeal of Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

Communications

In-person, first-hand accounts were the most popular communication means by which respondents would like to learn about Level 4 and 5 qualifications, via, for example, first-hand accounts from current/past Level 4 and 5 students (29%) or via in-person information sessions delivered by Level 4 and 5 lecturers/careers advisors (27%) – see Figure 67 below. Similarly, when asked about the best way to engage potential learners, there were two responses which were much more popular than the others: 44% of current learners felt that potential learners should be engaged via social media, closely followed by over one third (38%) of the current learners who favoured 'in-person information sessions' - see Figure 68 below. This is useful feedback for those in FE/CAFRE/HEIs who are considering how best to engage with potential Level 4 and 5 learners in the post-Covid environment, and an interesting reminder that despite the advances of online technology (especially since the start of the pandemic) learners still value face-to-face engagement to hear more about future study pathways.

How would you prefer to hear about Level 4 and 5 qualifications?

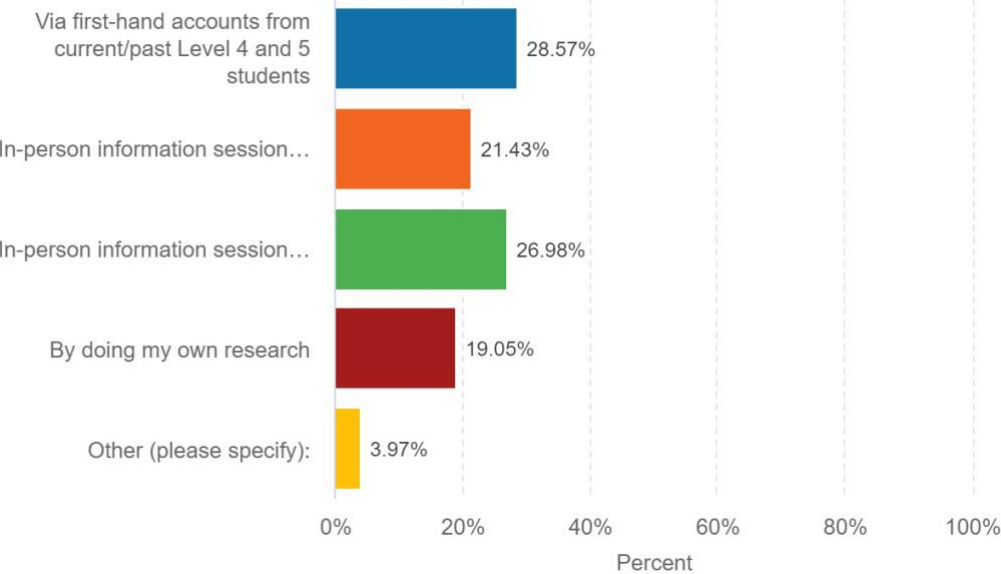


Figure 67. Current learners' preferred ways to learn about Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

What's the best way to engage potential students in learning about Level 4 and 5 qualifications?

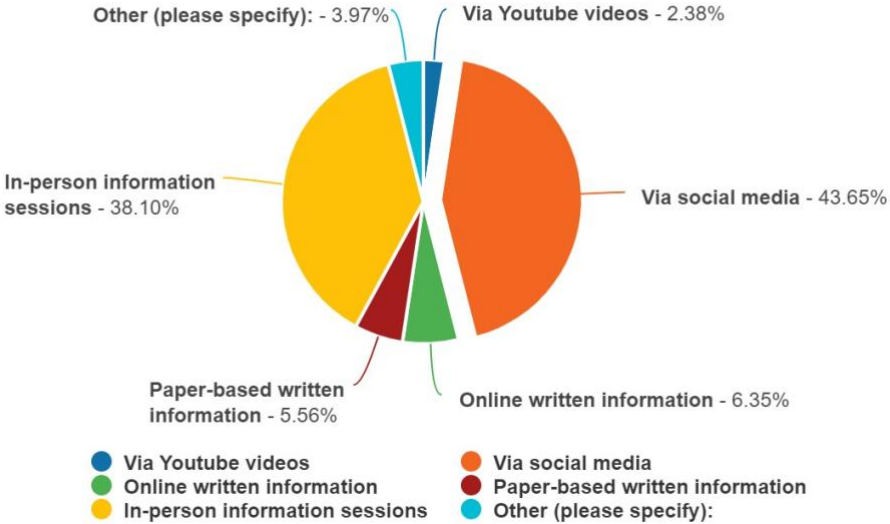


Figure 68. Current learner preferences for delivering marketing information.

Chapter 4: Qualitative Findings

This chapter details the key themes emerging from the qualitative data. Four overarching themes are presented (understanding and awareness; factors influencing understanding and awareness; factors influencing uptake; and optimal forms of communication and engagement). Each of these key overarching themes is presented below:

Theme 1: Understanding and Awareness of Level 4 and 5 Qualifications

In general, and across all groups sampled, the data suggests that there is, for many, poor understanding and awareness of Level 4 and 5 qualifications, with great variability in understanding and awareness across different populations, as well as variable understanding of different Level 4 and 5 qualification options.

Variability in understanding and awareness

The evidence highlights that learners are more familiar with some qualifications, compared to others. For example, among the prospective learners, there was a higher reported awareness of Foundation Degrees, Higher Level Apprenticeships and the Certificate of Higher Education:

“I know about the foundation degrees.”

[Non-selective school pupil, male, #32]

“I’ve heard of the foundation degree.”

[Non-selective school pupil, female, #25]

“I’ve heard of the certificate of higher education.”

[Non-selective school pupil, male, #34]

However only one prospective learner had heard of and applied for a Higher National Diploma (HND). Pupils within both grammar and non-grammar school settings were generally unaware of the remaining Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

“I’ve heard of the higher level apprenticeship, the certificate of higher education, the level four, level five foundation degree and the higher national degree.” [Grammar School Pupil, female, #7]

“I have heard of the HND. I’ve applied for one in software engineering in the Belfast Met.”

[Non-selective school pupil, male, #21]

“I haven’t heard or know what a HND [higher national diploma] is.”

[Non-selective school pupil, male, #17]

“I’ve never heard of the HND or the HNC [higher national certificate].”

[Non-selective school pupil, male, #36]

“I’ve never heard of the associate bachelor’s degree.”

[Grammar school pupil, female, #9]

“I’m not sure what Level 4 work based diplomas are.”

[Grammar school pupil, female, #11]

Theme 2: Factors influencing awareness and understanding

The data revealed a range of factors that are influencing stakeholders’ awareness and understanding. In particular, the data suggests there are high levels of confusion regarding the Level 4 and 5 qualification landscape. Additionally, the evidence suggests that an individual’s experience (both directly and indirectly) influences their levels of awareness and understanding.

Confusion: Terminology

One of the key factors inhibiting strong awareness and understanding was the high level of confusion that exists in relation to Level 4 and 5 qualifications. Much of this confusion appears to stem from the varied terminology employed to describe the qualifications. There is an apparent disconnect between the use of ‘Level 4 and 5’ terminology (in accordance with the UK-wide national qualifications framework) and what this means in terms of products, courses, qualifications and classification levels.

Learners themselves acknowledged this confusion, as some expressed that until embarking on their current Level 4 or 5 study, they had no experience or reference point for this terminology.

“The terms can be a bit confusing at times. Because the way I looked at was, GCSE, A-level. Degree. Foundation degree or Bachelor's degree? I would find it a bit confusing - the numbers.” [Current FE learner, female, #5]

“It just seems to be an in house term, it's not recognised outside of the educational establishment. Employers aren't talking about those terms. We're not talking in those terms.” [Current FE learner, male, #19]

“I needed to look them all up. Because these things change. I went through a system that was O-levels, A-Levels, degree. There was no talk of numbered levels at that stage. So that's something that's come in later. I think there is a little bit of confusion over what qualifications

qualify what level. It's not a system that I'd heard of until I actually came here. And people started talking about level this and that" [Current CAFRE Learner, female #6]

This confusion was recognised by FE College lecturers as well as the professional body involved, who were vocal in their recognition of and appreciation for their students' confusion.

"While we know what Level 4 and 5 means, they [i.e. the students] don't. It's a completely foreign language to them, they don't understand it. And they will probably never need it, you know, until their children are at an age where they're having to apply to various courses that haven't needed to understand the lingo that goes with education" [FE lecturer, #3]

"We are working hard to promote it amongst schools. And we have found that when we use the terminology of the opportunity to progress and complete with a degree apprenticeship, that actually goes down much better than our Higher Level Apprenticeship. I think that is an issue to be worked on in the years ahead" [FE lecturer, #10]

"I think once you take away the numbers, you're left with more descriptive words. And that allows people to take a step back and say, what is actually the right fit for me and my experience, like what level should I be studying at? Instead of worrying about numbers, they're more bound to the requirements of studying at that level." [Professional body, #1]

The confusion is then further exacerbated by the inconsistency in the use of terminology and language within the sector. FE lecturers acknowledge that they rarely refer to 'levels' when discussing these qualifications with students, rather they employ different language and terminology which they feel is more meaningful and understandable to the students with whom they are working.

"If I'm talking to students, the only time I do Level 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 it's just to explain and put it in terms of the projected outcome. For example, if you do level two, you're coming out at the operative level. If you do level three, it would be at supervisor level. Level five comes in at entry level management. Whereas Level six has the potential for higher level management." [CAFRE lecturer, #3]

"So there's an understanding of the word degree and what that means, and again, not a very clear and historic understanding of the university's degree. So the foundation element is a qualifier. If you think about the Foundation Degree, it makes it clear that it's a non-academic pathway on that framework, on our national qualifications framework." [HEI participant, #3]

"We don't use the level language as much as we use the actual word. Personally, I refer to the names of the various different progression routes rather than the levels." [FE lecturer, #14]

Confusion: Differentiation

Related to the disconnect between terminology used and understanding of Level 4 and 5 qualifications is the issue around understanding the differentiation and distinction between certain courses.

A number of FE lecturers recognised the need to address existing misconceptions and confusion regarding the differentiation between, specifically, the different degree levels (foundation, honours etc).

“There's still some way to go to enhance that understanding of the differentiation between, say, for example, a foundation degree and an honours degree and dispel the myth that absolutely everybody needs to be coming out with a level six honours degree. (CAFRE lecturer, #2)

“We get a lot of phone calls from others, from A-level students. There would be a misconception and misunderstanding between foundation degree and honours degree. There's definitely a misconception about what an honours degree is and what level it's at. And this differentiation between a foundation degree and that. Because often the parents say ‘And is that the honours?’” [CAFRE lecturer, #4]

“I think it's quite confusing. It's difficult enough for a young person, and maybe their parents or guardians to try to determine what type of career path a young person should travel alone. But the breadth of choice that there are in terms of careers, and then the range of qualifications can be difficult to navigate. It does require some discussion to explain the differentiation between qualifications, opportunities for progression, and limitations as well.” [CAFRE curriculum lead, #2]

Experience

Experience, both directly and indirectly with Level 4 and 5 qualifications plays a key role in influencing awareness and understanding (and perceptions) of Level 4 and 5 qualifications. For example, indirect experience via family and friends appears to be a key determinant. School-based Level 3 students demonstrated higher familiarity with particular qualifications when they knew someone who had previously chosen such a course.

“My sister done a foundation degree in Early Childhood Studies. So, that's how I heard of that one”. [Grammar school pupil, female, #1]

“We've heard of the apprenticeships. I know my friend started one but he doesn't like it.” [Non-selective school pupil, male, #27]

Additionally, awareness of Level 4 and 5 qualifications were enhanced via direct engagement with targeted information sessions and providers. Many school pupils (the online survey

points to 25% of prospective learners) had become aware of Level 4 and 5 qualifications through their institution's careers teacher/advisor or through in-person information sessions delivered by employers.

"I heard of the higher level apprenticeship through careers class, and some other businesses have come in to try and talk to us" [Grammar school pupil, female, #2]

Theme 3: Factors influencing uptake

The evidence points to high levels of positivity towards Level 4 and 5 qualifications from across all populations sampled. There appears to be a number of positive factors influencing and motivating people's decisions to undertake Level 4 and 5 qualifications, while also acknowledging that there are also some factors which appear to be hindering uptake of these qualifications. The main factors emerging from the data are presented below.

Promotion

One key factor influencing uptake of Level 4 and 5 qualifications was the extent to which people were aware of this as an option (as discussed in the first key theme addressed in this chapter), as well as the extent to which this pathway was promoted. There was a sense that Level 4 and 5 qualifications are not being discussed or promoted across a variety of arenas, for example, in all schools¹³.

"We still don't see enough promotion of these pathways in schools. So it's still our view that schools aren't really promoting level four, level five apprenticeship routes to school leavers to come in to Agri-food. And they may be promoting it more in terms of moving into some of the financial sectors or the IT sector, so the likes of PWC, offering a level four, level five or foundation degree, rather than saying, 'Well, you know, there's a meat factory or a dairy processing factory up the road'. [Agri-food employer, #5]

Enhanced employment opportunities

As is common for many different educational pathways, the perceived capacity for Level 4 and 5 qualifications to enhance employment opportunities was a core factor influencing uptake of these courses. One of the most commonly cited reasons for choosing Level 4 and 5 qualifications emerging from the qualitative data was the opportunity it provides for targeted skill development in order to meet workforce needs and, as such, enhancing employment opportunities. Essentially, students wanted to make sure that their chosen course of study was worth their time and how their chosen course can help them achieve future career goals.

"Yeah. And even for talking about after you're finished – we need to know, is it worth your while doing the course?" [CAFRE prospective learner, female #2]

¹³ This is an aspect further explored below in Theme 4: Communications

“I’d like to know what I could do after.... I would rather know how much it [Level 4 and Level 5] can help me in the long run. How much can they support you, with your future career?” [Non-selective school pupil, female, #22]

Importance of experience

The value of Level 4 and 5 qualifications (and in particular for vocational subjects) was, for many, enhanced by the work experience that was offered, alongside the more ‘academic’/ ‘study’ style learning.

“It's harder to get a job into a tech firm without any previous experience. You can work and do the apprenticeship at the same time.” [Non-selective school pupil, male, #31]

“It's better because you have to work and study, and then you'll make a name for yourself. It'll help you at the end, for example, get a better job.” [Grammar school pupil, female, #42]

“Okay, so in a vocational environment, skill and knowledge development are really very much the focus. So I think that's hugely advantageous in the vocational route.” [FE lecturer #9]

Often, when discussing employability and the role of ‘study’ and ‘experience’, direct comparisons were drawn between Level 4 and 5 qualifications and university-based degrees. In some cases, many pupils perceived a university degree as a necessity to increased job quality and salary expectations, whereas some other pupils felt that employers valued experience more than the actual qualification itself.

