

ARK Research Report



**Attitudes to Language Learning and
Internationalisation.**

Evidence from 2015 Young Life and Times (YLT)

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1. Background to the Study

Introduction

In 2015, the British Council published its *A World of Experience* report. In it, researchers from the London School of Economics (LSE) and from CFE Research ‘explored the impact of different types of international experience – including school exchange programmes, volunteering overseas, independent travel, university study and work placements abroad’ (p. 3). The study highlighted the importance of international experiences for the development of skills and showed that ‘*involvement in international experience helped to shape participants’ career paths*’ (ibid).

International experiences were shown to benefit respondents’ confidence in their flexibility and adaptability as well as belief in personal analytical and critical thinking and problem solving skills. It was found that international experiences fostered proficiency in foreign language skills and helped the respondents to find suitable career paths.

The authors of the Report recommended that it was important to recognise and promote the benefits of international experience. In relation to young people they suggested that they should be afforded opportunities ‘*to learn languages and participate in international programmes within the curriculum*’ from an early age (p. 4). They should also be exposed to positive international experiences, for example via school exchange programmes.

Those with foreign language skills were found to be more likely to take advantage of international experiences, and the authors therefore concluded that young people should be given opportunities to spend time abroad as this helps to improve foreign language skills. The research found evidence that a lower proportion of UK residents take part in international programmes and exchanges than in other countries.

The British Council’s *Broadening Horizons* report which was also published in 2015 compared the attitudes of US and UK student to overseas study. The survey-based study was undertaken among almost 3,000 UK based students and 4,600 US based students. It showed that around one third of UK students were interested in studying abroad with 42 percent of these young people stating that they wanted to do so in a non-English-speaking country. Furthermore, over six in ten UK respondents in that study who did not want to study abroad still wanted to travel to, and/or live in, another country.

With these studies in mind, the British Council contracted and funded ARK to explore attitudes and experiences towards internationalisation and language learning among 16-year olds in Northern Ireland, using ARK’s annual Young Life and Times (YLT) survey. Whilst some young people have opportunities to travel abroad with either their family or with school when they are younger, 16 is an important developmental stage where many young people decide what career path they may follow and chose their respective further education career, including subject choice at this point. So, understanding 16-year olds’ influences and decision-making on a career, and whether or not this is likely to include some time for study and/or work abroad, could

provide insights into meaningful programmes and promotions of international opportunities that appeal to young people.

Research Aims

The aim of this research was to explore the attitudes and aspirations of 16-year olds in Northern Ireland to language learning, study, travel and work abroad. Language acquisition and international experience go hand in hand. A survey of 500 senior business leaders (Think Global and British Council, 2011) identified these two assets as being the most lacking in young people entering the employment market, and with this in mind we also wanted to examine the motivation or barriers to young people pursuing opportunities to travel, work and study abroad.

In regular intervals, YLT had previously asked young people whether they intended to leave Northern Ireland in the future and whether or not they thought they would come back to Northern Ireland to live. When this question was last asked in 2014, 55 percent of respondents said they planned to leave. The three main reasons why 16-year olds said they would leave were to seek a better future in general (41%); to study (35%); and to work (30%). Forty-one percent of the respondents who said they would leave thought they would come back to Northern Ireland to live (ARK 2015). However, YLT had never explored this data further, nor did we know whether young people thought they would need any additional language skills in order to live abroad. Whilst the annual YLT survey contains a time series on national and cultural identity and towards religious and ethnic mixing, we had never explored whether or not there was a connection between national and religious identity, international ambitions and language skills.

2. Methodology

This research was conducted using a mixed-method approach:

- (a) Questions on attitudes towards internationalisation and language skills were included in the 2015 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey; and
- (b) Five focus group discussions with 16 year olds across Northern Ireland

The two parts of the project were designed to complement each other.

2015 Young Life and Times (YLT) Survey

YLT is a postal survey conducted annually by ARK among 16-year olds in Northern Ireland (with optional online and phone completion where respondents prefer this). YLT has collected social attitudes data among young people in Northern Ireland since 2003. The survey sample for the YLT survey is taken from the Child Benefit Register (CBR). ARK receives the names and addresses of eligible YLT respondents directly from HMRC. Child Benefit is a social benefit for people bringing up children in the UK and is paid for each child. Although the UK government recently introduced means testing for Child Benefit, for the purpose of undertaking the YLT survey ARK still has access to the addresses of those families who do not receive the Benefit. Therefore, the CBR provides an almost perfect random sample of 16-year olds for the YLT survey. Permission to access the addresses of recipients of the Child Benefit for the YLT survey was granted to ARK after a statutory instrument and explanatory memorandum was approved by Parliament in Westminster in 2004. Data security and confidentiality are subject to a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and a Service Level Agreement (SLA) between HMRC and ARK. HMRC demands highest standards of data security which form part of a service level agreement signed between ARK and HMRC.

Fieldwork for the 2015 YLT survey was undertaken from October to December 2015. All young people who celebrated their 16th birthday during February and March of 2015 were invited to take part in the survey. In 2015, there were 3,558 eligible respondents. They were sent an information sheet on the study to their home addresses and were given an opportunity to opt out at this stage. Those not opting out, received further information and a paper questionnaire about two weeks later. A link to an online version of the survey was also forwarded, in case young people preferred to complete the survey online. Each respondent was allocated a unique identifier, which prevented duplicate completions. Incentives were given to the first 100 online respondents (£10 shopping voucher each) and a prize draw to the total value of £500 was also offered to everyone who participated in YLT either online or by completing the paper version of the survey. Data input was contracted out to an independent data processing company.

Survey content

Each annual YLT survey includes background variables that relate to the relevant equality measures of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, including information on:

- Respondents' religious, ethnic and community background;
- Their current economic and educational status, including the type and religious composition of the school most recently attended;
- Their gender and their sexual orientation;
- Whether or not respondents have a limiting long-term illness or disability;
- Whether or not respondents have caring responsibilities, and whether or not they live with both of their parents, one parent or none;
- Whether they live in urban or rural areas.

In addition, YLT also collects information on respondents' family financial background, which is a proxy variable for their family's socio-economic status.

In 2015, two questions were included in the YLT survey to investigate attitudes towards internalisation and language learning (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Questions asked in the 2015 YLT survey for this project

1) When you finish school/college in Northern Ireland would you consider?			
	Yes	No	Don't know
Studying outside the UK	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Doing an apprenticeship/internship outside the UK	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Working outside the UK	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2) Thinking of the future, do you think that learning an additional language will be valuable for you? (Please tick ALL that apply)			
Yes, for study			<input type="checkbox"/>
Yes, for work			<input type="checkbox"/>
Yes, for travel/leisure			<input type="checkbox"/>
Yes, for something else (<i>Please write in</i>) _____			
No, I don't think I will need any language other than English			<input type="checkbox"/>

Focus Group Recruitment

Respondents were also asked to indicate on the survey whether or not they would be interested in taking part in a group discussion on internalisation and language learning. Participants were advised that the group discussion would be held in their local area and that they would receive a £20 gift voucher for participating.

When completed surveys were received, we recorded those respondents willing to be involved in the follow-up discussions. Some background demographic information was also included at this stage including their geographical location, school type, gender and ethnic background to help identify a representative sample of focus group participants.

With the run up to Christmas and the prospect of schools exams in early-mid January 2016, we aimed to complete most of the fieldwork before the end of school term in December 2015.

A database of those who had expressed an interest in being involved in the group discussions was compiled and sorted into geographical locations, reflecting a good mix across Northern Ireland. 227 16 year olds registered an interest in participating. It was agreed to hold focus groups in five different locations across Northern Ireland to facilitate ease of access for respondents. Town or city-based neutral venues were chosen with adjacent public transport links and/or within easy walking distance from local schools. Focus groups were held between 4:00-6:00pm to avoid school absence and travel expenses were also covered. Nevertheless, due to various circumstances, such as school trips and exam preparations, and commitments that young people had (e.g. part-time jobs) fewer than one in four of the 16-year olds who had registered for the focus groups were able to attend the scheduled discussions.

The project had received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work (SSPSW) at Queen's University Belfast, where both authors are based.

