

# **SUCCESS THROUGH SKILLS 2 CONSULTATION RESPONSES**

## **SUMMARY DOCUMENT**

### **Introduction**

The Department for Employment and Learning's revised and updated Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, 'Success through Skills 2', was launched on 1st June 2010 for public consultation.

The Department received responses from a wide range of stakeholders including business representatives, universities, further education colleges, political parties, Sector Skill Councils, unions, employers and the Employment and Learning Assembly Committee. The Department is extremely grateful to organisations and individuals who took the time to respond.

This summary document attempts to bring together the key messages drawn from these responses.

### **Next Steps**

In light of the responses set out in this document, changes will be made to the draft Skills Strategy, 'Success through Skills 2'.

Following approval by the Northern Ireland Executive, the final Strategy will be published, followed by a detailed Implementation Plan. It should be noted that the latter document will not be published until there is clarity surrounding the Department's fiscal resources following the Comprehensive Spending Review.

## **Question 1**

**This Strategy sets out where Northern Ireland is now and where it needs to be if we are to compete globally and build a fairer prosperous society. Do you agree with the analysis and the aspirations?**

Of those that specifically answered this question 91 % replied 'Yes' and 9 % replied 'No'.

### **Overview of comments:**

There was broad support for the analysis and aspirations contained within the Strategy. Belfast Metropolitan College commented "The College applauds the foresight of the Department in exploring the aspirational scenario and would support the analysis, recommendations and priorities highlighted within the themed areas of action". The Employment and Learning Assembly Committee commented "The Committee welcomes the consultation and your commitment to a skills strategy that is reflective of the needs of stakeholders".

However, several respondents noted the demanding nature of the aspirational strategic goals, especially given the current economic environment and the important role of the Implementation Plan in terms of setting out clearly how DEL will make its contribution towards these goals.

Many supported the view that the Strategic Goals would not be achieved by the Department working in isolation and that there was a real need for the Department to work with other Government departments such as the Department of Education and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and other stakeholders. Northern Regional College noted "Promotion of the role of the employer and employer 'ownership' of the strategy is crucial. Further work has to be done to ensure that the links between the strategy, employee development, and the positive impact on business and industry of an appropriately skilled workforce, are made by employers. Employers should be strongly encouraged to

consider the ApprenticeshipNI route as well as identify any up-skilling required for their workforce.”

The Employment and Learning Assembly Committee commented “This agenda must be driven forward by a partnership of your Department and the other Executive Departments which have a locus, not least the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Invest NI and the Department of Education. The colleges, universities, schools and business must also be involved. It is imperative that there is total stakeholder ‘buy in’ to any actions to further the skills agenda and success is always more likely when the stakeholders also feel that they have tangible ownership of any plans. “

Corporate HR, the Department of Finance and Personnel commented “The establishment of targets for 2020 is effective as a means of setting a longer term focus however, given the anticipated changes in economic and employment landscape, particularly in the public sector, there is a need to ensure that the targets and activities to achieve them remain flexible and responsive”. Skills for Health also noted “There is a need to take a flexible approach to implementation. This will enable swifter responses to economic developments and changes to the skills landscape and priorities”.

Although many respondents noted the lack of delivery targets and specific actions in the Strategy this was deliberate as stated in the document. These will be included within the subsequent Implementation Plan and are dependent on resources.

## **Question 2**

**This Strategy builds on the actions from Success through Skills 1, recognising that there needs to be a step change in the skills levels of the workforce in Northern Ireland. Do you agree with the range of actions outlined in this document?**

Of those that specifically answered this question 94 % replied 'Yes' and 6 % replied 'No'.

### **Overview of comments:**

#### Links with Economic Strategy

It was felt that the new Economic Strategy will set out and prioritise key growth sectors and outline opportunities for job creation. Respondents felt it is vital that the Skills Strategy is developed in conjunction with the Economic Strategy and others of regional importance.

There was recognition that more needs to be done to stimulate demand for jobs in Northern Ireland.

While recognising that higher level skills would be required, a number of responses highlighted the need for a spectrum of skills as, although likely to decrease, there would still low and medium skilled jobs within the economy.

#### Use of qualifications to measure skills

A number of respondents noted concerns over the use of qualifications to measure skills. Translink commented "If 'qualifications' has been the only measure of skills then we run the risk that we are under measuring and under recognising current skill levels within the labour market"

### Social Inclusion

The majority of the third sector organisations felt there was not enough emphasis on the 'twin goal' of social inclusion. The feeling was that the balance of the document was more towards improving productivity and the economy.

NIACRO commented "In limiting its focus to FE colleges/universities and promoting only one qualification and credit framework, the Department totally negates the excellent provision that exists across the Voluntary and Community sector that enables many individuals, including our service users, to access education/training in a context which is more suitable to their needs".

### Balance of funding

There were a number of responses relating to the appropriate balance of funding between Government, the employer or the individual. The CBI commented "The CBI believes government funding for training adults and supporting employers should have a greater focus on the skills which will boost employment and productivity – namely intermediate skills, apprenticeships, and STEM – paid for by a managed reduction in spend on basic skills. Indeed there are strong arguments for making the Department of Education responsible for these failings."