“Most employers are just looking for experience now. You do get that step ahead. Whereas in uni, you might want to get that certain placement in that one year and then learn for the rest and then someone else could be in the exact same shoes as you, but have way more experience and employers would take them over you. So yeah, it's different”. [Grammar school pupil, female #8]

“I've been talking to someone when I was over at the college, and he just made it seem like there's more experience in it all. And you're doing the foundation degree and a local post is important to us. You get experience and you get more help there.” [Grammar school pupil, female, #37]

Readiness for the workforce

More immediate readiness (or ‘head start’) for the workforce was also recognised as a valuable attribute of Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

“Experience is always more valuable than like a qualification. I'm finishing earlier than my friends studying on placement with Queen's. So after I can go straight in the workforce.” [Current FE learner, male #5]

“You probably get a head start over others because you're already with an employer. And you're getting experience already.” [Grammar school pupil, female #8]

‘Hard’ competency skills

With regard to skill development, there was a recognition of the capacity for Level 4 and 5 qualifications to enhance the ‘hard’/ ‘competency’ based skills:

“If I was going to summarise the ethos of all our programmes, you know, it's to be practically applied and relevant to the needs of the industry. It isn't just about technically competent graduates. We also put increased emphasis on development, employability skills, interpersonal skills and things like that.” [CAFRE lecturer, #2]

“Whenever students are completing their work based learning module, they become more rounded, it helps their transversal skills. They're applying the theory that they've learned in class to the work setting. And it really just develops them. And I think one of the biggest things, is self-confidence.” [HEI representative, #2]

‘Soft’ transversal skills

The idea of ‘real world’ or ‘workplace’ readiness was also highlighted by teachers and DfE staff, who highlighted the view that Level 4 and 5 learners are well equipped with transversal life skills, such as team work and time-keeping.

“Because we hear employers all the time saying, we have plenty of people with the qualifications, but they just can't function in the real world, because they can't communicate or can't work with other people. I think we struggle in a school environment to develop those key employability skills, just because of the pressures of teaching 10 exams” [Non-selective school teacher, #5]

“Well, the fact that in the HLA employment base that they're in, they learned that they're getting the hands on jobs, skills experience that's different from any traditional university course. Graduates come on out, who haven't worked a day in their life, and go back into part time courses with us. Graduates come in on their level three Business Admin course, because they have no work experience at all. And they want to be able to work in an office.” [FE curriculum lead, #8]

“The tangible benefit for the learner would be the terminology. It's about having the skill set, having the technical understanding and being able to apply it out there in the workplace. But

a lot of the skills at the interim period whenever I was starting employment, were gained through my higher national. And the skills we learned at level three on each end were the things that actually give us the employment skills.” [FE Curriculum lead, #10]

The importance of such skill development was also recognised by prospective students and teachers, many of whom noted the value of practical work experience and key skills development to better enable them to enter the workforce with greater confidence and ease.

“I think you learn more skills than University. You're encouraged to attend classes on time and stuff like that, and just the simple skills in uni but when you're working, you'd learn probably even more knowledge and skills.” [Grammar school pupil, female #12]

“You'd learn more in terms of working with other people and being part of a company. It would teach you more about what being in the actual workplace is like, because being in school, they try and teach you what a natural workplace is like.” [Grammar school pupil, female, #31]

“Well, I mean, there's obviously a huge advantage in the vocational side of things, over and above what we can offer in a school environment. Because a constant problem for us is the employability skills - the soft skills, as they're called, though I hate that term, because it sort of downgrades the importance of skills, and employability. We constantly try to sort of highlight skills and qualities that would be more important than qualifications.” [Non-selective school teacher, #1]

Employers also valued HLAs' readiness to 'get their sleeves rolled up' and work hard. The following extracts from the interviews with employers highlight the contrast very clearly.

“So when it comes to the comparison between the Higher Level Apprenticeships and the graduates, yes, there is a difference. You find that graduates come in, who haven't had any work experience, are a bit naive about work experience. And they really can't grasp the switch from what is being academic studies to actually working and making money in the professional business. Whereas when it comes to the apprentices, because they're working with us four days a week, it means that over the course of time, they certainly get into the way of business, the way of working as a professional. Their communication is really much better. Their management of work tasks again is much better, because they've been trained to do all of this. And they can make good judgments, their independent judgement making a decision is very good, because they've been able to get all of this over a few years.’ [Civil engineering employer #1]

“Whereas what we would tend to find is with the graduates, they may be coming to us if they are applying for graduate opportunities with a more fixed idea of exactly what they want to do. And they're not as prepared to roll the sleeves up and try different things. Because they've

maybe spent three years or four years, deciding this is my exact route to go into product development. I want to go into food quality, or I want to do HR or Finance. That's it, I'm not really interested in all of the other areas. So we find that getting people at that level four, level five, are very much more about that open exploration and enthusiasm because they are still trying to figure out where their niche is, where their interest is." [Agri-food employer, #5]

Additionally, employers recognised the diverse skill set evident in those with a Level 4 or 5 qualification. For one employer in particular, Level 5 apprentices are not only more employable due to their higher levels of experience but because as job candidates, this type of employee will integrate more easily than graduates into the expectations of normal working life.

"Some of our apprentices, whenever they have their degree, they are going to possibly run a project, they'll be at project manager level. So the experience they gain year on year, you know, the ones that started in 2016, that are just halfway through their degree. And our graduates are coming in there maybe with one leader placement experience but they [the apprentices] know so much, so much more than the graduates." [Manufacturing employer, #3]

"I've seen people progress really, really quickly who have come in at level four and level five within a business because, again, it's about that practical application. It's about being able to implement the learning quite quickly. You're not learning something in year one, and maybe trying to apply it three years later when you eventually get a job. With level four and level five, you're doing a lot of the learning this week. We have people in CAFRE this week; next week, they're going to come back to the company and they're going to be applying that learning very, very quickly. And a lot of their projects, their assignments that they're doing are actually things that are benefiting our business because they're taking problems, they're analysing them, they're working through from an educational point of view and applying the learning. And then they're developing a solution along with some of our managers." [Agri-food employer, #5]

Industry connections

Another key factor influencing perceived employment opportunities was students' views on how well connected the courses were to industry. Many of those interviewed valued the role of industry and its connections with the FE sector. For example, the opportunity to be taught by an industry professional was very appealing for students who had very specialist, technical knowledge, as one current learner explained:

"CAFRE came into our school. I could have went straight into the foundation degree I'm in now, but I wanted that more practical experience from the level three. So that's why I took two years and done it before I came in to my foundation degree." [Current CAFRE learner, male #5]

Additionally, the opportunity to make connections within industry and the scope to enhance their own social capital within their career sector of choice (at times as a result of the networks of their lecturers) was also an apparent motivator encouraging uptake of level 4 and 5 qualifications.

“I just want to try and make more industry contacts” [Prospective CAFRE learner, male #2]

“For me, it's also connections and links they have, links and people in the industry that bring more to your work experience and that.” [Current FE learner, male #24]

“And they [lecturers] have really good industry connections. Yeah... for most of us next year, they have gone over the sort of connections they have and they have said to us before, if there's conferences where we could network, they would try their best to get us into them so that we can create our own connection.” [Current Learner, male #28]

Lack of employment opportunities

As well as those who were very positive about the potential for Level 4 and 5 qualifications to enhance employment opportunities, there were those, e.g., some prospective students in Level 3 school based settings, who did not appear to value vocational, college-based study due to the culturally perpetuated stigma of failing to get into university. Many school and college-based teacher participants discussed wider social misconceptions that Level 4 and 5 qualifications were not viable options due to the perception that ‘it will not get them far enough’ or that Level 4 and 5 qualifications were perceived as unlikely to be able to lead to secure, future employment.

“I think if they were valued and paired highly, this could change things. I think there is a social stigma attached to FE. And they feel in a way they went the lesser route, and even if you're coming out of a secondary school, there's maybe an expectation you will go the lesser route. That's rooted in our societal expectations.” [Non-selective school principal, #1]

“I think when you mention the word apprentice, or anything other than an A level or university to a parent, you just see their face saying you think their child is a failure.” [Non-selective school teacher, #2]

“Well, I would say because we have a taught careers programme, they do know that it exists, and they have been introduced to it. I think there's probably a difference between the definition of awareness and acceptance though.” [Grammar, Head of CEIAG, #2]

Subject availability

Students' decisions to pursue opportunities in either Further or Higher Education settings were in due course affected by their perception of course availability for their desired career path. There was a recognition that some of the courses were industry specific, with some industries better represented at Level 4 and 5 compared to others.

"Engineering is one of those areas that comes with very strong industry. So we're continually looking for those opportunities as a college to expand. Culinary arts would be another one, another area of focus given the demands in the sector. What we've noticed as a college as well, is that the HLA demands are subject-specific as well. Some areas will be very, very strong from an HLA demand, whereas others not so much. So again, it's very industry-specific, in regards to where those levels of student recruitment come from." [HEI representative, #2]

This industry focus was recognised by students also. Level 3 students in both school and college settings perceived Level 4 and Level 5 study at FE colleges to be more industry-focused with high availability in engineering, construction and manufacturing while those students leaning towards more social science/humanities or more academic areas of study felt that they could not find the appropriate routes to pursue Level 4 and 5 study in their desired discipline.

"The courses are quite limited to my knowledge and the subjects I would be interested in pursuing are not available locally. [Grammar school pupil, female #3]

"I want to be a history teacher... I've had a look for teaching apprenticeships but I couldn't find anything" [Non-selective school pupil, male #26]

"I'm more interested in like humanities, history or politics and art and humanities so I don't know if there's anything here that would help me" [Grammar pupil, female, # 1]

"We need more fashion based courses in Northern Ireland. Costume design courses" [FE Prospective Learner, Female, #31]

This was an issue also raised by several of the non-selective school teachers interviewed, who expressed frustration that while the teaching and learning approach of vocational education suited many of their pupils very well, the range of subjects available at Level 4 and 5 was limited to certain employment sectors:

"I think every pupil deserves to have as many options as possible and not be narrowed down just by the subject they are interested in or the particular career they are interested in. They should have an option of an apprenticeship of some sort rather than it just being: degree or job. So open it up to as many as possible and give them all the best opportunities they can...it's very limited." [Non-selective school teacher, #8]

“But there’s still no move into, for example, nursing, the areas of nursing, you know... it’s more IT, engineering” [Non-selective school teacher, #4]

“so I think we've touched on it already as well, but the amount and number of options or widen the scope so if government or these colleges could widen the scope, and for example, the English department, surely there's areas like journalism and work on the job and go on one of these apprenticeships, if you want to be a journalist, and go and work with the BBC, for example, or wherever, I'm not quite sure. But that's just one example. And I'm sure, geography could be the same and history, I'm sure there's more opportunities for it, but traditionally it's the trade, the engineering...” [Non-selective school teacher, #9]

A further point was made by another (female) non-selective school teacher who felt that the traditional range of Level 4 and 5 qualifications and in particular the range of Higher Level Apprenticeship opportunities seemed to favour male rather than female learners, based on traditional subject preferences:

“It’s also very male focused, just to put that out there. I think that there is a focus, you know, engineering traditionally is more male, IT is more male, I know there is a focus on getting more girls into STEM subjects. But childcare, journalism, you know, your nursing elements and things like that, tend to be more female subjects. Where’s the availability for them? Where are the options for them, you know, perhaps if there was something to encourage girls to be getting involved in some of these too and looking at the subjects they want to do at sixth form. And what do they want to do as careers? Is something we can encourage there?” [Non-selective school teacher, #10]

Financial implications

There are a range of financial implications at play which can both encourage and inhibit uptake of level 4 and 5 qualifications. Most notably are the cost incurred to undertake this study, the funding available, and the potential earning powers after study is complete. Each will be taken in turn.

Cost

While the knowledge of course fees varied between school students in Level 3 settings, course fees, accommodation costs and living expenses were all core considerations for prospective students when deciding on their next steps. Very few school-based Level 3 pupils were aware of the actual fee costs associated with Level 4 and 5 qualifications. However, these school pupils were generally able to recognise that studying for Level 4 and 5 qualifications was potentially much less expensive than studying at university, both in terms of study fees and accommodation and travel expenses:

“My friend is doing a business course [in Level 4 and 5]. He could have went to England but then he saw the Tech was way cheaper. So obviously he chose Tech, because it benefits him more so.” [Grammar school pupil, male, #6]

“Yeah, I wouldn't personally do it [go to uni] because I hate the thought of paying for something back. And just like always at the back of your head. From what I heard, student finance help you a lot with that. But still, it's just like a thing that I wouldn't do because you still have to pay this off at one point.” [FE prospective learner, #11]

“It's probably not as expensive [as university study] but I don't really know how much the course is though...” [Grammar school pupil, #13]

“Well, I don't want to travel internationally or learn virtually. So I thought this will work better and it is a lot cheaper than uni at least, I think.” [Current FE learner, #23]

Cost comparisons between further study in England versus Northern Ireland were raised by some school-based learners as a motive to study closer to home.

“The course I want to do is free in Northern Ireland, but if you want to go to England, it's £9000 a year and then the living costs. At least here you'll get a bursary for your living costs as well.” [Grammar school pupil, female, #9]

Some parents however, had a better idea of what a vocational Level 4 or 5 course might cost:

“Well, my own access course costs £569 for the whole year. But University, I think per year is four and a half grand. That's four grand of a difference. [Parent of non-selective school pupil, #3]

Another parent was aware of the differences between university and vocational study however, expressed concern over additional costs of her daughter having to complete a vocational course and a university course straight after.

“It's 2400 for the Met, and four and a half grand if she goes to university. So the problem with that is, then you're adding on costs per year. She does a year or two here then goes on to do her degree in uni. That's five years of debt.” [Parent of non-selective school pupil, #4]

Available funding

With just a few exceptions, school-based prospective learners were largely unaware of existing arrangements to support or fund student places on Higher Level Apprenticeships, for example. This lack of understanding could potentially hinder some from applying to Level 4 and 5 qualifications. Teachers and curriculum leads who had previously worked with students

who followed this particular route found that the availability of funded places was likely to boost uptake and overcome the access barrier of not being able to self-fund this particular mode of study.