3. Results

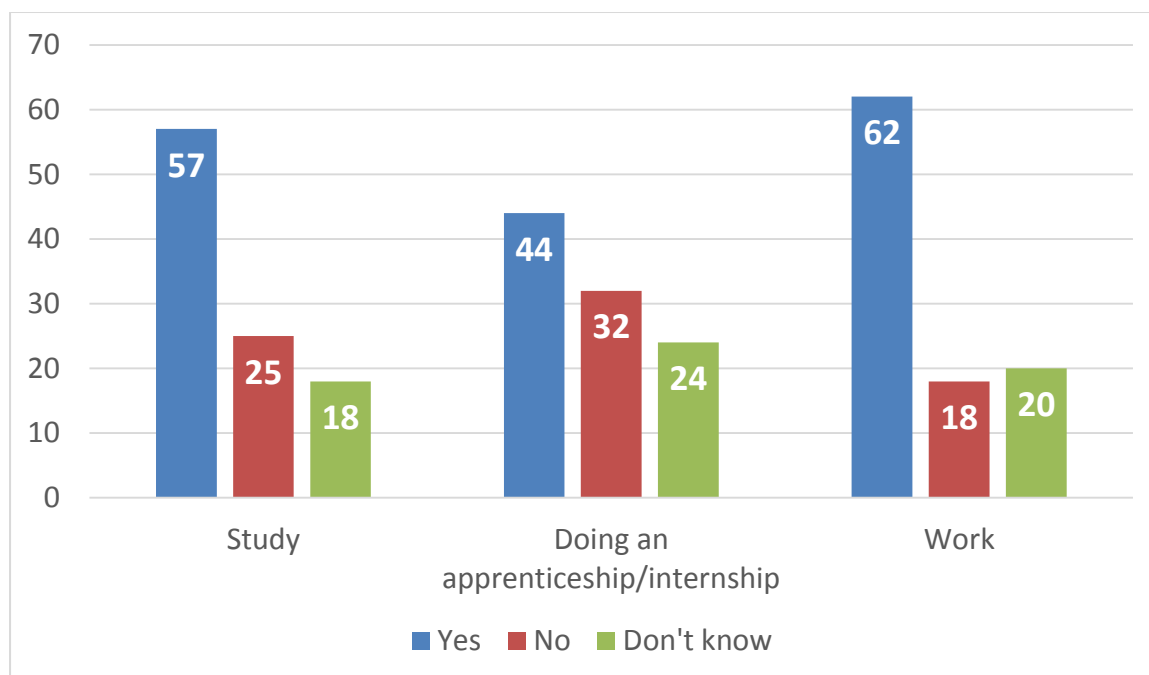
YLT Survey Results

YLT survey data was collected from October to December 2015. 1,156 16-year olds completed the survey which represents a response rate of 31%.

Ambition to go abroad for learning or work

The first question asked focused on 16-year olds' desires to live abroad for work, study or apprenticeship (see Figure 1). This was a multiple response question, so respondents could give one or more reasons why they would consider going abroad. Figure 2 summarises the results to this question. The Figure shows that over 60 percent of respondents said they would consider working abroad. Over half considered studying abroad (57%); still over four in ten said they considered going abroad for an apprenticeship or internship. This suggests that there is strong desire among 16-year olds to go abroad. These findings also relate well to previous YLT survey results which showed that 55% of respondents intended to leave Northern Ireland – the majority of whom said they would do so for work (ARK 2015).

Figure 2: Proportion of 16-year olds considering going abroad for study, learning and work after finishing school



Females were significantly more likely than males to say that they would consider studying ($p=0.000$) or doing an apprenticeship/internship ($p=0.002$) abroad, however, there was no gender difference in relation to working abroad, as Figure 3 illustrates.

Figure 3: Proportion of 16-year olds considering going abroad for study, apprenticeship or work. By gender

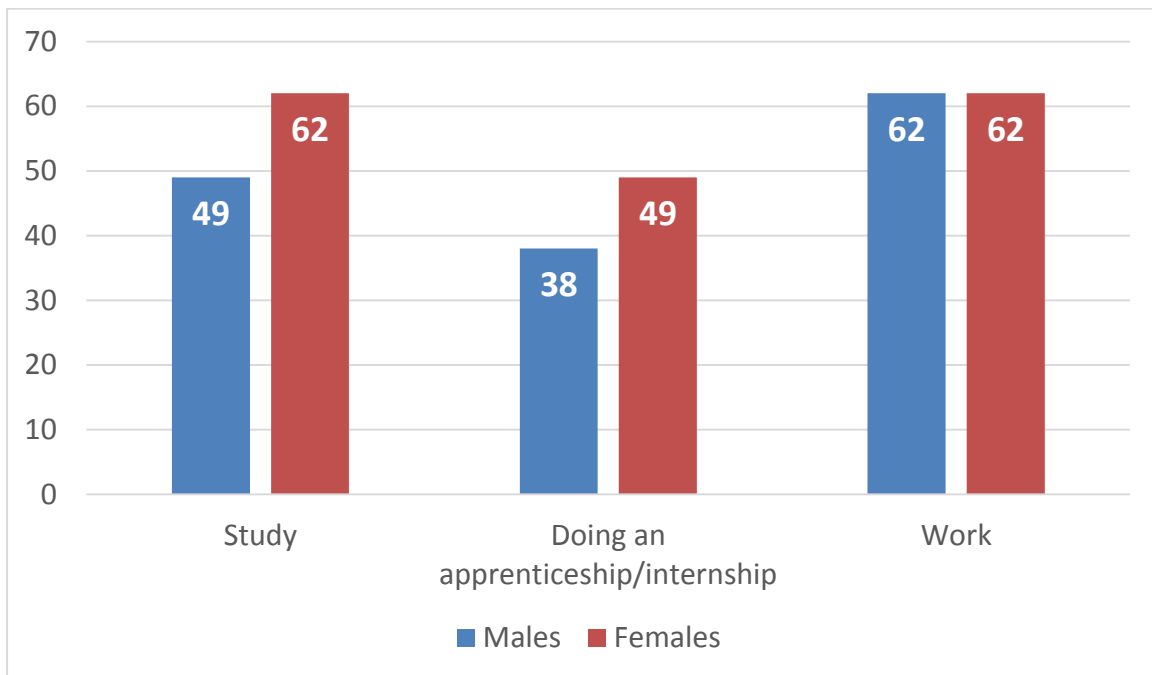
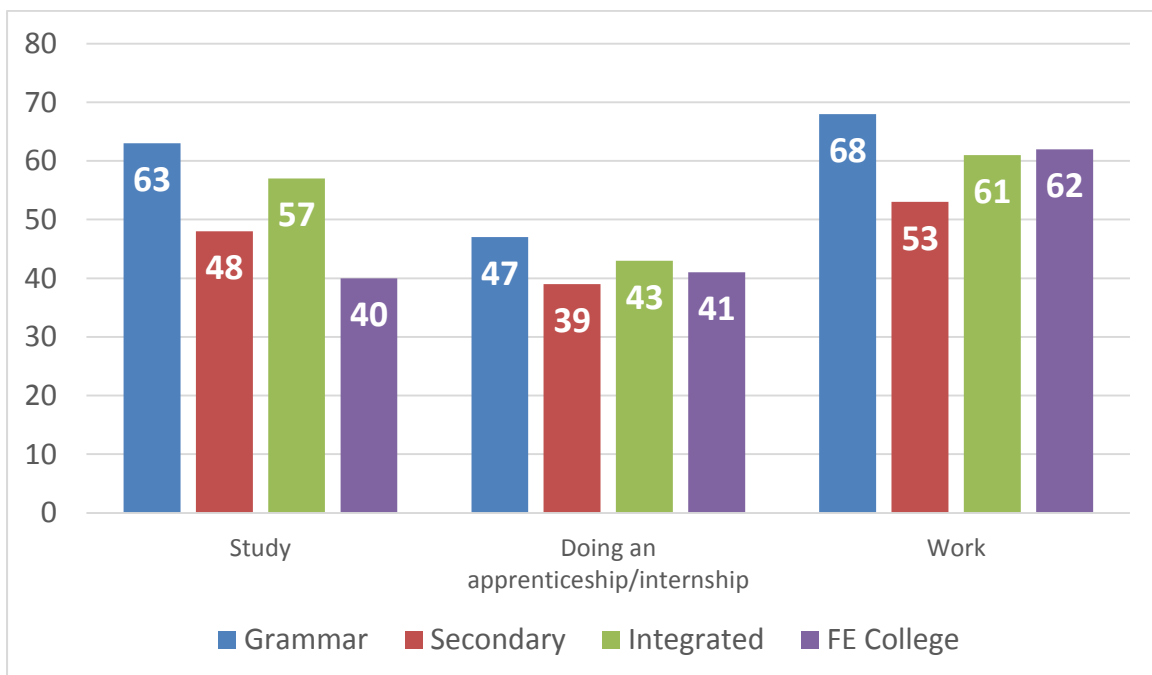


Figure 4 provides a similar breakdown by the type of school respondents attended.