People 1<sup>st</sup> commented "It is our view that only those qualifications and training recognised by employers as meeting their needs should attract funding."

Ilex raised the point of European funding "Given the current pressures on public spending it is also important that alternative sources of funding are explored such as the opportunities that might arise under EU 2020".

### Labour Market Information

In relation to LMI, Northern Regional College commented "Key to the success of the strategy is the identification of robust data on skills needs. NRC has had a

very positive experience of the regional data made available by Oxford Economics. This has complimented other data collated through the work of the Northern Workforce Development Forum and enabled NRC to work with the Sector Skills Council representatives and local employers to translate identified needs into tangible courses and provision”

e-skills commented “We would like to see greater use of our sector LMI to inform local delivery, through Workforce Development Forums (WDFs) where appropriate”

### Subject imbalances

Many respondents were supportive of the need to address subject imbalances, particularly in STEM subjects and felt that priority funding mechanisms in Further and Higher Education would be appropriate. The Employment and Learning Assembly Committee commented “it is imperative that STEM subjects are a key element of our skills base to allow us to achieve the necessary step changes in our economy”. That said, a number noted the high unemployment rates among STEM graduates at present. The CBI noted “Greater prioritisation of skills and sectors is required – clear linkages with key growth sectors and inward investment is necessary”

Queen’s University Belfast commented “The recognition that STEM skills will be a growing emphasis in driving the economy is welcomed. However, increase in student numbers at university-level requires a greater take up of STEM at A-Level. There is a need to identify ways of achieving a cultural and attitudinal shift away from medicine and allied subjects to the STEM subjects”. Furthermore “Science and Engineering are expensive subjects to teach and this needs to be recognised more fully in the funding model”.

Several respondents welcomed the revision of the Priority Skills Areas and hoped this would be continued on a more regular basis with a more holistic approach encompassing all the key players.

#### Accreditation of existing training

Many responses highlighted the need to develop practical ways of accrediting existing skills already in the workplace and encourage the mapping of company training onto the Qualifications and Credit Framework. The CBI noted “employers already delivering high-quality training to their staff should have a simple way of getting that training accredited as a qualification”.

#### Up-skilling

A number of responses welcomed the focus on up-skilling. Bombardier Aerospace commented “We consider that up-skilling those in the workplace needs to be a priority – as identified in the themes for action – as this will assist competitiveness in global markets. Additional support for up-skilling needs to be provided”.

It was felt that in order for employers to buy into up-skilling funding for bite sized training is necessary. e-skills commented “the key to up-skilling those in the workplace is through the availability of training at the level and quality, flexibility, and cost that meets employer needs”.

Ilex commented “We also recognise that employers need to play a greater role in up-skilling the workforce to increase productivity in existing and new businesses”.

Phoenix Energy Supplies commented “Up-skill grant aid is necessary”.

#### Skills Solutions

The Department’s new ‘Skills Solutions’ service attracted a lot of discussion.

The Institute of Directors commented “The creation of a single information point or database for business seeking training for current or prospective employees would be helpful in signposting employers to the appropriate training providers to meet their needs” and “Government should continue to provide incentives for firms to up-skills their workforce to enable them to take advantage of a future upturn in business”. Belfast Metropolitan College commented “it is vital that colleges work closely with DEL in relation to the new Skills Solutions service, particularly in promoting skills training to employers”. Southern Regional College commented “I think that a subsequent action where the Department will promote skills training through its ‘Skills Solutions’ service is essential”

The Employment and Learning Assembly Committee commented “The Committee is supportive of a ‘Skills Solutions’ Service for business. Members have heard from a number of stakeholders, particularly SMEs, calling for such a service.”

Several Sector Skills Councils, such as CITB-Construction Skills, also welcomed the Service and the opportunity to work with it. “(We) welcome the opportunity to work with the proposed Skills Solutions Team to develop bespoke training for the construction industry particularly in specialist sectors where limited provision exists in Northern Ireland”

Whilst many respondents felt that the service should be welcomed, four of Sector Skills Councils (SummitSkills, SEMTA, Creative and Cultural Skills, SkillsActive) did not support the introduction of the Service.

SummitSkills commented “Employers in the Building Services Engineering sector do not support the introduction of a Skills Solutions Service” while SEMTA commented “The proposed Employer contact and Skills Solution Service would simply not have the breadth of resource and sector expertise to interface with individual companies and help identify the right skills for their business... DEL

should instead consider funding the engagement activities carried out by SSCs for this purpose”. SkillsActive commented “SkillsActive are disappointed at the proposal to introduce yet another structure that will provide advice and guidance to individual businesses”. Creative and Cultural Skills went as far as to say “Faced with severe cuts to public spending, we do not believe the new Skills Solutions Service is a wise use of public funds and fear that it will duplicate what already exists”.

#### Inclusion of the Public Sector

There was a general feeling that the Public Sector should be included within the Strategy with all the themes for action also applying to it. As the largest sector within the economy it was felt that it should lead by example by mapping its qualifications onto the QCF, supporting Public Sector Apprenticeships, and supporting training through its procurement policy. The University and College Union commented “..the Strategy must seek to ensure that the themes for action apply also to public sector employment”.