The following comments from teachers, university lecturers and pupils highlight the significant advantage to those from lower income backgrounds of having an income (however modest) and reduced or no course fees through undertaking Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

“Funding would be a massive issue. You know, going into apprenticeships from an engineering point of view and being paid while you're studying, having that training budget in place would be massive for all courses. If there was a bit more funding available for kids from a deprived area, you know, so that they weren't going to face that kind of economic pressure there would be a little bit more support there for them.” [Non-selective school teacher, #10]

“I do think the costs, associated costs is going to be a big fight. I think with this cost of living crisis that we're in, we're going to see household budgets reduced, and therefore, parents may not have and carers and the students themselves may not, may have lost their job, their part-time job or something. So I think that could have an impact” [HEI representative, #2]

“I find as well there's a lot of more mature students who are looking for a career change but can't afford to go off to university to do a degree because of childcare commitments. They're now starting to look at Level four and fives or the Higher Level Apprenticeships.” [DfE careers advisor, #3]

“I think they prefer it. People prefer apprenticeships because they'd be working part time, I met one who has a mechanics apprenticeship and he works at the mechanics down the road. And so the apprenticeship helps him and the actual work experience he receives as well as getting paid is great. They (students) prefer to earn money while learning.” [Civil engineering employer, #2]

“You get paid for your 40-hour week, even when you're in school. So yeah, the employers are generous and will keep you there.” [Grammar school pupil, #8]

Future Earnings Potential

Generally, prospective students in both Level 3 school and college settings believed that those enrolled in Level 4 and 5 programmes would eventually go on to earn good salaries. Students did not however associate Level 4 and 5 qualifications with immediate high salaries.

However, parents, teachers and Level 4 and 5 students were of the opinion that the vocational graduate would eventually out-earn the university graduates due to the stronger levels of

applied knowledge and practical experience. Therefore, high salaries were typically associated with higher levels of experience rather than the level of qualification completed. While those with university degrees appeared more qualified on paper, Level 4 and 5 qualifiers were portrayed by employers as stronger job candidates due to their conditioned ability to fit into, cope and adapt quickly to the expectations of normal, working life:

“There’s a slight difference because if you've got more difficult qualifications, like your doctorates obviously, you’ll earn more money. But if you're going in at like your Level 6, you'll just earn roughly the same amount as an apprenticeship.” [Current FE Learner, #26]

Current learners demonstrated better awareness of potential salary expectations and certainly differences in anticipated salaries according to the education level of the applicant. But when discussing entry level candidates post Level 6 completion, those who had higher exposure to HLA talks felt that once the Level 4 or 5 qualification was completed, the vocational applicant would most likely earn more than the University graduate as a result of their additional industry experience, understanding and insight.

“Probably if you're graduated, you'd be starting off small and probably earn the same salary as an apprentice, but the apprentice already has that four-year learning. I think an apprentice would eventually earn more over the course of four years, or whatever the apprenticeship is. [Grammar school pupil, #8]

“I said to my son that if you took a two year, three year hit, you're living at home. Just see your apprenticeship money as your pocket money. In three years’ time, you qualify and you get into the right company. You will never look back at the previous two years, three years when you weren't earning much.” [Parent of non-selective school pupil, #3]

Current learners however felt that employers were more likely to select the University graduate. It was also believed that the University graduate had better job mobility once employed in a company position.

“Think if they're going for the job application – the university degree is more likely to get picked and maybe get a higher up job role.” [CAFRE prospective learner, #1]

“University graduates are more sought after than someone who’s less qualified and they'd probably get paid more.” [Current FE learner, #5]

Location

Some students expressed a clear preference for studying close to home. In some instances, even choosing to travel and study at a Belfast college or university was too far.

“Living close to home was a big one for me. And yeah, university was definitely a big turnoff. I was trying to stay here, it’s no cost and I get paid.” [Non-selective school pupil, male #30]

The promotion of local opportunities by a local FE college did appear to be important in certain areas within Northern Ireland wherein the surrounding environment has a high number of manufacturing companies.

“There were some local companies [coming in to talk to the students]. So there's potential for them to get a job locally. So that is going to be good for them. But it's been great to see more of an emphasis. That's very much a practical course. But it's great to see the emphasis on other apprenticeships now, there's business. So it's good to see companies coming on board with that. [Non-selective school teacher, #4]

Teachers discussed the inter-generational lack of aspiration for university study within certain more isolated communities situated further from Belfast. For these young people, moving outside the local town to study at a university in Belfast was almost inconceivable, whereas there was a certain safety and security associated with travelling a few miles to the local FE College, while still living at home within the familiar community.

“We’re from an economically deprived area, and a lot of our students will be the first in their family to have gone to university at this generation. Generations before wouldn’t have went to university. They would have stayed in the town and worked in the local factories. So moving away from that is a big step for our younger people.” [Non-selective school teacher, #10]

“for the child care course I've got young ladies who are more than capable of going into teaching, but are choosing to go to Newtownabbey tech, so location for me (for the sports and childcare courses) is the primary factor” [Non-selective school teacher, #7]

“I’m from a working class background. So I think a lot of children from around here go to tech or to the Met after study, you know, it was never going to university. It was never really talked about.” [Parent of non-selective school pupil, #2]

In one community in particular, there was frequent mention of a particular lack of confidence felt by the current year 13 and 14 students, whose experiences over the past two years had been dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, teachers remarked that the current year 13 and 14 students were even less likely than before to apply for university courses that would take them outside the local community and outside the familiarity of their lockdown environments.

“[Name of town] is quite insular. And to leave this town is a big step in my experience. I've worked in other towns and cities, but this town is unique, where our students have low

aspirations of themselves, and the area that they live in has an appeal towards them. There's lots more students capable going to England (for university), for example, but within recent years after COVID, I've noticed a lot of our students are now choosing to go in to the Level four." [Non-selective school teacher, #9]

"There's a wee bit of lack of motivation to push themselves too, where we're really pushing them at the minute. They've just had enough. I think some of them may end up going straight into employment because they just, they don't necessarily even want to carry on in any type of education. They've just kind of nearly been a bit jaded, with the last couple of years and all the disruption. And the way it sort of left them, I think some may end up in employment. We are certainly encouraging them, if they're at all thinking about education and keeping going we are encouraging them to think about those vocational options." [Non-selective, Head of Sixth Form]

For others, studying at home either in their local FE College, CAFRE or even at university in Northern Ireland was not an appealing option. The opportunity to study away from home in other parts of the UK or in international universities appealed to some who expressed a desire to enjoy the university lifestyle, to become more independent and to experience a more 'exciting' life outside Northern Ireland. For some the idea of studying at any local FE or HE institution was simply unattractive:

"Studying abroad just sounds so exciting." [Grammar school pupil, female, #1]

"I guess freedom. You want to experience new things. I've been here for 17 years, I honestly don't know, if I want to go to uni here, I'd like to go somewhere else and actually depend on myself." [Grammar school pupil, male, #3]

"Yeah, we don't know. But somewhere in like Europe. They've got really good universities. Just somewhere a bit more exciting." [Non-selective school pupil, female, #26]

"I suppose they need to have some sort of social side of it, maybe that's part of it, the experience. Because young people are not just looking for their studies, they're looking for those extra things. And I suppose they haven't had that for a couple of years. So, actually, it's maybe more important now." [Non-selective school teacher, #9]

When asked about the financial implications of living and studying at university outside Northern Ireland, some level 3 school-based learners clearly felt that this was a price worth paying for their parents and themselves.

"I've always wanted to go to England, even though it's double the price." [Grammar school pupil, female, #2]

Location was also connected to a long-standing history of family-driven agricultural backgrounds. The combination of previous family members attending and the college route represents a generational commitment to improving their knowledge and skills to run their family farms:

“I know more folks who have attended CAFRE. And they're from a farming background. And that's a natural progression almost for them. That's how they see it. Very strong association there for agriculture.” [CAFRE curriculum lead, #16]

“And so the quality is definitely there. And what we do see is a lot are coming from students that live out in the country, but coming from like a farming background, or their parents are in the industry. I think it is because they're maybe brought up on a farm and they're fixing and understand how to use the machines. It's different things like that, but they're more involved in that type of work.” [Agri-food employer, #4]

“I think in agriculture, because there's a culture in Northern Ireland, a family culture and a family knowledge there for farming. I would say a lot of farming kids will go, I understand that if I do a degree local, I'll have these options for me.” [CAFRE lecturer, #2]

Choosing to study away from their home area was however observed as a risky action to take for certain families who did not have such a strong higher education background.

“It's the fear of the unknown. Potentially families and parents haven't been through the process themselves. So automatically they're a little bit fearful of the unknown. So maybe an educational programme for parents to improve their knowledge of the process, improve their knowledge of the options that are out there? Because at the moment, you're swimming against the tide a little bit, you're trying to create as many pathways and opportunities as possible, but the kind of low aspirations is a big, big factor.” [Non-selective school teacher, #3]

Less academic route

For some, the less academic and more vocational nature of Level 4 and 5 qualifications was a key factor influencing their likelihood or motivation to engage with these courses, whereby it was recognised that this mode of vocational study might be better suited to those less academically orientated.

“I think some of them maybe see it as more accessible to them? Because of the lower grades. I don't think some are ready for uni at this stage? It's kind of a comfort blanket. And they know it's a huge jump to university. So I think they hold on to that.” [Non-selective school teacher #7]

“We know for a fact that there’s a percentage that are not University candidates... Some students’ plans are not university, they might have to put up a plan B.” [Non-selective careers teacher, #5]

“I don't think university is for everybody. And I think for some of our young people, I would rather they went into that [College] than going to a University and struggling, maybe to find that it's not for them. I'd rather see them go into something more like an apprenticeship, which is more appropriate for them.” (Non-selective school teacher, #3)

“Well, I think for some, they're not going to get the grades they would need to go to university. So I think this is a definitely a different option, a better option.” [Non-selective school teacher #2]

Others viewed these qualifications as a stepping stone for those less academically orientated students. Or indeed for those who were unsure or perhaps not ready to transition to university study.

“A lot of our students are using the HND as stepping stones. It's for those students who are not capable of university. But within this area, aspirations aren't high.” [Non-selective school teacher, #9]

“[A foundation degree] is for anyone looking to go into early childhood studies where they couldn't get on to the proper degree course. Students can then use it to top up the full degree through the levels” [FE lecturer, #3]

“Can't we just go with an experienced human life? And what are the pros – I want a breath of fresh air to see what the world is really like, truly is.” [Grammar school pupil, male, #4]

It was clear from some of the interviews with FE lecturers and non-selective teachers in particular that the more structured, less academic building block approach of Level 4 and 5 qualifications was much more appropriate for some learners, who were less suited to progressing directly from school to traditional academic study at degree level at university. Several FE lecturers recounted the experiences of former students:

“And some of the students. They have to learn differently and A-levels don't suit them. We had one girl last year. I am showing my age. I taught her in primary four. She left school at 16. She went on to do her NVQ level 3, she did her maths, got into our FD and graduated last year with a 2:1. She would never have gone down the A-level route. She admits that herself. It would not have suited her. But she said, doing it this way with industry and theory, being able to go out, gain that experience, gain that confidence to be able to go and I think that does need to be marketed.” (FEC lecturer, 25)

'Plan B' social stigma

For some current level 4 and 5 learners, their current course was their first pick.

"I was just looking through all the creative courses and I've always like really games and stuff. So that one really caught my eye and that was my first choice." [Current FE learner, male, #16]

"I just looked at colleges and universities that I could easily access that has a level five course. This was my first pick." [Current FE learner, male #11]

However, for others, Level 4 and 5 study was a 'Plan B' alternative. Indeed, one of the biggest negative influences which arose from the data was the perception that studying at an FE College for a Level 4 or 5 qualification was perceived as a 'Plan B' option when first preferences (typically university-based study) are not realised. Students themselves acknowledged this perception, whereby they have formed the opinion, perhaps as a result of this stigma, that a Level 4 or 5 qualification is less valued, particularly in terms of challenge and achievement.

"They're not aware of the scope of courses, once they leave school. If we get them at level two, we can keep them. But getting them from level three to level four, level five, they just think that the tech is a backup. It's not the first choice." [FE curriculum lead, #13]

"Some of our students perceive college as an 'if all else fails' plan. Yeah, it's not a plan A but sometimes it's not even a plan B." [Grammar, Head of CEIAG, #2]

"People usually view colleges as a last resort. When I was in school, everyone was making fun of tech. And I had no idea why. I did two years at tech and I learned quite a lot." [Current FE learner, male #8]

"I think in the long run, it's probably less of an achievement than university in my eyes." [Grammar school pupil, female, #6]

This less favourable comparison and inevitable societal stigma appears to be reinforced both at school, by peers and teachers and at home by family or parents.

School reinforcement of 'Plan B' stigma

The data suggests that there is no standardised approach to the delivery of school-based careers advice related to Level 4 and 5 qualifications. Whilst there are some teachers and schools who proactively raise awareness of Level 4 and 5, it seems that such an approach is dependent upon the school/teacher context. For example, one current Level 4 and 5 learner reported that an individual school teacher had encouraged his application to complete a Level 3 qualification in a FE College:

“Our teacher really tried to encourage us to apply for like at least one or two courses before the end of the year, so that we could have some options for next year. So, at least some teachers are actually like trying to push us towards colleges rather than just universities.”
[Current FE Learner, male, #19]

Some prospective learners based in Level 3 school settings (both grammar and non-selective) reported receiving careers education which balanced both university based higher education and vocational based further education programmes, while other school pupils (from both grammar and non-grammar schools) noted a strong university bias in their career planning sessions.

“I think it's a balance as well like having careers and having different apprenticeships coming in and speaking to us, as well as having talks from universities. So it is very balanced. I feel like we are offered both routes.” [Grammar school pupil, female, #7]

“I'd say more emphasis on university because quite a big chunk of the careers booklet is filling out for a spot in university, but there is some stuff on other options” [Grammar school pupil, female, #1]

“The careers teacher needs to stop prioritising uni, but I feel like they don't have as much information on everything else, as they do for uni, which is why they're pushing uni down our throats because they don't actually know. I think they need more information about all the other options first, before they can give it to us.” [Non-selective school pupil, male, #20]

For some students, there was a perception that Level 4 and 5 qualifications were presented as a ‘back-up’ or ‘plan B’, to be considered only if their first preference (typically university) was not realised.

“It would be a brief mention and everything else. But everything's really, really focused around the tendency to apply for it as a second option. They're not really helping you as much with other options. I don't know, maybe they don't care as long as you're applying somewhere.” [Non-selective school pupil, female, #19].

Additionally, a recurring theme emerged from the data that suggests that, in some schools, university application preparation and UCAS preparation occupied a large extent of careers education, with less energy or attention paid to Level 4 and 5 qualifications. Some pupils felt that perhaps teachers were not as well informed about Level 4 and Level 5 qualifications and the options available to them.