Figure 4: Proportion of 16-year olds considering going abroad for study, apprenticeship or work. By school type attended

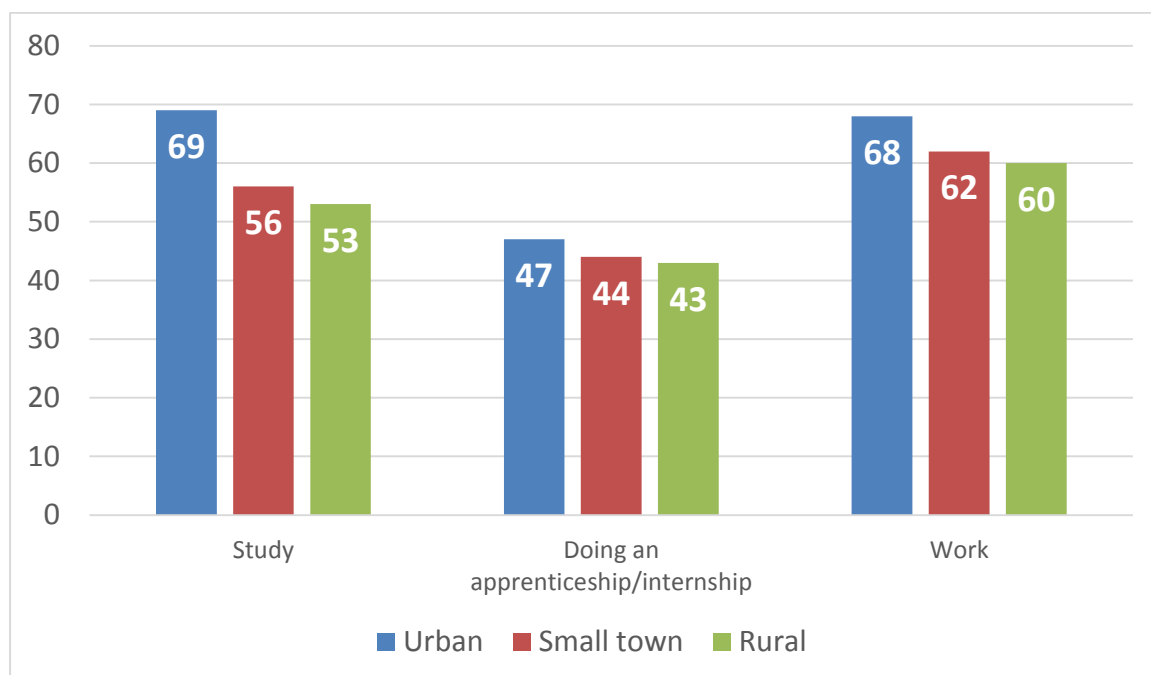


As could be expected, those attending grammar schools and with the ambition to go to university were most likely to say that they would like to go abroad to work or study. This difference was highly significant for all three areas: study ($p=0.000$); work ($p=0.000$) and apprenticeship/internship ($p=0.006$).

Protestant respondents (52%) were slightly less likely to say that they considered studying outside of the UK than their Catholic counterparts and those without religious affiliation (59% respectively), however, this difference did not exist when it came to working outside the UK and doing an apprenticeship or internship outside the UK. Perhaps the small difference in relation to studying outside the UK is based on the higher proportion of Catholic respondents considering a third level education in Ireland rather than Great Britain, but statistically the differences between Catholics and Protestants were insignificant.

We did not find any significant differences by family-financial background. However, respondents who said they lived on a farm or in the countryside ('rural' backgrounds) were less likely to say that they considered leaving the UK for study, apprenticeship, or work than respondents from cities or city suburbs ('urban' backgrounds), as Figure 5 shows. The difference in relation to the intention to study abroad was highly significant ($p=0.002$). Especially respondents who said they lived on farms (rather than in villages) were less likely to have the ambition to leave the UK for study or work. Only half (50%) said they would consider studying outside the UK; four in ten (40%) said they would do an apprenticeship, and 56 percent said they would work outside the UK. One explanation for this might be the responsibility that young people have in helping on parental farms. Still, a majority of these young people would like an opportunity to work outside the UK.

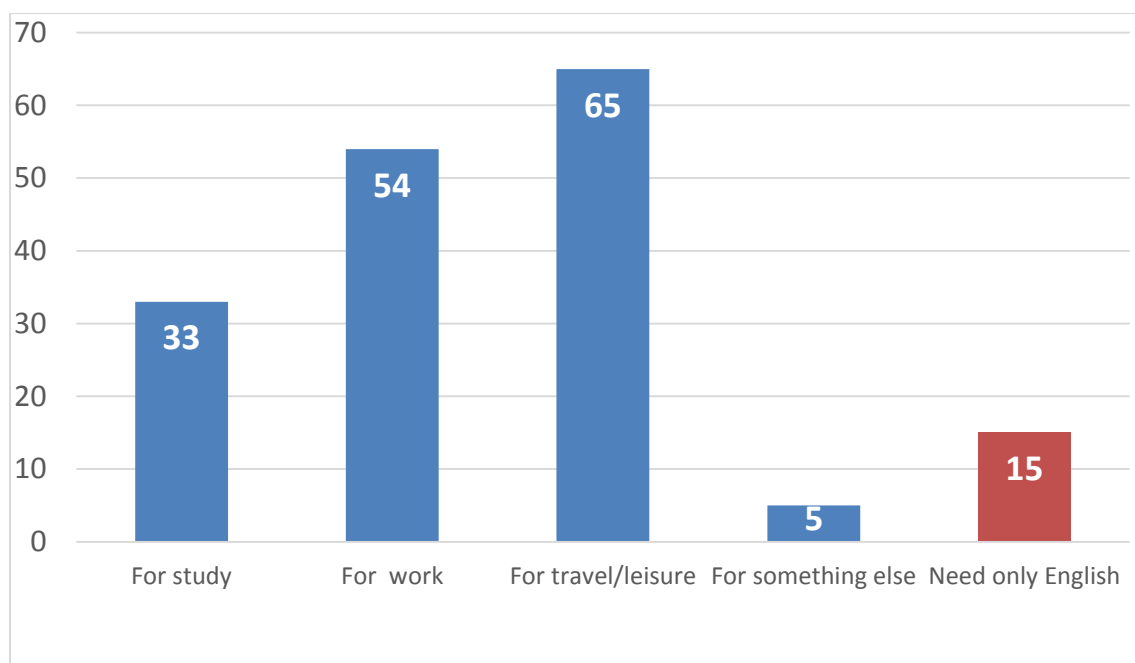
Figure 5: Proportion of 16-year olds considering going abroad for study, apprenticeship or work. By urbanicity/rurality



Future language learning

Respondents were then asked whether they felt that learning an additional language in future would be beneficial for them. Again multiple responses were permitted. Figure 6 shows that leisure and travel was the reason most often mentioned why an additional language would be useful. Almost two thirds of respondents said this. About half (54%) felt this would be useful for working abroad, whilst one third of respondents thought an additional language would be useful for studying.

Figure 6: Proportion of respondents saying learning an additional language is useful for the following purposes



Thirty-five percent of those intending to go to university said they thought learning another language would be useful for studying.

Females were significantly more likely than males to say that an additional language would be useful, as Figure 7 shows, and this gender difference was highly significant for learning an additional language for studying ($p=0.001$) and significant for travel and leisure ($p=0.015$). Males on the other hand were significantly more likely to say than females that they did not need another language apart from English ($p=0.000$).

Table 1 summarises the language learning ambitions by school type attended. The Table shows that the ambitions vary little between 16-year olds in different educational settings. The only statistically significant differences were that grammar school pupils were more likely to say that learning another language for work ($p=0.032$) would be useful, whereas pupils from grammar and integrated schools were more likely to say than those attending secondary schools or FE colleges that learning another language would be useful for travelling and leisure ($p=0.021$).

Figure 7: Proportion of respondents saying learning an additional language is useful for the following purposes. By gender

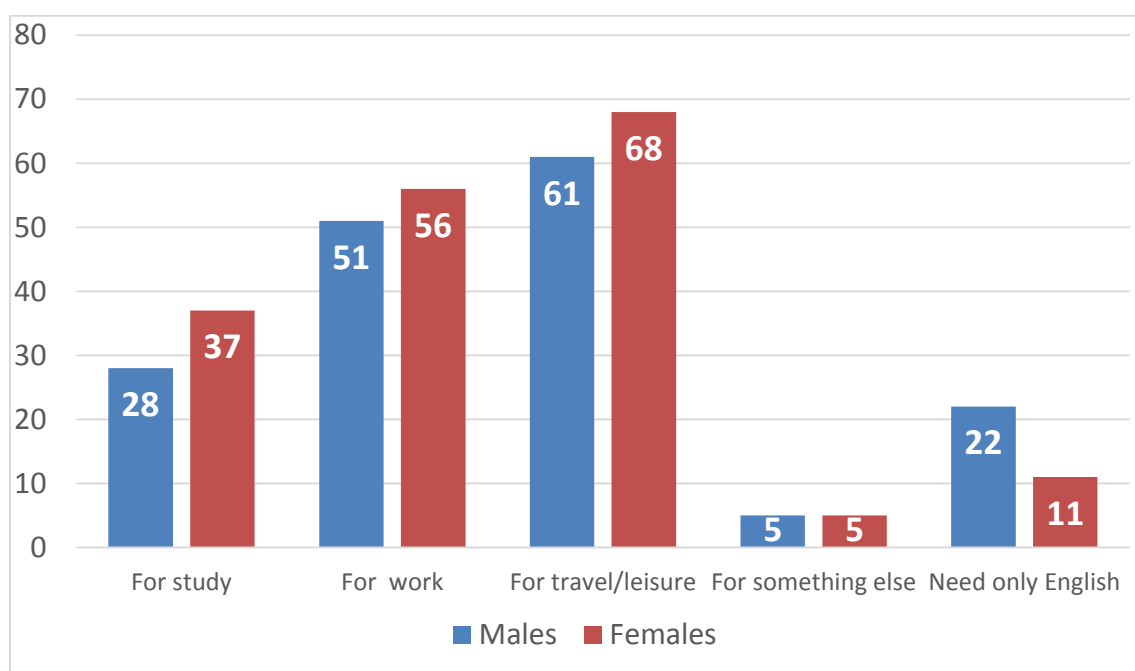


Table 1: Proportion of respondents saying learning an additional language would be useful for study, work and leisure/travelling. By school type attended

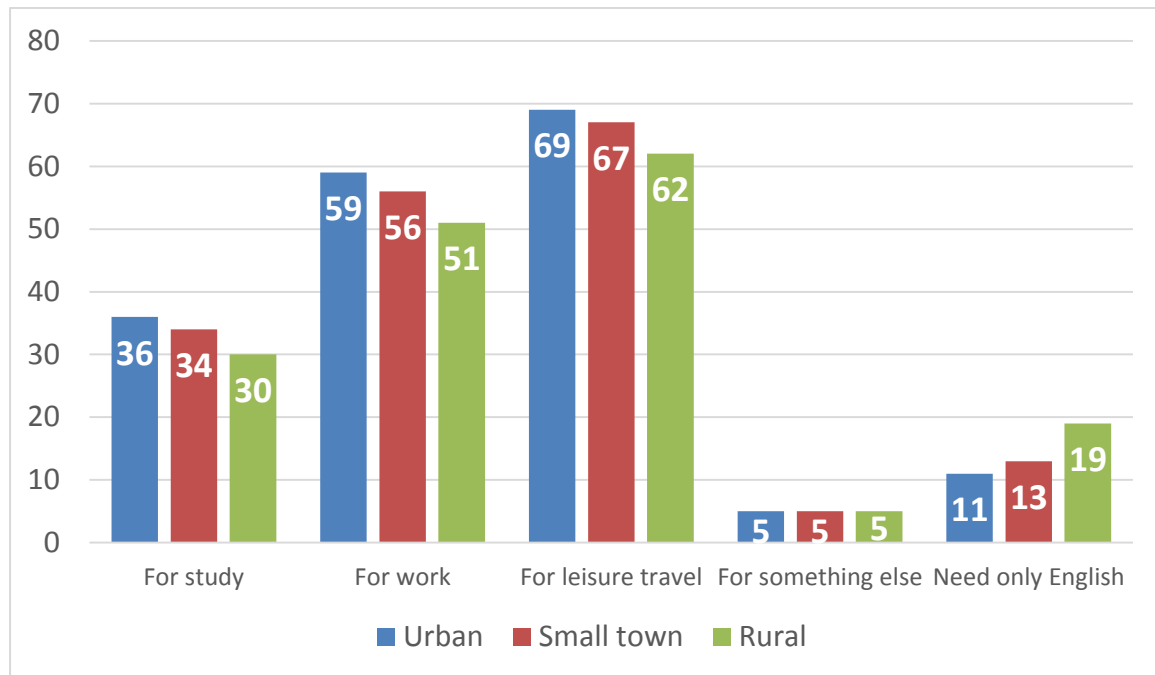
	Grammar	Secondary	Integrated	FE College	All
For study	34	32	31	37	33
For work	59	50	50	56	54
For travel/leisure	68	60	70	63	65
For something else	6	4	5	0	5
Need only English	14	16	12	22	15

Figure 8 shows that 16-year olds from rural areas felt the least need to learn another language. Nineteen percent felt that they needed no other language than English, and, again, the most plausible explanation for this significant difference ($p=0.011$) is that young people involved in farming probably anticipated the need to remain on their farms, and also came from families that had less experience of travel because of farming commitments.

There were very few other background variables that differentiated respondents with regard to their sense of usefulness of additional languages and their desire to work or study abroad. Those from not well-off family financial backgrounds (29%) were slightly less likely to say that learning another language for studying would be useful

than those from average well-off backgrounds (31%) and those from well-off backgrounds (39%). This difference was statistically significant, but only at a very low level of significance ($p=0.4$).

Figure 8: Proportion of respondents saying learning an additional language is useful for the following purposes. By Urbanicity/Rurality.



There was a significant difference – but again quite a weak one ($p=0.26$) between those with a disability and those without in relation to the expressed ambition to study abroad. Those with a disability or long-term illness, especially those who said this disability or long-term illness impacted a lot on their ability to carry out day-to-day activities, were much more likely to say that they would need no other language than English – 44 percent saying this. However statistically this was not a significant difference, perhaps due to the small number of 16-year olds with such a severely limiting long-term illness or disability in the sample. Nevertheless, one can reason that a significantly reduced mobility and capacity to carry out every-day tasks are likely to decrease these young people’s ability to move abroad and therefore the felt need to learn an additional language for such journeys.

We found no differences by religious or ethnic belonging in relation to the ambition to learn another language. However sexual orientation was a significant factor in relation to the intention to move abroad for study or work, but **not** in relation to the expressed need to learn an additional language. Same-sex attracted 16-year olds were much more likely than their opposite-sex attracted counterparts to say that they considered studying, working or doing an apprenticeship outside the UK, as Table 2 shows. These differences were highly/very significant for these three areas (study: $p=0.000$; apprenticeship/internship: $p=0.006$; work: $p=0.000$). This finding is

consistent with previous YLT findings, where same-sex attracted young people time and again expressed a much stronger desire to leave Northern Ireland than their opposite-sex attracted counterparts (Schubotz and O’Hara 2011).

Table 2: Desire to leave NI for work, study or apprenticeship and perceived need to learn additional languages. By sexual orientation

%		
	Opposite-sex attracted	Same sex attracted
Considers going abroad for...		
...study	56	75
...apprenticeship/Internship	44	53
...work	62	73
Thinks that learning another language is useful for...		
... study	34	33
...work	49	45
travel/leisure	34	35
...something else	4	5
Need only English	18	15

Summary

In summary, the YLT survey findings showed fewer differences between young people of different backgrounds than could perhaps have been expected. The ambitions to leave the UK - whether this is for study, further learning, or work – is similar among respondents from different backgrounds. Although most of these 16-year olds were unlikely to have firm plans to go abroad when the survey took place, the YLT data suggest that prohibiting factors were those who have limited mobility, for example responsibility on a family farm, a disability or financial constraints. The strongest desire to leave Northern Ireland to work or study was expressed by same-sex attracted young people.