“I think it's pretty uni-focused because I think they aren't as familiar; parents aren't as familiar. So if you say something new to them, it's just a bit foreign. And they're a bit unsure about how stable it would be.” [Grammar school pupil, female, #1]

“The focus of schools is University. The Level fours and fives are generally seen as a back-up, plan B. By the end of it, they're exhausted, they've done UCAS. That's all they've been doing for nearly a year. So trying to get them out into college is... it's hard for them to consider that.” [DfE careers advisor, #1]

“Well, we start looking at the end of year 13, specifically looking at personal statements, looking to everyone going to university, and that's part of the agreement, from the principal that everyone has a plan A which could be applied to university.” [Non-selective careers teacher, #5]

Furthermore, there was also evidence of the active discouragement of Level 4 and 5 qualifications for some students who had openly expressed an interest in pursuing such study.

“A student I knew came from a fairly well regarded grammar school in the north of the province. And when she informed her careers teacher that she wants to come to [name of College]. She had a good set of results, good qualifications, obviously, strong potential ... but the school and careers teacher, very much seen that there were other opportunities presented to her ...for example, biomedical science, maybe even engineering, you know, there was almost a push away from what some regarded as a lesser qualification. Now, this girl, she had finished out at GCSE with a clean suite of really good grades, didn't want to study A-levels, just wanted to study a diploma at [name of College]. And her intention was that to get on to the honours degree in food technology, so she's fairly fixed, she knows what she wants to do, but the school was very keen on trying to put her off. And that's just one example of many,” [FE lecturer, #18]

Parental reinforcement of 'Plan B' stigma

The data suggests that the home environment, and particularly parental perceptions, are also reinforcing the notion that Level 4 and 5 qualifications are a 'Plan B' option, or as the below quotes highlight, they represent the idea of going 'backwards' or hold less 'prestige'.

“Now she doesn't want to go to England, she can't get into the university here. So, I feel we're going backwards because now we're going to the Met to do a college tour.” [Parent of non-selective pupil, female #3]

“A lot of parents want the prestige of their son or daughter going to university. Whereas, if a student chooses to go to a local further education college, there's the perception that maybe it's beneath them.” [FE curriculum lead, #2]

Teachers and school leaders recognised the strength of parental influence and attitudes.

“When people start talking about things like Level 4, Level 5 and apprenticeships - the parents are not keen on that. The parents prefer the university route and think college study would be denigrating the child. ... Parental influence is very strong there.” [Grammar, Head of CEIAG, #1]

As exemplified in the quote above, there was often the perception that parental perceptions represented a significant barrier to the uptake of Level 4 and 5 qualifications, with many parents very unfamiliar with the range of qualifications and valuing more highly the traditional university route, which they saw as the ‘gold standard’.

“They see it very much as just an alternative if they aren't able to do what parents really see as the gold standard.” [Non-selective teacher, #4]

“So how can we then develop the skills and the knowledge within that can be a really attractive option, not just to 17-18 year olds, but also to their parents. You actually want the parents to get switched on and saying, that's where you want to go, that's where you want to get the job, assurance that you will get your qualifications, you will be getting permanent employment at the same time, and you'll be able to progress really, really quickly through the business. The alternative is, you go to university, you get your degree, and don't get me wrong, there is a time and a place for that. And we do have graduates that come in as well. But it's not for everybody. And we shouldn't be as a society, as a parent, as a teacher, as an employer, just pushing that whole agenda of, ‘Have you got your UCAS form filled in?’” [Agri-food employer, #5]

FE/HE reinforcement of ‘Plan B’ stigma

The FE college lecturers were also acutely aware of the societal stigma associated with level 4 and 5 qualifications, compared to University-based study.

“I mean, I would say personally, that there's always been a stigma around college and failing to get into university. College is a last resort kind of thing. And I don't think that should be. It should be seen as equal because it has the same amount of funding, if not a bit more.” [FE curriculum lead, #12]

Their own perceptions of Level 4 and 5 as a ‘back up’ qualification could also be further exacerbating the stigma that exists in society regarding vocational education more generally and Level 4 and 5 qualifications in particular:

“I would normally say, 'Well, have you considered alternatives through the likes of the further education colleges as a backup come August when they get their GCSE results? And they can decide on the best pathway because if they score really low on their GCSEs, they're going to struggle at A-level, whereas they might be focused on one particular career. That it's actually better for them to go to college and study it, but their parents don't want them to, they come upset. Sometimes the parents are like, 'No, that's not where we want you to go'. So a lot of stigma is unfortunately, generational based on a parent's perspective and experience.” [DfE careers advisor, #3]

In his response to the online survey, one (non-selective) teacher referred to the enduring “twentieth century” perception that the university route alone had value, highlighting a wider ignorance of the opportunities available and also the fact that less academic pathways are more suited to some learners:

“Too many people in NI still believe only the A Levels to degrees route is acceptable, which is a very 20th century view and totally fails to take account of the changed and changing educational and work landscapes of the 21st Century. Flexible education, flexible and alternate routes that L 4 and L5 qualifications provide to the world of Higher education and work, reflect the differing learning styles of students and their individual needs and preferences, improving outcomes and making for better workforce members ultimately”. [Non-selective teacher, #5]

Moving away from the ‘Plan B’ stigma

Despite the social stigma and less favourable perceptions of Level 4 and 5 qualifications compared to university degrees, there was also some evidence of perceptions shifting towards greater appreciation of Level 4 and 5 qualifications. For example, some students interviewed recognised the potential successes available to them, without holding a university-based level 6 qualification.

“Well, I used to have a perception. I didn't realize Tech was good. That was probably when I was younger. Now that there are more options and you're kind of encouraged to look at Tech compared to university...” [Grammar school pupil, female #12]

“Teachers just see academics, if you don't get A-levels, you should be seen as a failure. But realistically, it's just a grade on a piece of paper. And there's people that want to be successful, to have their own businesses. They didn't have any academics at all or degrees to get there.” [Current FE learner, female, #16]

Some of the qualitative evidence also points to the role of employers in helping to discourage the ‘Plan B’ stigma, or as this employer refers to it, the ‘academic snobbery’ that exists.

“I was always trying to give people an opportunity, to try and get rid of the academic snobbery around vocational qualifications that persists in our organization. People that don't have the academic ability, often don't get the opportunity. Employer support in this regard is more important than ever.” [Agri-food employer, #3]

Additionally, as this FE curriculum lead highlighted, whilst there is still a long way to go in terms of shifting societal attitudes more broadly, there is progress being made in regard to the students themselves.

“Parents just think it's A-levels and then University. Anything other than that is like, less valued and if you don't get the parents on board, it's difficult to change their minds. I think we are making a start to that, but it's still a long way. I think we've maybe got the students to a good place with it.” [FE curriculum lead, #3]

Additionally, employers recognised the rising popularity of certain Level 4 and 5 qualifications and/or programmes of study, in particular Higher Level Apprenticeships. It was clear from the interviews with employers that Higher Level Apprenticeships were becoming much more popular among prospective learners.

“We take apprentices through Workplus but the numbers of applications that we get through just on emails, just apprentices or students reaching out is huge. So I think the word is getting out there for sure that apprenticeships is the way to go. And students that are studying for their degree already, nine times out of ten, they want to change over to do the apprenticeship.” [Construction Employer, #4]

Several interview participants spoke of the need to shift attitudes, to market the positive outcomes from vocational qualifications and to promote the value of alternative routes from school to employment:

“They [the schools] put their students off the likes of a FE college and make it seem like if you don't work, that's where you'll end up. So, a lot of young people out there and their parents come through the whole education system with the perception that [continued] if you don't do well enough, you'll end up there and that the only route is A-levels and a degree at a university. They don't see FE as a perfectly legitimate alternative way to get there.” [FE curriculum lead, #14]

“I'm just trying to make it something for students to aspire to. If I don't do well enough, then I'll just go to FE. That's not really the mind-set I would want these young folks coming in to me with, you want them to aspire to go there because there's an opportunity there, or there's an experience. So think it's maybe having to take that negative and turn that into more of a positive experience.” [Grammar, Head of CEIAG 1, #1]

While the importance of Level 4 and 5 qualifications for mature learners didn't feature as a major theme in the study, one mature current learner was quick to make the point in her online survey response that Foundation Degrees represented a valuable option not just for school-leavers but also for those seeking to upskill later in life:

“Scream from the rooftops that foundation degrees are available at tech. Great for adults looking to return.” [Current FE learner, Female, aged 30-39]

Ethos and pastoral care

There was an apparent appeal of the positive ethos and pastoral care witnessed within FE Colleges. Some comparisons between FE Colleges and University were drawn. For some participants, the University experience could be distant, impersonal and even intimidating. For example, a number of FE college lecturers commented on their students' negative experiences at university.

“One of our students had actually gone to Jordanstown onto the degree level six, and had heart failure, and then came back. He was like in huge numbers, and he couldn't cope and there wasn't the support that he'd be getting in a smaller class that we would have, you know, so he came back... Yeah, he was lost” [FE lecturer, #24]

“I know I've had a couple of emails from students who went to England last September. Can't cope and they want to come back to us in September time either on the full time course or the part time course. [FE Lecturer, 13]

Some teachers recognised that for some students, a Level 4 or 5 qualification may suit them better, because if the individualised approach and building blocks are put in place, perhaps in preparation for further study at university.

“Whereas potentially, you know, a level four qualification or equivalent may suit them, you know, again, it's all individualised, you know, so the level four qualification may suit some kids a little bit better. As [other teacher] touched on, help to put the building blocks in place for university, and I suppose increase retention rates, then, whenever they actually do get the university”. [Non-selective teacher, #6]

Therefore, timing and teaching expectations played a significant role for those who did eventually choose the Level 4 and Level 5 route.

Equally, close mentorship and good teacher-student relations were key to addressing other elements of student life such as mental health issues, their own self confidence and student aspirations which more often than not go hand in hand.

“We have noticed, and I'm sure it's in the media, the mental health issues with young people and COVID didn't help. And but most certainly, we would really care for our students, we see that at ground level. And this has been highlighted over the years.” [FE curriculum lead, #7]

Lecturer participants collectively identified the need for better pastoral care and emotional support to raise student aspirations and to help them identify the ‘right’ path for them. Many disputed a “one size fits all” approach as detrimental to the personal development and growth of students who had low career aspirations and low self-esteem.

"Because we've got smaller classes they're interpersonal skills are really developing. We've had some students who come in first year that wouldn't make eye contact with you. They couldn't speak in public. And I have a small class, you can't hide in the background, you have to interact. So if you're sitting amongst 300, you can get away with putting your head to the ground" [FE Lecturer, 20]

“It's about upskilling them to prepare them that they potentially can move on to level five or degree to top up whatever it's going to be next, which before they wouldn't have known they even were able to do, and making them believe that they can.” [FE lecturer, #3]

Time

Time appeared to be a very important factor in influencing students’ next steps. Both in terms of the time taken to complete their chosen courses of study and the time and space they require in order to make informed decisions and ensure they are ready for the next chosen steps.

Interviews with some school-based Level 3 students indicated that the Level 4 and 5 qualification route was seen as a much longer pathway to employment, highlighting a lack of awareness of the vocational qualification landscape. Equally, some college level curriculum leads indicated that parents were equally lacking in awareness of college progression routes.

“You would hear parents saying, ‘Well, that's gonna take you longer if you do two years of foundation degree, you've still got to do another three’ when you go, when actually it's exactly the same length of time. And there's a lot of misconceptions there and think you look at our students, when you talk to them and ask them for feedback off the ones who've progressed, you find students loved it, because they've got their work experience when they're there.” [FE lecturer, #7]

While this was very rarely raised during fieldwork interviews, some participants either from a teaching or student perspective preferred to explore the direct employment route. Some Level 3 college learners had the perception that taking further time to study would interfere

with their ability to earn money right away. This raises the question of whether students believe that Level 3 qualifications are sufficient qualifications to secure employment.

“If you done the level three, I think it's sort of enough. Yeah, well you've three years in our course. And then I think the next course is four years or something. That's seven years of not making money. [CAFRE prospective learner, female, #2]

“Personally, I'm not gonna apply [for Level 4 and 5]. It's like two years as well. So two years of this, and then another two years of that, just a lot of time. And then, then I'm assuming after that, you have to go to university. So you do another two years.” [FE Prospective Learner, male, #26]

For prospective students, the perceptions of progression from Level 4 and 5 varied according to what the student knew about vocational study in general. For those with little to no knowledge of Level 4 and Level 5 qualifications, the general perception was that they would not be enough as a stand-alone qualification to get students into employment. For that reason, it was widely believed that further study through a Level 6 qualification would be a necessity to guarantee future employment, while others viewed the Level 4 and 5 route as a good stepping stone to Level 6 higher education study.

“Not every child is going to want to go to university but some do still want to further their education. So it's kind of a stopgap.” [FE Curriculum lead, #17]

“If you do really well in that first year anyway, some will naturally progress straight into level four so it is a good stepping stone. If they do really well in that [Level 5], they can go into the full degree course.” (FE prospective learner, male, #13)

The concept of student agency and choice related differently across the student fieldwork cohort. In some instances, students chose the Level 4 and Level 5 route as an alternative route to get to university. Whereas other teaching staff based in colleges reiterated that choosing this route facilitates the pursuit of a subject the student may be interested in – which affords more time to decide what to actually do.

College based participants who were currently studying Level 4 and 5 courses shared that this route afforded them more time: more time to mature, to make decisions, and to specialise in their particular area of study.

“I just wanted to study further. I just thought the diploma degree would help me get there better. And just to also give me just a bit more time to actually figure out what I wanted to do as well.” [CAFRE prospective learner, female, #5]

“Yeah, I think the qualification is still more gradual than whenever you go to university, a lot of it is quite independent. Whereas here it’s more gradual. You’re kind of coached into that so that your mental maturity does catch up. So that when you do decide to go to top up, if you do, you're more mentally prepared to do that, you know, than if you were just leaving straight from school, especially after the last two years.” [FE lecturer, #14]

“It's a more gradual approach in that, I think a big thing is that they're not being forced into making a decision into a career at 18, or 17. It gives them another year, or two’s breathing space, as I said earlier, to research that area of study,” [FE lecturer, #17]

Decision making challenges

Related to the latter point, there was some concern expressed regarding students’ readiness to make informed decisions regarding their future career paths and more immediate educational plans.

“I've only just narrowed it down to which subject I want. Now I have to think, what job?!”
[Grammar school pupil, female, #2]

“Really we're still quite young people. We haven't decided what we want to do for the rest of our life. We're only sixteen, seventeen. So I mean, we want to keep your options open.”
[Grammar school pupil, male #7]

Whilst this is a challenge facing students regardless of their chosen course, there were some specific nuances pertinent to apprenticeships, where concern was raised that they might be locked into a company that they didn’t like or that the HLA experience may not satisfy their longer-term career aspirations and interests.