Focus Group Data

Five focus groups were held between November 2015 and January 2016 in Enniskillen, Belfast, Newry, Newtownards and Craigavon. An additional focus group was organised in Derry/Londonderry city centre, but uptake was very poor with only two out of 21 invitees agreeing to attend; we decided to cancel the event and the focus group in Craigavon was organised after Christmas to replace the Derry/Londonderry event. Where uptake was poor, we made contact with those confirmed to attend and invited them to bring along a 16-year old friend.

Participants

A total of n=41 young people participated in the focus groups, with each group varying in participant numbers: Belfast (n=11); Craigavon (n=6); Enniskillen (n=10); Newry (n=8); and Newtownards (n=6). Girls comprised 78% of participants, n=32.

Table 3: Focus group invitees/attendees

Venue	Number Invited	Number Attendees
Belfast	26	11
Craigavon	25	6
Derry/Londonderry	21	N/A
Enniskillen	25	10
Newry	26	8
Newtownards	26	6

The majority of YLT respondents who participated in the focus groups lived in a country village or small town setting and attended grammar schools; a greater number of young people identifying themselves as from a Catholic community background were represented in the sample. Most described their socio-economic status as average or well off, a small number considered their family to be not well off.

Those attending the focus groups would consider traveling abroad to study, pursue an apprenticeship/internship or to work. A considerable majority also felt that an additional language would benefit them in each domain of study, work and travel.

Focus group design and content

The focus groups were designed to be fun, interactive and age-appropriate whilst gathering relevant and useful data for the project. Ideas for activities were drawn from established resources (Chambers 2002) and were tailored for the internationalisation and language theme.

Each focus group lasted around 90 minutes and refreshments were provided. The British Council spent the final 30-45 minutes filming short interviews with participant groups. As participants were drawn from the YLT sample, which had been completed individually, participants arrived at the focus group venue unaware of who else may be attending. As a result some participants knew each other and others did not. This did not appear to negatively impact the group dynamics.

We began the session outlining the work of the British Council and the project aims and formal consent from participants was sought at this stage. The British Council also requested consent to take photographs and invited participants to be part of a short film at the end of the session. All participants agreed to take part in the focus group but a small number declined video participation due to time limits on the day. In addition, two participants chose not to be photographed.

Each session started with a short ice-breaker, after which participants engaged in a range of participatory small-group activities to explore different angles of their attitudes and experiences towards internationalisation and language learning.

World Map

An interactive session using a large scale map of the world was used to for each young person to highlight the destinations around the world they had travelled to; whether for family holidays, school trips, or indeed to spend time living abroad. Each student was given a handful of stickers to select the relevant countries and some time was spent discussing their expectations and experiences of travel beyond the UK.

Cultural relations in the school curriculum and beyond

This activity was designed to stimulate thinking beyond learning a foreign language at school to how schools may, or not, foster and promote cultural understanding in the classroom and the wider school community. We also used this session to explore how Northern Ireland understands and celebrates cultural relations. This was achieved through a 'walking activity'; a series of statements (see Table 4) were read out and participants were asked to stand in the part of the room which best represented their view of the statement i.e. whether they agreed, disagreed or were unsure. Each group was then asked to explain their decisions and these were then discussed collectively.

Fact or fiction?

Using a series of prompt cards which were shared between each student and then asked to read aloud to the rest of the group, interesting facts or myths about living and working abroad, foreign language acquisition were discussed between members (Table 5). This was used to explore the positive and negative associations towards languages and internationalisation.

Table 4: Cultural relations statements activity

Statement:	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
<i>'Northern Ireland is good at celebrating other cultures.'</i>			
<i>'We learn about different cultures in our school.'</i>			
<i>'I know a lot about other cultures.'</i>			
<i>'We only learn about my own community background in school.'</i>			
<i>'We celebrate international cultural events in school.'</i>			
<i>'We celebrate cultural events from both communities in Northern Ireland e.g. 2016 centenary of the Easter Rising/Battle of the Somme.'</i>			
<i>'I know most things about other cultures from traveling abroad; not what I learn in school.'</i>			

Body outline

Using full size paper, students were asked to draw an outline of a body and populate it with the skills, training and learning that might be required to travel, live or work abroad. Each participant was given a number of post-it notes to capture their ideas, which were then added to the body outline and discussed. This exercise enabled students to start to think about what they might need to travel, and explore the possible barriers that young people might face when considering travel outside the UK.

Table 5: Fact or fiction statements activity: Speaking a foreign language...

Fact	Fiction
<i>Boosts your brain power</i>	<i>You don't need languages because everyone speaks English.</i>
<i>Stalls dementia & Alzheimer's</i>	<i>Studying languages only prepares you for a career in teaching or travel.</i>
<i>You can earn more money</i>	<i>Learning new languages can confuse your understanding of your first language.</i>
<i>Builds self-confidence</i>	<i>Google Translate is just as good.</i>
<i>Develops multi-tasking skills</i>	<i>The number of jobs needing foreign languages is declining.</i>
<i>Makes travel more enjoyable</i>	<i>Languages are only useful if you want to work in another country.</i>
<i>Helps with other academic areas</i>	
<i>Improves your memory</i>	
<i>Improves your employability</i>	

Solution tree

The final exercise used a drawing of a tree with a collection of branches. These branches were used for students to suggest potential solutions to some of the barriers to travel which were highlighted in the previous activity. The young people were asked to think about how schools, the government, organisations like the British Council or indeed themselves could do to offer practical advice and create opportunities to promote internationalisation to young people. These ideas were then added to each branch of the tree.

Main Findings

Extent and nature of travel experiences

As each student was still aged 16 years at the time of the focus group, only one of them had experienced independent travel. Travel abroad was primarily confined to family holidays or school trips. One respondent had spent six months living in Canada whilst a parent was working there and one other had been based in Cyprus for seven years as a result of a military posting (see Table 6).

Table 6: Young people's travel destinations

Continent	Destination
<i>Africa</i>	Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia
<i>Asia</i>	Hong Kong, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore
<i>Australia</i>	Australia
<i>Europe</i>	Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey
<i>North America</i>	Canada, US

Family holidays

The majority of trips outside the UK had been taken as holidays with family and these had been primarily to European destinations.

When on holiday with family, the opportunities to speak or engage with native speakers were limited as often parents took control of situations whether ordering food in a restaurant or asking for directions. Students also felt that resort-centred holidays also reduced the likelihood of engaging in the local culture as most people spoke English. For more unusual or exotic destinations, parents may have relied on a student's rudimentary knowledge of a foreign language to communicate in shops or restaurants where English was not an option (most often in either French or Spanish). One or two students described how their parents' interest in travel dictated the more unusual holiday destinations aside from the more run of the mill package holidays – these seasoned travellers had visited Japan, Russia, Australia, Hong Kong and Finland.

Basic language skills could prove useful on holiday and when these were not put to use, the holiday experience could be lessened. On a trip to Russia, no communication was possible with the locals and on ordering food in a remote Tunisian village, the food choice was regrettable.

Family holidays could also provide the opportunity to return to a parent's country of origin and visit relatives still based there, examples of this included Poland and the Philippines.

For those participants who had extended family members established abroad, the opportunity to communicate in a foreign language was encouraged. One student staying with an aunt and uncle in Brussels was expected to attempt French or Flemish whilst shopping and another participant started to learn German because his brother was working there. Travel to Scandinavia to visit family working there, made a trip to an expensive region more affordable and accessible for one young person. This was also true for another student's trip to Singapore.

School trips

School trips comprised the second largest category of travel, and these were under the guise of either a History curriculum trip, sports tour or an exchange trip to promote language learning. Destinations for those studying languages included France and Spain and these opportunities were provided for students aged 11 up.