“If you're applying for an apprenticeship or a company, you can't really tell what the company is going to be like, just by their website they advertise it on, so you couldn’t really tell if it's a good environment to work in” [Grammar school pupil, female #2]

“I mean, what would happen if you go into apprenticeship and just don't like it, so don't like the job? And then you have to go through a process of going back to uni and wait another year. So it's very hard to decide.” [Non-selective school pupil, female, #21]

“I'm worried that if I did it, and say I was in the company, and I liked them. But I wanted to change and if there was a job opening and someone had someone who's just got a degree in a really good uni. And I've just come from another business. Who are they going to give the job to?” [Grammar school pupil, female, #3]

Discussions with parents and teachers of school pupils in Level 3 school settings highlighted the importance of pupils being supported to make informed decisions about their future study and career paths, as one parent explained:

“Again, for me, it's just having the identified career path, just trying to identify clearly, what it is he would like to do and have a back-up plan. Yeah, just trying to use what's available out there to help you get there. That's the most important thing. And CHILD A said well I'm just looking around at everything I can to see what I can focus on.” [Parent of non-selective school pupil, #1].

The Level 4 and 5 Application Process

Experiences of the Level 4 and 5 application process varied according to the participant's level of familiarity with the process in general or, rather based on previous experiences of applying for a Level 3 FE/CAFRE course. For instance, curriculum lead participants from FE colleges suggested that FE applications were much quicker and easier than exhaustive UCAS application process.

“Our applications are quite user friendly. You can just do it all online. You find a good majority of students, especially if they've completed level three, and they're looking at level four and level five, some of them have seen the extensive UCAS process before, whenever you're comparing it to our stuff, our application forms... They're not looking for personal statements or anything. So it is a lot more user friendly. And it's so accessible because it's all available for them online” [FE curriculum lead, #3]

By contrast, many teachers in Level 3 school settings found the application process for Level 4 and 5 qualifications to be ‘time-consuming’ and ‘complicated’ due to the extensive level of information out there, and the need for separate applications. This often prompted further correspondence with college lecturers to ensure a proper understanding of eligibility requirements and pre-requisites for course entry. The application process in general was not seen to be as streamlined as the process for UCAS applications.

“Well, it might be different for us as teachers when I help them with their UCAS forms: some of the courses are hard to distinguish what they're actually asking for. And then you're having to email the course, like directors to say what they actually need. Even I find that difficult as an adult.” [Non-selective school teacher, #5]

Teacher participants and those in an advisory position to school-based Level 3 students referred to the lack of a universal, centralised platform (such as UCAS for university entry) as complicating the application process for Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

“UCAS is a one stop shop, they go on to the UCAS portal. The schools take them through their personal statement, and they'll do about four and five drafts. And they're doing that in their structured career classes. Whereas if you want to go to a college, every college has their own application process, it's all different.

The schools might not be taking them through it, because they've just done the UCAS application. So students have to think where to go, what to apply for, and they're left to their own devices in that regard.” [DfE careers advisor, #1]

In one particularly enlightening interview with the principal and head of careers in a non-selective school, the principal claimed that the Level 4 and 5 application process was a “minefield to navigate”. This posed particular difficulties to many of her pupils who already faced significant challenges in terms of lack of parental understanding and support, having English as a second language, and even in terms of lack of available time, as so many of her pupils also had part-time jobs. The following interview dialogue involving a principal and Head of Careers in one school highlights these challenges:

Head of Careers: “It's not very clear, actually, in terms of the application process. It's still very ad hoc. You know, there's not even a clear system if you want to go, like there's a couple of different organizations hosting opportunities, like Workplus, which are centralising everything, but why is there not a UCAS system? In England, yes, you can apply to apprenticeships. Or then you also here have the opportunities advertised through NI direct, you know, but that's about keeping going back in, you know, to find them. And that is where young people maybe balancing three A-levels, maybe four, a part time job...”

Principal: “...maybe no parental support, maybe English as a second language, it's stacked against you, so there needs to be even, if we really want to inform and enable access, then we need to get a level playing field for what's available and how to apply.... And at the minute, if you really want to go that apprenticeship route, you might have to do seven or eight different application forms. Whereas if you just want to go to university, just do your UCAS form, pay your money, and away you go, boom! And whether you're suited or you're not suited, you're liable to get a place!”

Such comments were however not found solely in the non-selective school sector. In the teachers' survey, one male grammar school teacher made the following recommendation (as an open ended response):

“Level 4 and 5 courses are difficult to apply to when compared to UCAS. If there was one application site for NI students it would make it a lot easier to find information on deadlines, locations, qualifications required. Currently students have to search multiple sites e.g., Belfast Met, SERC to find out this information.” [Grammar school teacher, 8]

Once again there was a sense from parents that they and their children were very dependent on the schools to help them to navigate the complicated application process, and that there were limited opportunities to find out more information aside from directly contacting the FEC lecturers:

“I think it’s a lot to do with parents not knowing the general processes. We’re very lucky in her school, that we have teachers who can advise you and if you ask the question, they generally can answer back. But I work with people that have kids in different schools, and they are not taught this information. Maybe, that’s what holds students back. Their parents didn’t have the information or didn’t know what’s available to them.” [Parent of non-selective school pupil, #3]

“I went through Northern Regional College myself. And I actually found it very difficult to work out everything. The amount of information is bombarded at you about courses. You’ve traineeships, apprenticeships and Level Three.” [Parent of non-selective school pupil, #1]

Discussions with those who operate outside of FE settings who are more removed from the normal expectations of the application process found that while there was a large amount of information online, the process of navigating it alone as a student or as a person responsible for advising that young person without assistance would deter a young person from learning more about Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

“I didn’t notice on the website - it doesn’t really say much of what it can offer you but it just goes over the basics of what you’ll be doing. And how the degree will be assessed for you. But apart from that, it doesn’t really give me anything” [Grammar school pupil, male, #8].

Good accessibility of this vocational mode of study is also associated with the adequate breakdown of what appears to some as complex but important information necessary to make an informed decision as to whether or not to pursue Level 4 and 5 qualifications. Similarly, school-based Level 3 students felt that the information available online is very much focused on course content-related aspects.

“I’m really for going to England and they also have multiple courses over there compared to some that are over here. They just seem a lot better, there’s a lot more detail on their websites and I feel they explain it properly. Whereas over here, it’s just kind of like this is your course, so long.” [Non-selective school pupil, male, #13]

Progression from Foundation Degree to Level 6 HEI study

The qualitative data echoes some of the recent policy debate in the HE/FE sectors around the merits of ‘2+2’ versus ‘2+1’ models of provision, with the greatest contention surrounding whether articulating students should be required to spend two years at university/university

college to complete (or “top up”) their Level 6 degree qualification, or whether this should be reduced to one year for some or indeed all articulating students.

Curriculum leads in the FE Colleges, CAFRE and HEIs were asked to discuss their perceptions of the challenges facing Foundation Degree students seeking to articulate to Level 6 studies at university¹⁴ (and it should be added that this topic emerged unprompted in other interviews with lecturers). Different opinions were expressed by the participating curriculum leads (and lecturers) in this study. One FE lecturer was adamant that “they should really only have to do one year, to get their degree”. Another expressed their frustration that local universities seemed to look at the Foundation Degree route as “the softer route” and “a waste of time”, and that the universities didn’t seem to recognise the “standard of teaching we have”.

Others outlined a range of models across different subject areas (sometimes due to professional body requirements) and a lack of standardised approach within and across the FE sector in Northern Ireland. The question is also no longer simply one of ‘2+2’ versus ‘2+1’ models of articulation. One CAFRE curriculum lead, for instance, saw merit in offering a compromise option (in conjunction with Ulster University) of the ‘2+bridging+1’ model, referring to the practice of offering articulating students a bridging element of study, often completed during the summer after the completion of the Foundation Degree and before articulating to HEI level 6 study. The CAFRE curriculum lead acknowledged that this was a “great opportunity” which offered “market advantage” and was popular with students who were “increasingly impatient about many things in life” and conscious of the cost implications of an additional year of HEI study: “so you know, the shorter the timeframe, the better” [CAFRE curriculum lead]. This was a view shared by one of the HEI curriculum leads, who felt that “a student in Northern Ireland is severely disadvantaged compared to their counterparts in England, Wales and Scotland where they don't have to do another two years”.

However, some of the other HE and FE curriculum leads expressed genuine concern on a number of levels: first, in terms of the reduced quality of provision, where providers from England are entering the Northern Ireland ‘market’, offering one-year top up Level 6 qualifications based on very little teaching contact:

“And we have a college from England who came in and said ‘Oh, we can do it in one year, six weekends a year’. That's what we're up against.” [FE curriculum lead, #12]

Another HEI curriculum lead agreed and expressed concern that local students were being attracted to these shorter (and cheaper) articulation courses, resulting in some local Level 6

¹⁴ N.B. the term university is used to cover both university (OU, QUB, UU) and university college (Stranmillis)

courses struggling to attract students. There was a strong sense from the different discussions that market forces were at play, and that students were making choices based on cost and time, rather than considering the quality of the qualification they would receive:

“From personal experience, the early childhood studies programme that leads to [name of HEI] – [name of HEI] are making foundation students repeat their second year. No one wants to repeat a year full-time when other universities offer online options in one year for a BA Hons.” [FE lecturer, 11]

The advantages of the 2+2 model were expounded most clearly the curriculum lead in one of the HEIs who acknowledged the considerable challenges faced by Level 4 and 5 learners in transitioning from the small-class structures of FE Colleges to the much larger class sizes commonly found in universities. This HEI curriculum lead therefore argued strongly against the suggestion that Level 4 and 5 qualifiers could realistically be expected to complete their Level 6 degree qualification in just one year. Instead, he felt strongly that articulating students required additional time and support to facilitate their successful transition, retention and completion of their level 6 qualification:

“...what they [FE Colleges] really want is to say ‘come and do level four, level five, with us, and then go off and do a one year, finish your degree in one year’. That's what they really want... Now, I have real problems with that, real, real problems with it. And it's not anybody's fault, I think it's a false hope you're giving people, you're sending them off to finish a degree qualification, and it might not be in their best interests, that qualification, and it might not be the best student experience they'll get. Because what you get in level four or five: you get taught in classes of 20, or 25, or even 15. It's almost like being at school. They get assessed in a certain way, then all of a sudden, when they get to level six, in that model, on which 60 per cent of the degree is based, when they get to level six, they're in a classroom maybe of 300 people where nobody knows their name, and the assessments are totally different. So it's like being a 400 metre runner and doing okay, and then somebody says “Oh, I want you to go and run 10,000 metres now. I expect you to be even better at it” because that's what we're asking them...” [HEI curriculum lead, #4]

This HEI curriculum lead continued by making the point that two years on a FE-based Level 5 Foundation Degree (including an element of work-based learning and assessment) was not equivalent to two years of university study, so asking such Foundation Degree students to complete their degree in just one year (the 2+1 model) was both unfair and unrealistic, and was tantamount to “forcing people to fail”. He felt that giving less academic Foundation Degree students (who have lower Level 3 grades) time to ‘adapt’ to the particular challenges of the ‘jump’ to ‘intensive’ Level 6 study was therefore essential with a spread of assessment weighting across two years rather than one, and the opportunity to avail of pastoral support as they manage the transition. Contrary to the views expressed by other above, he argued

that Level 4 and 5 learners must therefore be encouraged not to see the gaining of Level 6 qualifications as 'a race' but rather to consider how they can best be supported to achieve success, acknowledging the challenges of progressing from Foundation Degrees to Level 6 study. This HEI curriculum lead concluded that there was a need for the HEIs and FE Colleges to work more effectively together without competition and within an 'ecosystem' to retain as many students as possible in Northern Ireland (through Level 4 and 5 study, for instance), to avoid the export of young people to pursue courses in Great Britain, and to 'make Northern Ireland a better place'.

Theme 4: Communications - Optimal forms of communication and engagement

When learning about Level 4 and 5 qualifications (and as per the survey findings), the qualitative data points to a preference for in-person and face-to-face engagement. This is perhaps a legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic and the lack of in-person contact experienced during this time.

"I suppose with Covid, they'd no other choice but to put it in Google classroom. But now that we get to speak to people, it's bit better." [Grammar school pupil, female, #4]

"It's better face to face but there's not really like anyone to talk to you about it, [Grammar school pupil, female, #10]

"I think that's [school engagement] been an issue, probably during the last number of years with the pandemic where schools haven't been able to engage as much as they probably would have in the past. And everything around careers days, and careers fairs, and all of that's been put on hold. And there's a real struggle within Agri-food, to develop skills and attract people into the industry." [Agri-food employer, #5]

Too often it appears from the data that prospective students must rely on secondary perceptions of what Further Education College is like, what course expectations there are and where vocational based study can really take them. While the focus group interviews did find evidence of school pupils having some access to employer-led talks, other FE College representatives suggested that detailed information and facilitated student access was needed to raise the profile of Level 4 and Level 5 qualifications among prospective learners in every school setting (both grammar and non-selective) There was a strong sense among some FE lecturers that they were not welcomed universally in all local schools to tell the Level 3 pupils about what was on offer in their FE Colleges.

When asked what was influencing pupils' decisions, one FE lecturer made it clear that local grammar schools were not willing to invite them in to speak to their Level 3 pupils, in contrast to the warm welcome they received in another local non-selective school:

"...the lack of relationship we have with schools, feeder schools, now I am lucky enough that I have placement students in most of my feeder schools, but see trying to get into other schools to talk to a group. It's not as if you're taking their students because essentially they'll be leaving the school, potentially, after A-levels, but they still won't open up the doors and say 'Come on in and talk to them'. [Local non-selective school] do a careers day and invite us up there, but the like of [grammar school A], [grammar school B], [grammar school C], it's impossible to get in." [FE lecturer, #9]

This was a point echoed by one of the employers, who noted the lack of interest in engaging with Higher Level Apprenticeships to be found in grammar schools compared to non-selective schools, suggesting that grammar schools still favoured traditional non-vocational university routes to employment.