Limitations of classroom learning

Very few of the focus group participants were learning a language at A level and we discussed this in more detail. Reasons cited for stopping after GCSE included: poor teaching and language skills and accents of teaching staff; dry or challenging curriculum content, for example original foreign literature texts and the impression that the jump from GCSE to A Level was too great. Another reason was the narrow subject choice at A-level where pupils had to choose just three – in rare cases 4 subjects. Pupils who had left school and were in Colleges of Further and Higher Education reported a lack of focus on language skills in the subjects they were studying. One participant who was studying Childcare reported that her course offered insights into different cultures and foods to prepare students for the increasingly multi-ethnic background of families and their children, yet language teaching was not part of the curriculum.

Experiences of a foreign language in a host country could be in stark contrast to learning in the classroom. One student spoke fondly of her first year trip to stay with a Spanish family and learning to love the language, however she soon felt disengaged when her class teacher put her off the subject.

Respondents felt strongly that foreign language learning was important and they placed a particular priority on oral language skills rather than the written language. Although being able to write is important, being a confident speaker would also improve one's knowledge of grammar. Although native speaking teaching assistants are employed in most of the schools, this facility is only made available to those taking language at AS or A Level. Many of the students felt that by extending this provision to GCSE level would really enhance language learning. Whilst most participants reported that they benefited from the skills of native teaching assistants, some 16-year olds also reported that their teaching assistants did not speak enough in their native language and were more interested in learning English themselves.

Focus group participants felt that selecting a language in the first year of post-primary school was too early, although most had some experience of learning a language at primary school, having to choose an option with little experience of it could prove difficult.

A number of students were studying Irish at A Level and were passionate about using the language and how relevant it was still today.

Aspirations to study, live and work abroad

Some of the focus group volunteers had very clear and specific ideas of where and what they would like to do abroad. Plans to live or work abroad included travel to Korea and Japan to gain practical work experience in the world-leading gaming industry there; experience directly relevant to the FE course currently being taken; and work experience which is not available in the UK. Trying to learn Korean and Japanese using online tutorials was helping to realise this goal. One girl had aspirations to travel to Australia namely for a better quality of life, and one male student had been finding out about ranch work in Colorado. One of the sixth form students was very focused on a career as a commercial pilot and had researched that one of the best and most affordable routes to qualify would be in the Netherlands.

Other students mentioned Canada and Australia as future work destinations, Latin America was also suggested in a couple of focus groups – knowledge of the Spanish and French language helped to make this feel viable option for students.

When discussing the potential to study abroad, a number of students felt that both parents and teachers promoted local universities above others as the cheapest option. Very few school careers departments promoted or provided general information about study outside the UK.

Cultural life and learning in Northern Ireland

Statement: *‘Northern Ireland is good at celebrating other cultures.’*

A large proportion of respondents (50%) across the focus groups disagreed with this statement. Reasons why included ‘we can’t celebrate our own culture!’ and there was some discussion about the recent escalation of hate crimes associated with Belfast and that much of the violence was because there is little cultural understanding. Negative comments about Belfast were reserved to those workshops held outside the city, but clearly it has a reputation of a more racist and hostile environment with young people living in other areas.

Those who felt more positive (40%) used Derry/Londonderry’s City of Culture status as a demonstration of celebrating culture and that Northern Ireland ‘tries its best’. The City of Culture standing sent a message to the wider world that Northern Ireland does celebrate other cultures. Other cultural events referenced other communities living in Northern Ireland, for example Chinese New Year, Diwali and Belfast’s Culture Night and these were seen as positive if only celebrated on an annual basis; the general consensus was that more could be done. Increasingly larger numbers of pupils with more diverse backgrounds beginning school had also helped to promote greater understanding.

Statement: *'We learn about different cultures in our school.'*

Over 60% of focus group participants felt that this was true, however, it may be that the type of school attended influenced how culturally diverse the school experience was. A number of students from across different areas felt that attending a school with predominantly Catholic pupils provided limited opportunities to learn about other cultures, 'I go to a Catholic school and we just learn about Catholics'. Similarly, those who had left school and were now attending Further Education college felt that there was no forum for discussing issues, 'No-one cares in Tech, you just have to get on with your work'. In fact, the students felt that cultural expression in some communities was actively discouraged e.g. football shirts, Armistice Day poppies are limited to one day only and there are no opportunities to learn a foreign language. Conversely, the experience of an integrated education (both at primary and post-primary level), a significant effort was made to celebrate other cultures throughout the school year. One participant who attended an integrated school was very open about her view that one-off cultural celebrations were not very effective. One student attended a specialist language school where all students learn three different languages from first year. Other sources of cultural knowledge were drawn from specific subject areas including the Learning for Life and Work curriculum, Geography, and Religious Education classes in some schools. Other measures promoted in schools were considered token gestures with school dinner menu choices or flags displayed.

Statement: *'I know a lot about other cultures'*

Respondents felt less confident about this domain, with most unsure about their knowledge. They described Northern Ireland as a community with little ethnic diversity, and although this was beginning to change, it may take a generation to improve cultural understanding. Others felt they knew a little about many different cultures, but this knowledge was very limited; they felt they knew 'the basics'. However one student concluded, 'there are so many different cultures in the world, you can't learn about them all.' Those who were more confident generally had more travel experience or had taken an interest to independently find out more by themselves. Reference was also made to religious education in their school being confined to Catholicism only.

Statement: *'We only learn about my own community background in school.'*

Respondents were fairly evenly split between agreeing and disagreeing with this statement. Shared education projects between schools helped foster understanding of both communities in Northern Ireland and students in certain schools had the opportunity to learn about a range of different religions. Some of the other YLT survey results, for example those on shared education and community relations, back this up. Fifty one percent of YLT survey respondents reported that they had taken part in shared education projects.

The focus groups provided some evidence that some grant maintained schools with a predominantly Catholic school population concentrated on teaching Catholicism only; this was found across all the geographical locations in which the focus groups were held. Whilst the YLT survey results show that pupils from schools with all or

nearly all Catholic pupils were not less likely to have taken part in shared education projects than respondents from other schools, those attending predominantly Catholic schools were significantly more likely ($p=0.000$) to say that all their friends had the same religious background as they had themselves, with one in four respondents stating this. As a comparison, only one in ten pupils who attended schools with all or almost all Protestant pupils said this, and the proportion of those attending religiously more mixed schools saying this was again much smaller, namely between two and five percent.

For newcomer students now well established in their school community, there were examples of introducing curriculum subjects (e.g. Polish GCSE) and other tools to integrate cultural elements of their native country. This reflects the growing diversity of the population and second generation of economic migrants becoming more established in Northern Ireland.

Some subject areas at post-16 study did lend themselves to greater exploration of cultural diversity. Some of the young people were studying Religious Studies at A Level, a course which introduced a comprehensive variety of different religions and the beliefs and conventions observed. One student studying a childcare qualification at a Further Education college could give very specific examples of learning about diversity in her course. Learning about working with children covered issues around diversity, inclusion and participation which included consideration of appropriate toys to play with and the dietary requirements of certain ethnic or religious groups.

Statement: *'We celebrate international cultural events in school e.g. Chinese New Year, European Day of Languages'*

Around half of the respondents felt that schools did recognise and mark international cultural events but how significant the activities were was debated. Events marking Chinese New Year or Thanksgiving centred on menu options in the school dining hall rather than exploring the cultural significance of the day. There were in contrast, examples of one or two schools that marked the European Day of Languages using a range of different activities including debates with a partner local school. This perhaps demonstrates a more meaningful and obvious way to link in with the curriculum in terms of celebrating different cultures.

Statement: *'We celebrate cultural events from both communities in Northern Ireland.'*

With 2016 being an important year in relation to two significant centenary celebrations, namely the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme, we wanted to explore whether cultural events in general, and these two anniversaries in particular, played any part in the schools' curricula. Overwhelmingly, students did not feel this statement to be true and only students who had experience of integrated education felt that both community backgrounds were celebrated in school.

Some of the FE students felt that there was a deliberate attempt to avoid recognising these events as they felt that references to religion or sectarianism was not tolerated in college.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was a clear community split regarding the two events. Some schools were planning to mark the event, A Level History classes in some of

the predominantly Catholic schools would be travelling to Dublin for the Easter Rising commemorations and an Irish language teacher in one of the schools had encouraged students to learn more about it. One respondent involved in the Army Cadets was planning to attend a Somme commemoration event. Only those in the integrated schools sector anticipated that they would learn about both events.