"I think the grammar schools, I don't know what the problem is, but they don't sell it [higher level apprenticeships] and they don't want to know. They want their students to go to university...they're not interested in us coming in to talk about it." [Construction employer, #4]

Conversely, the principal of one non-selective school welcomed the growth of interest in vocational qualifications and in particular through Higher Level Apprenticeships across all school types, but also expressed concern that, as competition became stronger among applicants, employers wouldn't move to adopt an exclusive bias towards recruiting apprentices from grammar schools alone:

"as that vocational route becomes more popular, I suppose the worry would be that, you know, companies and places go back to the traditional route of selecting from the grammars first, and forgetting then about... secondary schools as well." [Principal of non-selective school, #1]

Many of the participant comments suggest that negative or ambivalent student perceptions of vocational qualifications may not be based on an informed decision against Level 4 and 5 qualifications, but instead on a simple lack of awareness and understanding, not helped by some schools' reluctance to collaborate with the local FE Colleges. One College curriculum lead expressed it in the following terms:

“I think that there needs to be some clarification, but probably more so than that they need some comprehensive type of approach to market and raise the profile, understanding and appreciation of qualifications at Level Four, Level Five. And that's not just with schools, young people and parents, but it's also with employers as well. So that there's a better appreciation and understanding of the level of skills and relevance that Level 5 learners have within their industries.” [CAFRE curriculum lead, #20]

School-college communication and engagement

The qualitative data suggests that school-college engagement was relatively varied. Some FE Colleges and CAFRE commented on the proactive and direct engagement approach that they have taken with post-primary schools, in order to inform students of the different options available to them and to support them in their application process, as the following comment illustrates:

“We have a dedicated skilled recruitment team, who worked very hard with contacting the vast majority of post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. They will engage directly in the delivery of careers talks. They participate in assisting with, for example, mock interview processes, careers days, and also curriculum support as well, to a certain extent across disciplines we will have lecturers and tutors involved in providing some curriculum support to subject specific teachers within the school environment...Yeah, we're very active in that space.” [CAFRE curriculum lead, #3]

However, whilst the above demonstrates a positive example of the colleges engaging with post-primary schools, there were, unfortunately, other examples to the contrary.

“I don't think careers teachers do enough to promote us. A lot of our students come to us nearly by default, by, word of mouth of someone who's done the course. And then they go back to the careers teachers and say well we didn't know that you do these courses. And we have tried to engage with them [schools]. You know, that's a difficult thing. I know a lot of schools are actively not promoting us.” [FE lecturer, #17]

In some cases, there was a strong sense of frustration on the part of the FE sector that information about Level 4 and 5 vocational qualifications was not being communicated as effectively to Level 3 school pupils.

“For years, grammar schools especially didn't really want colleges coming through their door to talk about the options for level three. Because, they were in competition for students. That has improved a little bit but I still think it's a bit of an issue. And schools and colleges will need to work closer then so that information on the level fours and fives may increase.” [DfE careers advisor, #3]

One FE lecturer in particular alarmingly referred to being ‘blocked’ by post-primary schools:

“We've had learners who've done level two, level three, and then our level five course who went on and opened up their own businesses. There's a whole other path there, but we can't get into the schools to tell them. So the schools really do block us. By comparison, primary schools welcome us to come and talk to kids. But for us to come to a secondary, they're not wanting us there.” [FE lecturer, #1]

In addition to hearing from course leaders and lecturers, prospective students also expressed an interest in hearing from current or past college students. The data found that the credibility of the person delivering careers advice was important to those still in school settings. As such, for some students, it was important to hear from those who had already experienced Level 4 and 5 study as further reassurance of their utility:

“Because they've been through it. They know how you're assessed and can tell you a bit more about the process and what it's about. It helps to know someone in the field that's taken on that work so they have experience and they can kind of mentor me on what to do” [FE prospective learner, male, #3]

Employer-student communication and engagement

There were also examples of students who found it beneficial to hear directly from employers.

“It was mainly engineering companies for Career Connections. Representatives from about five local companies came in. And then they would talk about the apprenticeship route for GCSE leavers and possibly leavers in the year above. It opened my eyes a wee bit to the different opportunities because there's a degree apprenticeship that's now been offered for engineering. That'll probably be handier than doing a straight up degree, because you leave with no debt and stuff.” [Grammar school pupil, female, #12]

“We've had careers fairs where we brought companies in. We did one at the end of January where the pupils sort of did a carousel and they had gone around and spoken to different employers, and talking about the skills, qualities that they need, and qualifications to be able to go into that type of industry. It was to help widen their scope so that those pupils would maybe consider a career path that they hadn't thought about before. And against looking at whatever skills that they have at the minute and being able to apply those and think, ‘Oh, actually, I would like to go down this route.’ So I think getting as much contact with employers is just as important to send the message that this qualification can move you further. [Non-selective school teacher, #8]

There was also a perception that by engaging with employer representatives themselves, students would be able to hear first-hand that employers accept such qualifications during their recruitment exercises, for example:

“I do think it’s about having closer links with employers, if students know that there are actually employers out there who are going to take them on, I think that’s definitely a positive. And speaking to the students as well, it’s good for them to get to know those employers, because they’re not always very good at going out and finding out about the local companies themselves.” [Non-selective school teacher, #7]

“I mean, there’s only so much I can do. We used to run a careers convention in schools. One of the students had gone into one of the talks. And as we were coming out, one of the students said to me, that guy in there said the same thing you said, in class, as if to say, he thought I’d been lying about it. Until somebody outside the school said it. Alright, you know, so a real person had said, instead of just a teacher, so there’s that as well, I thought that was a very telling sort of reaction. It’s almost like the real person validated what I had been trying to tell them in class. And they hadn’t believed me until they’d heard it from somebody else who sort of verified it. That even though I’m telling them it, they really don’t see the credibility of it until they hear it from what they perceive to be a real person in the real world.” [Grammar, Head of CEIAG #1]

Whilst there was evidence of good employer-school engagements, there were also some negative perspectives. For example, the interview participant below noted a considerable difference in employer contact between major Belfast-based companies and smaller rural businesses.

“The local employers are really, really poor at highlighting opportunities to careers staff, like me, you have a digital notice board at the click of their fingers. And we get lots of stuff from the likes of PWC, those big companies like that.” [Grammar, Head of CEIAG, #2]

Finally, with regard to employer engagement and communication, there was also a recognised need for employers to talk to one another and to engage better with educational settings. Whilst in some contexts, employer and industry relations are strong, the connections have proven to build an appetite for a more vocational route into study. However, a significant number of participants have expressed a lack of employer input in the wider public advocacy of the Level 4 and 5 route through education.

“I do think it’s a more joint approach we need, you know, you need the employers, and education working together. At the minute it feels like we’re trying to do a bit of a pull in from other companies to gather knowledge. But ultimately, it needs to be a lot more streamlined. And it’s all about working together for the greater good. Employers have a bigger role to play.” [Civil engineering employer, #2]

Parental communications and engagement

Additionally, the data suggests that there should be more targeted information aimed at parents in order to better equip them in supporting their children in their decision making and application making processes.

“When it comes to the colleges. I don't have any information. I don't know how the schools handle it. I'm not aware of my son coming back to me and saying, Dad - I'm not going to uni but, I could do a Level 4. That conversation has never come up. I don't know if it's ever been discussed [in school]”. [Parent of non-selective school pupil, #1]

One parent raised the issue that there are very few communal spaces for both parent and child to explore further options together.

“Even in something like an education fair that other parents can join. And there was like someone from Queen's, UU and someone from the Met. I know that they do that with the kids. But the kids don't know what questions should be asked. They don't actually know what they need to know to get there. So I think that would be helpful.” [Parent of non-selective school pupil, #3]

The colleges themselves also recognised that lack of information provided to and engagement directly with parents.

“I think probably a lot of them [parents] are very dependent on what the schools give to them and give to their kids. Because we feel the parents are maybe not aware of actually all the courses that we offer and the progression rates that we have. We're trying to be inventive in how we get to those markets”. [FE curriculum lead, #4]

Finally, one school teacher (non-selective) highlighted the importance of a joined-up approach, educating parents, raising pupil aspiration, and together seeking to encourage pupils to think beyond easier but lower-paid options such as working in a local shop. In so doing, this teacher recognised the essential requirement for schools, families and communities to work together to raise aspiration and achievement, irrespective of the educational pathway:

“I think even goes before that, you know, even from the moment they come into the school, we need to be doing more to build confidence, build self-esteem, create that drive, and try to raise aspirations from as young as year 8. And we need to pull parents along with us because parents' aspirations are traditionally very, very low, based on the parents that I've worked with, since my time in the school. So it's maybe a case of needing to educate parents as to what pathways, what opportunities are out there, from a really young age, so that it's not a case of just going down to work in Centra, or going up to work in the local Spar, which

traditionally was a very viable career option. And I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that, but at the same time, if we're trying to raise standards and drive aspirations I think it needs to be done from a very, very young age, you know, rather than essentially wait until they're sixth formers and then trying to raise aspirations. You need to be drip feeding that into them, you know, from the start." [Non-selective school teacher, #7]

Chapter 5. Discussion

In this mixed methods research project, we set out to meet the following objectives:

- Objective 1: To explore the perceptions, opinions, thoughts and experiences of identified groups in relation to Level 4 and 5 qualifications in Northern Ireland, including current and prospective learners, parents/carers, school teachers and careers advisors, DfE careers advisors, employers, HEI and FE curriculum leads, and representatives from relevant professional bodies;
- Objective 2: To explore, in particular, the factors which influence prospective students in deciding whether to enrol on Level 4 and 5 qualifications in Northern Ireland;
- Objective 3: To critically consider the challenges and opportunities of developing the appeal, awareness, understanding and uptake of Level 4 and 5 qualifications in Northern Ireland.

The evidence presented demonstrates the complex and dynamic qualifications landscape at Level 4 and 5 in Northern Ireland which defies straightforward analysis or generalised conclusions. As with any piece of research which involves multiple target groups and numerous research instruments, the findings have highlighted a wide range of perceptions, opinions, thoughts and experiences of Level 4 and 5 qualifications, across and even within target groups. We have sought where possible to disaggregate the quantitative data to illuminate some of the nuanced understandings and viewpoints, for instance, of prospective learners depending on their current place of learning, and also made every effort to avoid over-generalising viewpoints and perspectives, especially when sample sizes are small. Despite the varied (and at times modest), survey sample sizes, coupled with the in-depth qualitative findings, this research can successfully address the key objectives set out above.

Objective 1: Explore the perceptions of Level 4 and 5 qualifications amongst target groups in Northern Ireland

Overall, there were varied perceptions of Level 4 and 5 qualifications expressed across the variety of stakeholders who participated in this research. The key themes emerging from the data which are pertinent to addressing Objective 1 are presented below:

Levels of awareness and understanding of Level 4 and 5 qualifications

Outside the FE/CAFRE sectors and excluding current learners, there is evidence from this study that levels of awareness and understanding of Level 4 and 5 qualifications are patchy

and often very low. These findings emerge from both the quantitative and the qualitative data gathered in the study.

For instance, while more than three-quarters (76.3%) of prospective learners had heard of the Level 4 and 5 qualifications listed in the survey, less than a quarter overall had knowledge of the entry requirements (22.4%) or of which subjects can be studied (24%). Just over a quarter (26.2%) thought it was easy or very easy to understand the range of different courses currently available. While there was some variation by current place of learning, the rates of understanding even among current students at FE College and CAFRE were also very low in each case. Among parents/carers the situation was worse still. Just one in five parents/carers claimed to have knowledge of the entry requirements (20.3%) or of which subjects can be studied (also 20.3%). The teachers who completed the survey instrument were also unclear about many of the Level 4 and 5 qualifications, although the Foundation Degree had relatively high levels of awareness (58.1% rated their level of awareness as 'quite a bit' or 'a lot').

Similarly, the individual and group interviews highlighted low levels of understanding among prospective learners in all sectors who appear often unaware of many of the different Level 4 and 5 qualifications, uncertain of the terminology (particularly around the levels) and confused by the differences between them. This confusion is shared by parents/carers who feel dependent on the advice given to their children at school. Those prospective learners with greatest understanding tended to be those with friends or relatives who had pursued a Level 4 or 5 qualification, or those who were already completing part or all of their studies within the FE environment.

There are many reasons which emerge for this lack of awareness and understanding, including the proliferation of qualifications; confusion around the terminology used; the lack of a centralised application or admissions system (to parallel the UCAS system for HEI admissions); the perceived lack of information provided about Level 4 and 5 qualifications in some (but not all) schools; and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic which has prevented face-to-face work experience placements, open days and employer visits to schools, all of which might have increased awareness and understanding of the complex Level 4 and 5 qualifications landscape.

Perceptions of the attractiveness of Level 4 and 5 qualifications

First, the extremely positive experiences of current Level 4 and 5 learners must be acknowledged and indeed deserves to be celebrated more widely. As highlighted in Figure 59 (above) an overwhelming majority of current learners rated their chosen courses as attractive (90%), useful (94%) and valuable (94%) in their survey responses. Similarly, there

was much positivity expressed in many of the qualitative interviews with current students, FE and CAFRE lecturers and curriculum leads and employers who often spoke extremely highly of the many positive features of Level 4 and 5 qualifications, including: their high level of practical skills development (both in terms of harder competency skills and softer transversal skills) and resulting preparedness of the students for the workplace; the more explicit links with employers (most explicit in the case of HLAs); the lower costs associated with vocational study (both in terms of lower fees and closer proximity to home so reducing costs of travel and accommodation); and the greater accessibility of the courses leading to Level 4 and 5 qualifications. Particularly striking were the positive endorsements of HLAs by the employers interviewed, who spoke of the mutual benefit to the employer and the apprentice of the HLA qualification, whose popularity had grown markedly in recent years and was continuing to grow, across all school sectors. Employers rate Higher Level Apprentices highly and value their flexibility, their willingness to learn, their readiness to 'get their sleeves rolled up', and their loyalty to the business.

There was also a sense that Level 4 and 5 students, who were generally less academic than many of their peers, could be better supported both academically and pastorally in the smaller classes to be found in CAFRE and the FE colleges than in much larger university settings. Indeed, there were instances recounted of students who had articulated to Level 6 university courses, found the experience too challenging, and returned to the more supportive FE environment closer to home. There was also evidence that the vocational route offered some students more time to study and decide on future study and/or employment options, although for other prospective learners, this also appeared to be a negative factor which discouraged them from choosing Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

However, these very positive perceptions of Level 4 and 5 qualifications were not shared by those who were outside the FE/CAFRE contexts, although interesting differences were noted between ratings for attractiveness, usefulness and value. For instance, in their responses to the online survey, although less than a third (30.2%) of prospective learners felt that Level 4 and 5 qualifications were 'quite a bit' or 'very' attractive, more than two in five (42.2%) thought that they were 'quite a bit' or 'very' useful, and over half (56%) saw them as 'quite a bit' or 'very' valuable.

Similarly, among parents/carers, and despite a lack of knowledge and understanding, half (50%) thought they were 'quite a bit' or 'very' useful, and almost two thirds (61.9%) found them valuable, but only two in five (41.7%) felt that they were 'quite a bit' or 'very' attractive.

The views of teachers were more positive in relation to the attractiveness, usefulness and value of Level 4 and 5 qualifications. In total, three quarters (74.5%) thought they were 'quite a bit' or 'very' useful, and almost four out of five (79.1%) felt that they were valuable, however yet again a lower percentage (62.8%) found them to be 'quite a bit' or 'very' attractive.