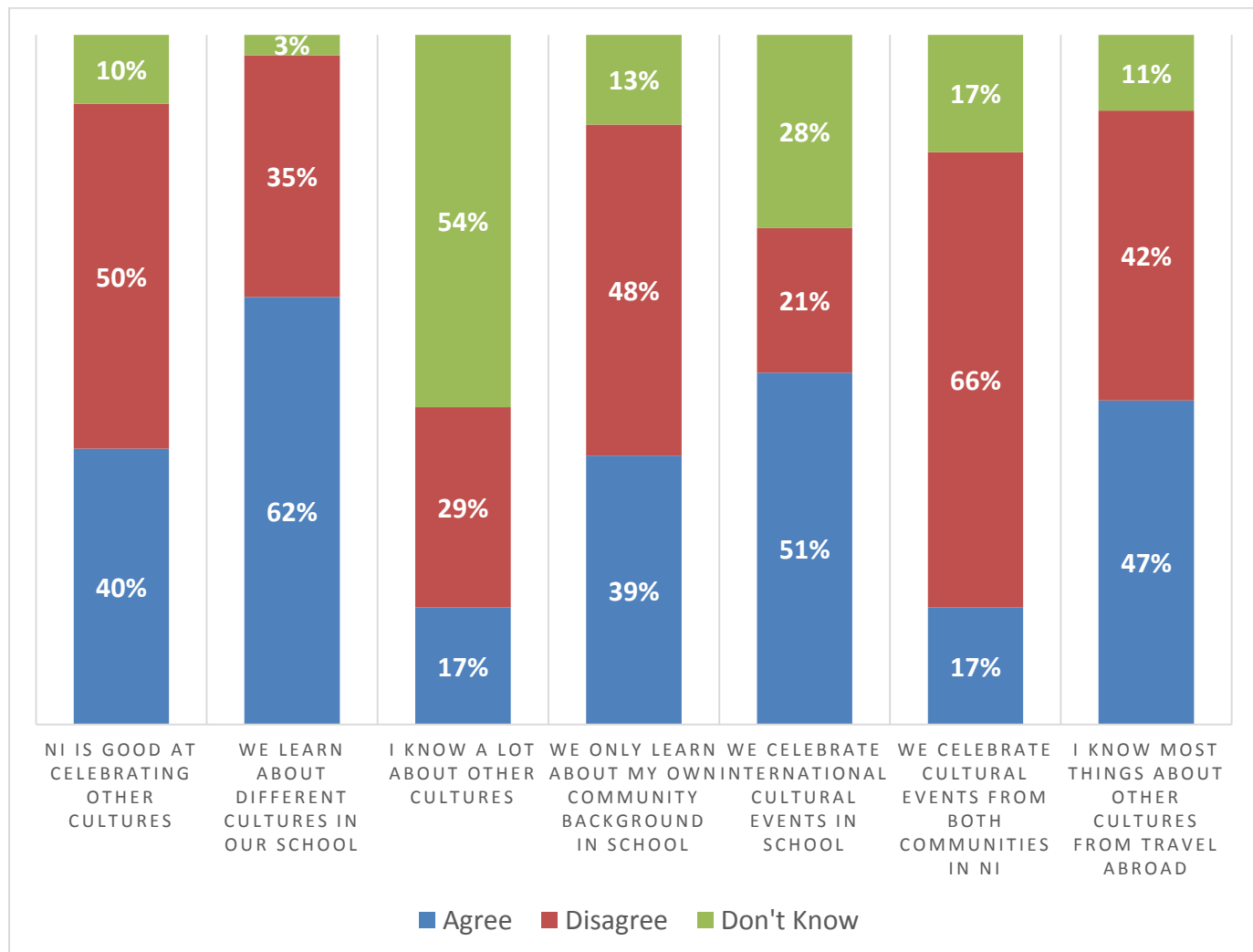
Statement: 'I know most things about other cultures from traveling abroad, not what I learn in school.'

Again, this was equally distributed between those who agreed or disagreed and mostly reflected how much travel the young people had been exposed to or how interested they were in watching the news or engaging online. Parents' views and opinions were also considered to be influential.

For those who disagreed, resort holidays hadn't exposed them to other cultures nor did they feel that school offered any significant learning about cultural diversity.

A visual representation of the extent to which focus group participants agreed or disagreed with the statements is provided in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Responses to the walking statements activity



Fact or fiction

This activity was designed to find out more about the views or misconceptions young people may have about living, working or studying abroad and learning a foreign language. They stimulated much debate and new information was shared about the benefits of a positive attitude towards internationalisation. Statements that were of particular interest to participants included:

- *'Learning a language boosts your brain power and can stall dementia.'*
- *'On average dual language speakers earn more than single language speakers.'*
- *'The range of careers available to linguists are not confined to teaching or the travel industry.'*
- *'You don't need a language to study abroad.'*
- *'Travel looks good on your CV.'*

Body outline – the skills or training required to travel

Using the outline of the body, students were asked to consider the skills or training they may need to travel or work abroad. The responses from each group were quite different and thought provoking, ranging from really practical tools (e.g. first aid and money management skills) to others that perhaps revealed certain anxieties about travel abroad.

Cultural awareness

Knowledge of cultural and social differences were considered vital before travel, and this extended to social conventions and rituals and religious rules. They felt that these were things that could be taught/learnt prior to travel to avoid embarrassing situations.

Knowledge of local food and customs and what and how to eat without causing offence was considered important. Students suggested experimenting with different foods before traveling, getting to learn more about the cuisine and what you might enjoy eating once you get there. There was some contrast between those who described themselves as fussy eaters or had special requirements for example being vegetarian and those who enjoyed trying new food and how this might affect their time abroad.

Language skills

Emphasis was placed on practical language skills prior to travel – focusing on understanding the language better, developing good listening skills to try and pick up what is being said rather than an emphasis on the written language. This was mentioned in the earlier session relating to language teaching at school, there is less importance placed on listening and speaking.

Practical skills

Young people were comprehensive about the practical considerations before thinking of moving abroad and these included learning about the housing and

working conditions, understanding the currency, and discovering options about how to earn a living and the necessary qualifications to work abroad.

This also stretched to being able to survive away from home and away from the supervision and support of parents, examples included avoiding sun burn and eating correctly. Other important skills identified by participants included: time management skills; self-preservation and keeping safe; basic sign language/communicating through gestures and actions; and first aid skills.

Personal attributes

Lots of suggestions of personal characteristics and attributes were considered important. There was a definite sense of the growing independence and personal responsibility required to travel and the transition towards adulthood: being spontaneous and adventurous was considered useful with an emphasis on meeting new people and making new friends.

The actual destination may not be as important as the process of trying something new, exploring and becoming independent. Some did refer to anxieties associated with leaving home and wanted to be confident they would like where they were going and avoid feeling homesick. Connectedness was seen as one way to help with the physical separation from family and participants considered that times were changing and it was easy to stay in contact online, and with mobile phones, and this extended to personal safety which would encourage them to travel.

The young people also talked about having the confidence to travel and try something different and they felt that this is a difficult skill to teach, but schools still have a responsibility to try and develop these life skills. Some participants felt schools did not prioritise developing these personal attributes, concentrating on subject learning and working through a text book.

Changing your viewpoint

As discussed, travel was seen as an opportunity to gain independence and learn to rely and learn more about themselves. This learning could also be extended to their world view and travel was seen as a means to develop a better appreciation and greater understanding of the world. This was mentioned in both terms of cultural understanding but also from an environmental perspective.

Travel was considered to be an opportunity to learn about other people's lives and gain better understanding of common misconceptions about other cultures, examples of this included hijab or headscarves being worn in Middle Eastern countries and one group talked about the importance of observing and respecting these traditions when abroad. Understanding these cultural practices abroad would have an impact on how they viewed similar practices at home.

In contrast, one participant felt that nothing should hold people back from travel, '*Just go! You don't need any training*'.

The focus group gave a sense that young people at age 16 have an increasing sense of independence and start doing things without parents and take decisions for themselves. However, school and family have an important role to play in preparing young people for being alone.

Solutions

The final activity asked the young people to consider what could help change and improve attitudes to internalisation and what practical measures could be taken to facilitate opportunities in this area. These were categorised in areas responsible to schools, government, key stakeholders, and the young people themselves.

In schools/college

A strong message was communicated across the different locations that schools could do much more to promote and improve attitudes towards internalisation and language learning:

- More information about what opportunities are available should be given to schools and careers teachers; careers teachers need more access to information/better training as to what might be available in other countries for working or studying abroad.
- Schools are focused on the academic route for subjects, there isn't a promotion of alternative options. Teaching and careers are subject-based.
- Linked to this point – some students dropped a language at A Level because they didn't find it practical, but more focused on essay writing. Perhaps more conversational classes should be offered to all students to maintain and build on GCSE learning. Many have to drop languages at A Level because their grades weren't high enough.
- Schools are pushing STEM subjects, not languages.
- Choices may be sufficient at some schools at A-level but some high schools only offer 2 languages. Students wanted more subject choices, this could be facilitated through shared education projects.
- Schools are not geared towards study or work beyond Northern Ireland or GB/Ireland. They focus on the academic route, but there isn't a broader focus on other options.
- Teachers need to improve their language/conversational skills, particularly pronunciation.
- More language assistants required in schools, and made available to those studying a language at GCSE.
- School trips seem to be targeted at the younger age groups – they should be targeted at older, Key Stage 4 and A Level pupils when their language skills are advanced and they would get much more benefit being exposed to the opportunity to speak and learn in another country. Students understood that timetabled classes are important during the sixth form but practical language application abroad would be of great value.
- Information in FE College was also considered limited – language learning isn't promoted even though night classes might be held in colleges.
- FE College can lack a sense of community e.g. no registration classes or assembly which can provide cohesion in post-primary schools, this may also have a negative impact on promoting cultural learning.
- Students wanted to gain more about practical skills as they gain independence – life skills, working abroad, managing money including paying rent or a mortgage, budgeting. This could be achieved through extending

Young Enterprise-style activities that were rated positively or reviewing the Learning for Life and Work Curriculum which some students found boring.

- For those who have had careers using languages, students felt it would be worthwhile to invite them to come to school to share their experiences
- Opportunities through schemes like the President's Award and the Duke of Edinburgh Award are not open to everyone and the opportunity to travel with these schemes are very limited. Extending these schemes should be considered. More language exchange programmes are needed – students suggested schemes could incorporate time spent in foreign schools or workplaces and in rural settings rather than large cities.
- Language and culture should be incorporated into subjects.
- Some schools have a more diverse population and it would seem they do more to incorporate other cultures as a result of this – a number of the students travelled to other local schools for a particular subject area/qualification and this exposed them to the different social and cultural mixes in other schools.
- Financial support for schools is needed to help them deliver these elements.

British Council

Students also came up with some specific ideas for the British Council to consider:

- Young person friendly website should be developed.
- Travel blogs of young people or British Council funded travel sharing their experiences could be a good source of information and inspiration for young people.
- Develop exchange programmes to let young people see work environments, work experience, see the rural side – not so much the tourist attractions and this could include attending an exchange school in the countryside.
- STEM subjects have a roadshow bus visiting schools across Northern Ireland, the British Council could do something similar.
- Develop a programme of people using languages in their careers to talk to students and teachers.
- Scholarships – ICT placements in US/Asia.
- Financial incentives.

Independent options

The young people also felt they were personally responsible to develop their skills and provide their own opportunities:

- Learn languages outside of school – if you give up a language after GCSE, keep it up and build on what you have learned so far because it is a shame to lose it.
- College course/evening classes aren't well advertised – they should consider advertising in schools.
- A number of students said that they would make time to learn a language outside school – summer holiday courses, evening classes. Others mentioned apps and online learning that they enjoyed. Again, the emphasis is not necessarily on a qualification but developing a practical skill and apply it.

- Find out about other cultures by accessing information on other countries – from the TV or the internet, schools don't encourage you.

Other suggestions

- More school trips similar to those funded by the Youth Council should be available.
- Accessing more information on different cultures – from school or the local areas in which young people live.
- More projects/cultural events could be held – not just in the main cities, but in smaller towns as well.
- Young people mentioned that financial restrictions or poor transport options limited the opportunity of young people to attend events.
- A lot of Christian organisations have focused activities to promote cultural knowledge – fundraising for other countries, these also provide opportunities to learn more about other cultures and to meet people.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study showed that a majority of 16-year olds from Northern Ireland intend to go abroad in future – whether this is for work, study, to travel or to live. Practical restrictions, for example family commitments, financial constraints, responsibility in the family business or poor health may mean that not all of these young people may be able to fulfil these ambitions, however, both YLT survey and follow-up focus group discussions clearly show that many young people display an outward orientation. In particular the explorative and participatory group discussions showed very clearly that 16-year olds from Northern Ireland have a good understanding that international experiences are skill-enhancers and build confidence. This mirrors the findings of the British Council's 2015 *A World of Experience* report which showed that international experiences do give people better opportunities and greater flexibility in their careers. As these experiences have cumulative effects, the advantages are felt much into late adulthood.

With this in mind, there are a number of recommendations which arise from the findings of the present study:

1. Gender-specific programmes should be developed to address the gender gap in internationalisation ambitions.

Girls should be encouraged to think more about *working* abroad, whilst boys could profit from targeted information about the benefits of *studying* abroad.

2. More work is required in the FE sector – career options abroad could be promoted more and more opportunities could be provided to gain language skills at Colleges of Further and Higher Education.

There was also a sense of lack of community feeling and a much weaker sense of belonging to a class group expressed by FE students. This is most likely related to the more independent learning style and the different course structure in FE colleges compared to school. Efforts to enhance the community feeling could help develop more cultural sensitivity among FE students.

3. Apprenticeships and internships could be explored and promoted more.

Apprenticeships and internships are not considered an option to the same extent as living or working abroad. More information about the nature of these opportunities could benefit in particular those young people who do not study for their A-levels.

4. Better knowledge and practical information should be made available to schools for internationalisation options for young people post-16 and post 18.

Too much careers advice is locally focused and subject based, opportunities to travel abroad should be known to careers teachers. Students in the focus groups strongly expressed the need for more advice and learning to support their life skills including travel, money management and careers.

5. Rural school programmes could be furthered.

The data collected shows that young people from rural areas showed significantly less interest in studying and working abroad. This may be due to the expectation

put on young people from rural areas that they have to help in the families' agricultural business. However, many school exchange programmes are also city-based, but more programmes that link schools in rural areas may appeal to young people in rural communities and may be more meaningful for their own future careers.

6. There is a need to provide more opportunities to acquire conversational language skills in a broader range of foreign languages.

The participants in the focus groups talked about the lack of opportunities to acquire conversational language skills post age 16, especially outside Northern Ireland's main cities. Young people really recognise the value of language learning, especially for use for travel and leisure reasons. The survey data shows that travel and leisure is the main reason why young people said they would travel abroad. Whilst the evidence shows that English has become a *lingua franca* in most tourist destinations, some young people talked about their desire to speak another language and their embarrassment and lack of confidence to use languages, such as Spanish, French or German, even if they had already achieved a reasonable standard through lessons in school. The confidence and ability to engage with locals in their mother tongue potentially provides further benefits to travel and leisure experiences.

7. Further research is needed to explore the impact of the relationship between disability and language/travel aspirations.

There is some evidence that disability, but also caring responsibilities limits the opportunity to travel and live abroad, however this evidence is inconclusive due to the small number of survey respondents who have a disability and/or caring responsibility, and the non-participation of these young people in the focus groups. Targeted explorative research could add to the evidence in this area.

8. There is a need to explore further the link between same-sex attraction and the strong desire to leave Northern Ireland.

This study found that sexual orientation diversity is strongly linked to the desire to leave Northern Ireland. This supports evidence previously collected by YLT that non-heterosexual young people feel they need to leave Northern Ireland for a better future in general. Further research could provide more detailed evidence whether these young people feel that internationalisation benefits their skills and confidence, or whether they feel they have to leave because of the negativity towards them in Northern Ireland.

9. There is a need to further provide opportunities for cross-cultural learning, celebrations and education both inside and outside of schools.

Shared education and integrated education should be fostered further. There is some evidence that Religious Education and History curricula in schools still endorse divisions rather than promote a shared sense of identity and diversity. Many young people expressed the view that they are left to their own devices if they wanted to find out about other cultures. Whilst many schools celebrated international cultural events, the young people who took part in the focus groups felt that these were too often tokenistic, limited to offering different foods that are available to them anyway and had no educating effect. Especially those who lived

outside of Belfast also felt that opportunities to explore different cultures outside of school were often Belfast-centric and therefore too often inaccessible to them.

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