It is striking that across prospective learners, parents/carers and teachers, ratings of attractiveness were lower than those of perceived value and usefulness. This apparent disconnect between perceived attractiveness on the one hand and usefulness or value on the other hand suggests that there are perhaps other factors which are limiting the 'attractiveness' of Level 4 and 5 qualifications. The qualitative data highlights, for instance, the attractiveness of university education for many prospective learners and their parents/carers, and evidences the enduring traditional notion that Level 4 and 5 qualifications are a 'Plan B' course of study. There were many examples cited across the interviews and focus groups where Level 4 and 5 qualifications were only seriously considered when other plans (usually university-based study) did not materialise as a result of lower than expected Level 3 grades. While this research did not set out to empirically assess and compare different determinants of the lower perceived attractiveness, there would be merit in further exploration of the causes of this, as a necessary first step to addressing it effectively.

Objectives 2 and 3: Factors influencing uptake and the challenges and opportunities emerging

Whilst much of the positivity discussed in the previous section will also play a role in influencing prospective students' decisions regarding enrolment in Level 4 and 5 qualifications, this section will focus primarily on those challenges, and subsequently opportunities facing this sector.

Both the quantitative and qualitative elements of the research study exposed many of the challenges facing the sustainability and expansion of the Level 4 and 5 qualifications landscape in Northern Ireland. Some of the key issues are discussed below:

Lack of knowledge and awareness

The first challenge is addressing the lack of awareness and understanding of Level 4 and 5 qualifications which leads in some cases to the stigmatisation of vocational education itself. While the study has not evidenced consistent differences between school types (e.g. grammar vs. non-selective schools), it is clear that there is no uniform approach to exposing Level 3 learners in school settings to the opportunities available through vocational study at level 4 and 5. In some cases, Level 3 learners spoke highly of the balanced information provided to them by their school-based careers teachers and supplemented by DfE's own careers service, but on other occasions, learners complained of an overdue focus on preparations for the university application process (UCAS) which dominated much of year 13 and the first part of year 14, leaving little time or energy to navigate the range of different application processes for entry to Level 4 and 5 qualifications. While pupils bemoaned the lack of information provided, parents felt powerless to support their children as they too had low levels of knowledge and understanding (and in many cases much lower levels of knowledge and

understanding than their children). The evidence thus confirms that Level 3 learners are very dependent on the information and guidance provided to them: where this is balanced and impartial, informed decisions can be made; where there is an imbalance towards more academic study pathways, Level 3 learners and their parents will inevitably feel that there is little or no alternative to this and are therefore more likely to see vocational education as second best.

At its worst, there was a perception among some participants that certain schools actively discourage or even 'block' FE Colleges from coming in to speak to their pupils, which perpetuates the sense of 'otherness' associated with vocational qualifications. In many cases, teachers and lecturers recounted that this creates a sense of 'stigma' where those who fail or underperform in their academic studies will resort to vocational studies out of necessity as a fall-back, Plan B or second choice option. This is a view held too by some parents, who also lack knowledge and understanding of vocational qualifications and the many employment opportunities associated with them, and for whom studying vocational qualifications is perhaps 'beneath them' or would 'denigrate' their child. The result is the perpetuation of a 'stigma' associated with vocational study at FE Colleges in particular, widely evidenced across the target groups in this study, and based largely, it would appear, on a lack of awareness and understanding of the range of qualifications available, the supportive teaching and learning environment, the opportunities to progress to level 6 study from many (though not all) Level 4 and 5 qualifications, the resulting high levels of employability, and the extremely high satisfaction rates of current learners.

At its best however, careers advice and guidance (provided both by schools themselves and supplemented by the DfE's careers service) is informative, balanced and non-prejudicial, offering Level 3 learners every opportunity to make informed decisions which are best suited to them as individuals. Evidence of such a balanced approach was found in both grammar and non-grammar schools (as reported in the pupil focus groups), highlighting the inconsistency of approach to Level 4 and 5 qualifications across schools in Northern Ireland. The most positive accounts in this study were to be found among Level 3 school pupils who already had some experience of their local FE College during their sixth-form studies. In this context, the pupils felt more positive and better informed about the opportunities on offer to them, if they were to choose to continue their vocational studies to the next level.

The evidence from this study also points to the preference among young people for face-to-face information sessions to be provided by their schools and featuring visiting lecturers from local FE Colleges and/or CAFRE, current Level 4 and 5 students, and employers. In this regard, evidently, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been enormously damaging, preventing this coming together of learners, lecturers and employers, but also, as one Head of Sixth Form explained, negatively impacting the confidence and educational aspirations of the current

year 13 and 14 pupils. While the young people did also speak of the importance of conveying information about Level 4 and 5 qualifications through innovative use of social media, the immediacy of in-person meetings, first-hand accounts and relationship-building cannot be overestimated. Parents also noted that there were few if any opportunities for them to find out more, and expressed their enthusiasm to find out more and to support their children in making significant study choices after Level 3.

Improving the vocational offer

The second challenge which is currently thwarting the further development of Level 4 and 5 qualifications is the perceived restricted range of courses on offer. The main Level 4 and 5 qualifications currently available in Northern Ireland appear limited to a range of professions including construction/ engineering, the agri-food sector, computing/ software, finance/ accounting /business, leadership and management, childcare, health and social care, travel and tourism. While the range of qualifications has grown in recent years, the range of sectors covered has not kept pace. This was an issue raised by both learners and lecturers, with one (female) teacher in a non-selective school arguing (rather controversially) that the range of Level 4 and 5 qualifications focused predominantly on subjects typically preferred by male students. This is undoubtedly a complex area, and it is important to acknowledge the importance of having appropriate career exit points at level 5 for any new qualifications, however further consideration of extending the subject range in a strategic, evidence-based manner would be helpful.

Addressing the challenges of progression

While it is acknowledged that not all Level 4 and 5 learners need or wish to progress to Level 6 study, nonetheless, there remains a challenge in respect of progression from Level 4 and 5 qualifications to higher qualifications, with a lack of knowledge and understanding of progression pathways associated with many of the Level 4 and 5 qualifications. Prospective learners quite naturally felt more inclined to choose options where there was a clear progression pathway, but for some of the qualifications, there was confusion as to where such vocational qualifications might lead in terms of future study.

There was however greater clarity in the case of Foundation Degrees, but evidence of considerable contention at policy level around the most appropriate model or approach for progression to Level 6. The current debate around progression from Level 4 and 5 qualifications (especially Foundation Degrees) to Level 6 university degree qualifications was discussed by curriculum leads (and by some FE lecturers), and it is clear that views are widely divergent between and even within the FE and HE sectors. On the one hand, there is an argument generally favoured by the FE Colleges and CAFRE for Foundation Degree students to complete their Level 6 HEI-based degree in one year (or with a short bridging element and

then one year of Level 6 study) rather than the current two-year model (the so-called 2+1 model), reducing the length of time required from four years to three and bringing their length of study into line with those students who go directly from school to university. However, the counter argument, as advocated by some (though not all) HEI curriculum leads contends that some Level 5 Foundation Degree students who move from the more supportive small-class environment of FE to the intensive final year of HEI study may struggle academically and may benefit from the additional year of university-based studies (the 2+2 model), spreading the assessment weighting over the two years and taking advantage of the additional time to adjust to the very different learning HEI environment as well as the greater pressures of Level 6 study and assessment practices. There was evidence of powerful market forces in this policy area, as articulating students were increasingly attracted to shorter and cheaper Level 6 'top up' options, eager to complete their degree qualification as quickly as possible and enter the workplace. This is already putting pressure on existing 2+2 progression routes offered in Northern Ireland, as local HEIs seek to retain student numbers in the face of stiff competition from further afield (in particular, from English universities). Given the complexity and urgency of this issue, there is a need for further research into this particular challenge in a study which would examine aspects such as the quality of provision (in terms of course content and learner experience), academic and pastoral support and readiness for employment, as well as time and cost implications of the different models. Such further research should also listen to the perspectives of employers, curriculum leads and crucially current Level 6 students themselves who have recently completed or who are currently completing a range of 'top up' pathways (e.g. one year and two year).

[Lack of a centralised information and admissions system](#)

The third challenge facing Level 4 and 5 qualifications is the lack of a universally used centralised information and admissions portal which might help simplify the application process for prospective learners. As one school principal put it, the current Level 4 and 5 application process is a "minefield to navigate". If it is true that there is a marked lack of knowledge and understanding of what is on offer and where, then there is a resulting strong rationale for a simpler web-based information and application hub, where interested learners and their families can access up-to-date information about courses, presented professionally and in an appealing manner.

One notable recent improvement is the adoption by all HEIs of "Routes to University" on their individual websites which provide hyperlinks to the range of programmes available at the FE Colleges and CAFRE. This is a useful development in that it provides links to information about the different programmes and qualifications available, but ultimately applicants must still apply directly to each individual Level 4 and 5 provider, thereby unnecessarily increasing the time and effort required for Level 3 learners in making multiple applications.

It is now accepted that university admissions are organised through one centralised process, but this was not always the case. University admissions were first centralised by the established of UCCA in 1961 and then more recently UCAS in 1992, before which students also made individual applications to as many universities as they wished. Adoption of UCAS by FE Colleges and CAFRE or a similar centralised admissions system is arguably long overdue in relation to the portfolio of vocational qualifications, which would greatly simplify the current unnecessarily fragmented system.

Another development which was noted and welcomed by a number of research participants was the centralised application process which is currently offered by some private apprenticeship brokerage services (e.g. *Workplus*). While it is acknowledged that these are private businesses which employers pay to utilise, the feedback from both employers and learners was found to be very positive. Such a model suggests that a similar centralised solution could be designed and developed for the wider sector of vocational qualifications / programmes of study.

Communication and branding

The final challenge facing Level 4 and 5 qualifications, which circles back to the first, is the need to improve the branding and communications strategies related to Level 4 and 5 qualifications amongst all stakeholders. With regard to this particular challenge, the research points to the need to enhance awareness and understanding amongst all stakeholders. Any communication strategy developed should consider addressing issues such as: understanding and branding of the full suite of Level 4 and 5 qualifications; the terminology and language used; awareness and differentiation between courses; awareness of important issues such as the application process, costs, entry requirements etc.; and, importantly, the value of Level 4 and 5 qualifications (in terms of skill development, employability, progression pathways etc.), in order to shift the societal perception away from the 'Plan B' stigma and more towards the aspiration to undertake Level 4 and 5 qualifications as a first choice 'Plan A' goal.

Limitations and the need for further research

As indicated in the methodology chapter above, there are certain limitations to the findings of this study, which must be acknowledged. These relate primarily to the sample sizes (for the survey-based data specifically), which vary between target groups. Consequently, while interesting findings have emerged from this study, caution is urged in terms of the generalisability of the results, especially when some of the disaggregated groupings were very small (e.g. the number of grammar school pupils who responded to the prospective learners' survey).

Chapter 6: Conclusion and recommendations

This has been a timely and illuminating study, highlighting significant challenges to the growth and development of Level 4 and 5 qualifications in Northern Ireland, which have been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic since March 2020. The study has found many strengths and advantages to Level 4 and 5 qualifications (e.g. in terms of practical value, employability, subject competency and transversal skills development, lower costs, greater accessibility and proximity, and very high levels of learner satisfaction) but also significant challenges in terms of the lack of awareness, knowledge and understanding of the qualifications on offer among prospective learners, parents and teachers, the limited range of subjects available, progression routes and the complexity of the application process.

It is apparent from the research that Higher Level Apprenticeship (HLA) programmes of study have a more significant profile and are recognised and understood more clearly than most specific Level 4 and 5 qualifications. This is perhaps due the establishment of this 'meta-brand' of HLA, which avoids the confusion found elsewhere across the Level 4 and 5 qualification landscape.

The time is now ripe for review and there is evidence of a desire among prospective learners and their parents to find out more about these often undervalued vocational qualifications which could offer so much to many more learners than are currently aware of them. In this study, levels of understanding were often so basic that participants were largely unaware of Level 4 and 5 qualifications in the round, irrespective of the qualification type (Foundation Degree, HND, etc.). Outside of Foundation Degrees and HLAs, questions of branding were often seen to be beyond the scope of enquiry. Indeed, had many of the prospective learners, parents and teachers, in particular, not been provided with a list of Level 4 and 5 qualifications, it is doubtful if they could have named more than one or two examples. However, there is encouragement in the very positive branding, marketing and uptake of HLAs in recent years in Northern Ireland, and evidence of the effectiveness of private centralised 'brokering' agencies which have been able to streamline the applications process for employers and potential apprentices. If this could be replicated on a larger scale and with additional courses on offer across a wider range of disciplines, then there is every possibility that the entire Level 4 and 5 qualification landscape could become better known and understood, could grow in terms of its attractiveness, usefulness and value, and could thereby help to create a more vibrant economy in Northern Ireland. It should be noted however that if a common brand for Level 4 and 5 qualifications is to be adopted, it must accommodate the full range of disciplines and qualifications on offer. For example, the recent introduction of the nomenclature of Higher Technical Qualifications in England would appear to fit some qualifications (e.g., computing) better than others (e.g., early childhood studies).

Finally, as the DfE's 2021 10x economic vision¹⁵ asserts, there is an urgent need for greater collaboration between government departments but also between competing education sectors for "at the heart of it all will be our schools, Further Education Colleges and Universities working in unison to ensure that all of our young people have the opportunity to reach their potential" (§6.15).

In conclusion, while this research has shed light on a vast array of issues, challenges and opportunities, the following recommendations have been distilled and presented below for consideration:

- more effective communication and improved branding targeted at all stakeholders (e.g. prospective learners, their parents/carers, teachers and employers) which would emphasise the practical value, employability, subject competency and transversal skills development, lower costs, greater accessibility, closer proximity, and very high levels of learner satisfaction associated with Level 4 and 5 qualifications. It is recommended that such enhanced communication should include face-to-face, first-hand accounts from FE and CAFRE lecturers, current learners and knowledgeable employers, supplemented with the innovative use of digital technology and social media;
- more consistent careers information provided to Level 3 learners in *all* settings which should provide clear, comprehensive, impartial and up-to-date information on Level 4 and 5 opportunities;
- an extension of the range of Level 4 and 5 qualifications on offer in Northern Ireland, to better correspond with the wider provision in HEIs, with necessary consideration given to appropriate career exit points at Level 5 for those who do not wish to progress to Level 6;
- the need for greater clarity around possible progression routes from Level 4 and 5 qualifications to further study at Level 6 and beyond, and greater clarity around which qualifications are accepted and/or favoured by HEIs;
- the importance of further consideration of the particular academic and pastoral challenges that may face Foundation Degree students in Northern Ireland who articulate to Level 6 HEI-based study;
- further research in Northern Ireland into the most appropriate pathway for Foundation Degree students articulating to Level 6 HEI-based study, with a view to providing a clear evidence-based response to inform the current debate around 2+1 versus 2+2 models of provision;

¹⁵ Department for the Economy (2021) *A 10X Economy*. Belfast: DfE. Available at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/10x-economy-ni-decade-innovation.pdf>

- the development of a centralised applications and admissions platform (or the universal adoption of the UCAS system) to promote greater understanding and ease of access to the full range of Level 4 and 5 qualifications on offer in Northern Ireland.

Appendices

Table 6. Appendix 1: Cross-tabulation of EMA and further study/work plans

			Q12. What are your plans for after your current course ends?						Total
			Train or study at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)	Train or study at a Regional College (Tech)	Train or study at a University	Enter the workforce	Take time out	Not sure	
Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	Yes	Count	3	8	48	14	7	23	103
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	2.9%	7.8%	46.6%	13.6%	6.8%	22.3%	100.0%
	No	Count	6	15	72	21	11	33	158
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	3.8%	9.5%	45.6%	13.3%	7.0%	20.9%	100.0%
	Unsure	Count	11	8	19	16	2	14	70
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	15.7%	11.4%	27.1%	22.9%	2.9%	20.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	20	31	139	51	20	70	331
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	6.0%	9.4%	42.0%	15.4%	6.0%	21.1%	100.0%

Table 7. Appendix 2: Crosstabulation of EMA entitlement and likelihood to pursue Level 4 or 5 qualification.

Crosstabulation: Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award? * Q34. How likely are you to pursue a Level 4 or 5 qualification at CAFRE/ a Regional College? (E.g. HNC, HND, Foundation Degree)								
			Q34. How likely are you to pursue a Level 4 or 5 qualification at CAFRE/ a Regional College? (E.g. HNC, HND, Foundation Degree)					Total
			Not at all likely	A little	Not sure	Quite a bit	Very likely	
Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	Yes	Count	21	23	35	10	14	103
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	20.4%	22.3%	34.0%	9.7%	13.6%	100.0%
	No	Count	31	37	52	25	13	158
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	19.6%	23.4%	32.9%	15.8%	8.2%	100.0%
	Unsure	Count	6	13	34	13	4	70
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	8.6%	18.6%	48.6%	18.6%	5.7%	100.0%
Total		Count	58	73	121	48	31	331
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	17.5%	22.1%	36.6%	14.5%	9.4%	100.0%

Table 8. Appendix 3: Crosstabulation of EMA entitlements and Level 4 and 5 attractiveness.

Crosstabulation: Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award? * Q24.1. How would you rate the attractiveness of these Level 4 and 5 qualifications?								
			Q24.1. How would you rate the attractiveness of these Level 4 and 5 qualifications?					Total
			Not at all	A little	Not sure / Don't know	Quite a bit	Very	
Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	Yes	Count	8	21	41	24	9	103
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	7.8%	20.4%	39.8%	23.3%	8.7%	100.0%
	No	Count	8	39	65	38	8	158
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	5.1%	24.7%	41.1%	24.1%	5.1%	100.0%
	Unsure	Count	0	20	29	17	4	70
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	0.0%	28.6%	41.4%	24.3%	5.7%	100.0%
Total		Count	16	80	135	79	21	331
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	4.8%	24.2%	40.8%	23.9%	6.3%	100.0%

Table 9. Appendix 4: Crosstabulation of EMA entitlements and Level 4 and 5 usefulness.

Crosstabulation: Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award? * Q24.2. How would you rate the usefulness of these Level 4 and 5 qualifications?								
			Q24.2. How would you rate the usefulness of these Level 4 and 5 qualifications?					Total
			Not at all	A little	Not sure / Don't know	Quite a bit	Very	
Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	Yes	Count	5	13	49	27	9	103
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	4.9%	12.6%	47.6%	26.2%	8.7%	100.0%
	No	Count	5	27	54	50	22	158
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	3.2%	17.1%	34.2%	31.6%	13.9%	100.0%
	Unsure	Count	0	6	32	27	5	70
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	0.0%	8.6%	45.7%	38.6%	7.1%	100.0%
Total		Count	10	46	135	104	36	331
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	3.0%	13.9%	40.8%	31.4%	10.9%	100.0%

Table 10. Appendix 5: Crosstabulation of EMA entitlements and Level 4 and 5 value.

Crosstabulation: Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award? * Q24.3. How valuable do you think these qualifications are?								
			Q24.3. How valuable do you think these qualifications are?					Total
			Not at all	A little	Not sure / Don't know	Quite a bit	Very	
Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	Yes	Count	4	11	35	33	20	103
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	3.9%	10.7%	34.0%	32.0%	19.4%	100.0%
	No	Count	5	21	42	55	35	158
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	3.2%	13.3%	26.6%	34.8%	22.2%	100.0%
	Unsure	Count	0	7	20	30	13	70
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	0.0%	10.0%	28.6%	42.9%	18.6%	100.0%
Total		Count	9	39	97	118	68	331
		% within Q6. Are you entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)/ DAERA Further Education Award?	2.7%	11.8%	29.3%	35.6%	20.5%	100.0%

Table 11. Appendix 6 Crosstabulation of community background and course completion plans for prospective learners.

Crosstabulation: Q4. What is your community background? * Q12. What are your plans for after your current course ends?									
			Q12. What are your plans for after your current course ends?						Total
			Train or study at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)	Train or study at a Regional College (Tech)	Train or study at a University	Enter the workforce	Take time out	Not sure	
Q4. What is your community background?	Protestant	Count	11	12	46	25	6	21	121
		% within Q4. What is your community background?	9.1%	9.9%	38.0%	20.7%	5.0%	17.4%	100.0%
	Catholic	Count	7	13	68	14	12	34	148
		% within Q4. What is your community background?	4.7%	8.8%	45.9%	9.5%	8.1%	23.0%	100.0%
	Prefer not to say	Count	2	4	14	5	2	12	39
		% within Q4. What is your community background?	5.1%	10.3%	35.9%	12.8%	5.1%	30.8%	100.0%
Total		Count	20	29	128	44	20	67	308
		% within Q4. What is your community background?	6.5%	9.4%	41.6%	14.3%	6.5%	21.8%	100.0%

Table 12. Appendix 7 Crosstabulation of community background and Level 4 and 5 attractiveness.

Crosstabulation: Q4. What is your community background? * Q24.1. How would you rate the attractiveness of these Level 4 and 5 qualifications?								
			Q24.1. How would you rate the attractiveness of these Level 4 and 5 qualifications?					Total
			Not at all	A little	Not sure / Don't know	Quite a bit	Very	
Q4. What is your community background?	Protestant	Count	3	41	44	26	7	121
		% within Q4. What is your community background?	2.5%	33.9%	36.4%	21.5%	5.8%	100.0%
	Catholic	Count	6	32	66	32	12	148
		% within Q4. What is your community background?	4.1%	21.6%	44.6%	21.6%	8.1%	100.0%
	Prefer not to say	Count	2	4	19	13	1	39
		% within Q4. What is your community background?	5.1%	10.3%	48.7%	33.3%	2.6%	100.0%
Total		Count	11	77	129	71	20	308
		% within Q4. What is your community background?	3.6%	25.0%	41.9%	23.1%	6.5%	100.0%

Table 13. Appendix 8 Crosstabulation of community background and Level 4 and 5 usefulness.

Crosstabulation: Q4. What is your community background? * Q24.2. How would you rate the usefulness of these Level 4 and 5 qualifications?								
			Q24.2. How would you rate the usefulness of these Level 4 and 5 qualifications?					Total
			Not at all	A little	Not sure / Don't know	Quite a bit	Very	
Q4. What is your community background?	Protestant	Count	3	21	47	40	10	121
		% within Q4. What is your community background?	2.5%	17.4%	38.8%	33.1%	8.3%	100.0%
	Catholic	Count	5	16	67	40	20	148
		% within Q4. What is your community background?	3.4%	10.8%	45.3%	27.0%	13.5%	100.0%
	Prefer not to say	Count	1	5	16	12	5	39
		% within Q4. What is your community background?	2.6%	12.8%	41.0%	30.8%	12.8%	100.0%
Total		Count	9	42	130	92	35	308
		% within Q4. What is your community background?	2.9%	13.6%	42.2%	29.9%	11.4%	100.0%

Table 14. Appendix 9 Crosstabulation of community background and Level 4 and 5 value.

Crosstabulation: Q4. What is your community background? * Q24.3. How valuable do you think these qualifications are?								
			Q24.3. How valuable do you think these qualifications are?					Total
			Not at all	A little	Not sure / Don't know	Quite a bit	Very	
Q4. What is your community background?	Protestant	Count	2	22	28	44	25	121
		% within Q4. What is your community background?	1.7%	18.2%	23.1%	36.4%	20.7%	100.0%
	Catholic	Count	5	14	52	44	33	148
		% within Q4. What is your community background?	3.4%	9.5%	35.1%	29.7%	22.3%	100.0%
	Prefer not to say	Count	2	1	12	17	7	39
		% within Q4. What is your community background?	5.1%	2.6%	30.8%	43.6%	17.9%	100.0%
Total		Count	9	37	92	105	65	308
		% within Q4. What is your community background?	2.9%	12.0%	29.9%	34.1%	21.1%	100.0%

Table 15. Appendix 10: Crosstabulation of prospective learner age and Level 4 and 5 attractiveness.

Crosstabulation: Age Recoded * Q24.1. How would you rate the attractiveness of these Level 4 and 5 qualifications?								
		Q24.1. How would you rate the attractiveness of these Level 4 and 5 qualifications?					Total	
		Not at all	A little	Not sure / Don't know	Quite a bit	Very		
Age Recoded	17 or younger	Count	6	33	63	30	7	139
		% within Age Recoded	4.3%	23.7%	45.3%	21.6%	5.0%	100.0%
	18-20	Count	8	37	47	27	4	123
		% within Age Recoded	6.5%	30.1%	38.2%	22.0%	3.3%	100.0%
	21 or older	Count	2	10	25	22	10	69
		% within Age Recoded	2.9%	14.5%	36.2%	31.9%	14.5%	100.0%
Total		Count	16	80	135	79	21	331
		% within Age Recoded	4.8%	24.2%	40.8%	23.9%	6.3%	100.0%

Table 16. Appendix 11: Crosstabulation of prospective learner age and Level 4 and 5 usefulness.

Crosstabulation: Age Recoded * Q24.2. How would you rate the usefulness of these Level 4 and 5 qualifications?								
			Q24.2. How would you rate the usefulness of these Level 4 and 5 qualifications?					Total
			Not at all	A little	Not sure / Don't know	Quite a bit	Very	
Age Recoded	17 or younger	Count	2	17	64	42	14	139
		% within Age Recoded	1.4%	12.2%	46.0%	30.2%	10.1%	100.0%
	18-20	Count	7	23	52	33	8	123
		% within Age Recoded	5.7%	18.7%	42.3%	26.8%	6.5%	100.0%
	21 or older	Count	1	6	19	29	14	69
		% within Age Recoded	1.4%	8.7%	27.5%	42.0%	20.3%	100.0%
Total		Count	10	46	135	104	36	331
		% within Age Recoded	3.0%	13.9%	40.8%	31.4%	10.9%	100.0%

Table 17. Appendix 12: Crosstabulation of prospective learner age and Level 4 and 5 value.

Crosstabulation: Age Recoded * Q24.3. How valuable do you think these qualifications are?								
			Q24.3. How valuable do you think these qualifications are?					Total
			Not at all	A little	Not sure / Don't know	Quite a bit	Very	
Age Recoded	17 or younger	Count	2	17	47	41	32	139
		% within Age Recoded	1.4%	12.2%	33.8%	29.5%	23.0%	100.0%
	18-20	Count	6	18	34	50	15	123
		% within Age Recoded	4.9%	14.6%	27.6%	40.7%	12.2%	100.0%
	21 or older	Count	1	4	16	27	21	69
		% within Age Recoded	1.4%	5.8%	23.2%	39.1%	30.4%	100.0%
Total		Count	9	39	97	118	68	331
		% within Age Recoded	2.7%	11.8%	29.3%	35.6%	20.5%	100.0%

Table 18. Appendix 13: Crosstabulation of current learner age and Level 4 and 5 attractiveness

Crosstabulation: Age Recoded * Q12.1. How would you rate the attractiveness of your chosen course?								
			Q12.1. How would you rate the attractiveness of your chosen course?					Total
			Not at all	A little	Not sure	Somewhat	Very	
Age Recoded	18-20	Count	1	3	2	18	16	40
		% within Age Recoded	2.5%	7.5%	5.0%	45.0%	40.0%	100.0%
	21-29	Count	0	3	2	11	19	35
		% within Age Recoded	0.0%	8.6%	5.7%	31.4%	54.3%	100.0%
	30 and over	Count	1	0	1	23	26	51
		% within Age Recoded	2.0%	0.0%	2.0%	45.1%	51.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	2	6	5	52	61	126
		% within Age Recoded	1.6%	4.8%	4.0%	41.3%	48.4%	100.0%

Table 19. Appendix 14: Crosstabulation of current learner age and Level 4 and 5 usefulness.

Crosstabulation: Age Recoded * Q12.2. How would you rate the usefulness of your chosen course?								
			Q12.2. How would you rate the usefulness of your chosen course?					Total
			Not at all	A little	Not sure	Somewhat	Very	
Age Recoded	18-20	Count	1	3	1	8	27	40
		% within Age Recoded	2.5%	7.5%	2.5%	20.0%	67.5%	100.0%
	21-29	Count	0	2	1	6	26	35
		% within Age Recoded	0.0%	5.7%	2.9%	17.1%	74.3%	100.0%
	30 and over	Count	0	0	0	14	37	51
		% within Age Recoded	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	27.5%	72.5%	100.0%
Total		Count	1	5	2	28	90	126
		% within Age Recoded	0.8%	4.0%	1.6%	22.2%	71.4%	100.0%

Table 20. Appendix 15: Crosstabulation of current learner age and Level 4 and 5 value.

Crosstabulation: Age Recoded * Q12.3. How valuable do you think your chosen course is?							
			Q12.3. How valuable do you think your chosen course is?				Total
			A little	Not sure	Somewhat	Very	
Age Recoded	18-20	Count	4	1	7	28	40
		% within Age Recoded	10.0%	2.5%	17.5%	70.0%	100.0%
	21-29	Count	0	2	9	24	35
		% within Age Recoded	0.0%	5.7%	25.7%	68.6%	100.0%
	30 and over	Count	0	1	12	38	51
		% within Age Recoded	0.0%	2.0%	23.5%	74.5%	100.0%
Total		Count	4	4	28	90	126
		% within Age Recoded	3.2%	3.2%	22.2%	71.4%	100.0%



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