Phoenix Energy Services Ltd commented “Increasing productivity aspirations of the private sector should be worked in tandem with greater productivity/Key Performance Indicators focus on public sector also”.

#### Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs)

A number of respondents queried the exclusion of NEETs within the Strategy. It should be noted that this issue is being taken forward with separately. The Employment and Learning Assembly Committee commented that “the skills strategy will need to tie in with the provisions contained in a strategy for NEET young people”.

#### Management and Leadership

There were a high number of respondents who agreed with the need to raise management and leadership skills within Northern Ireland and that there needed to be more of a focus on suitable provision for micro businesses. SkillsActive noted “that the bulk of government-supported Management & Leadership provision (with a few notable exceptions) currently appears to be skewed towards SMEs perhaps to the detriment of individual learners, micro businesses, and public sector organisations.” South West College commented “(there was a need to) increase Management and Leadership skills to make the most productive use of the existing workforce skills levels and enable management to identify the skills gaps within their organizations.”

Many respondents welcomed the development of an integrated framework with Invest Northern Ireland.

Queen’s University Belfast commented “The University is currently investing substantial resources in a major programme of expansion of Queen’s University Management School to build on the School’s existing platform of excellence” A few responses noted that it would be useful to have distance learning options available including the Learning and Skills Development Agency (NI) which commented “A funding model which allows online or distance learning needs to be put in place”. Northern Regional College also noted “Employers are increasingly asking for training through distance learning, workplace learning and e-learning and future funding mechanisms need to accommodate and encourage this approach”.

### Employment Relations

The lack of reference to employment relations skills was highlighted as well as the need to include workplace dispute resolution in the strategy document.

### Apprenticeships

A high number of respondents agreed that the ApprenticeshipNI programme should continue to be promoted as the Department for Employment and Learning's flagship provision for professional and technical training at Level 2 and 3. The Federation for Small Businesses commented "The FSB values the importance of apprenticeships to the Northern Ireland economy, particularly in these difficult economic conditions.

A number noted that progression routes to Level 4 and above should be further developed to ensure pathways are available for those employees who need to acquire the critical skills that underpin the emerging sectors of the Northern Ireland economy. Energy and Utility Skills commented that "employers are increasingly looking towards apprenticeship for higher level skills; this route will require Level 4 and level 5 development from Level 3 to be readily available."

The Federation of Small Businesses commented that it "believes that there is huge untapped potential for increasing the number of apprenticeships provided by small businesses. However, there are particular difficulties for small businesses to engage with apprenticeship programmes – money, time, red tape...78% (of respondents to a recent Federation survey) said they would employ apprentices if financial support was available from the government."

There were a few concerns raised in relation to the Programme Led Apprenticeships (PLAs) and the exclusion of real life work experience within the context of paid employment. A4e commented "the inclusion of the word 'Apprenticeship' in these programmes has caused confusion and threatens to de-value the Department's Employer-Led ApprenticeshipNI flagship programme. Young people expect an Apprenticeship programme to be a real-life work experience that exposes them to on-the job training, enabling them to develop skills and a career, within the context of paid employment. Whereas, PLAs can be misleading for young people, raising false hopes and expectations." SummitSkills commented "Employers in the sector who contributed to this

response would like to see greater emphasis on quality training to NVQ L3 rather than lower quality training such as PLA.” Colleges NI commented “The situation surrounding the Programme Led Apprenticeships and the low placement rate highlight a broader issue witnessed elsewhere across the UK in relation to the availability of Apprenticeships”.

### Foundation Degrees

The Alliance party commented “There should be an increase in the availability of Foundation Degrees in Northern Ireland, these provide an important route to up-skilling”

The Employment and Learning Committee commented “The Committee is also supportive of the work that your Department has undertaken in putting Higher Education into Further Education, particularly the promotion of foundation degrees. Members are very keen to see this development continued and expanded as part of the skills strategy. It is clear that there is a demand for HE courses to be delivered in colleges across Northern Ireland and it is an excellent way to create a better geographical dispersal of the higher level skills involved. Employers and industry must be involved in this development as the foundation degrees and other higher level courses in the colleges must be seen as useful to business and an enhancement employability of those who hold them.”

A number of responses cited a lack of credibility with employers as being a key issue. In addition to this, there were concerns about the 2+2 model and the lack of parity of opportunity to develop relationships with universities throughout the UK, compared to colleges in Great Britain remaining a barrier to their further development.

### Essential Skills

Essential Skills remains a priority for many organisations. A number of organisations welcomed the targets the Department of Education now has in

relation to Maths and English. Belfast Metropolitan College commented “Considerable effort has been expended by the post-school sector in addressing the essential skills deficit and the College would support the statement that more needs to be done by the Department of Education if the Department for Employment and Learning is to be released from the necessity to provide current basic numeracy and literacy interventions for these people already past compulsory school age who lack basic numeracy, literacy and ICT skills”.

#### Awareness raising

Some respondents noted the need to raise awareness of the skills development support that is currently available throughout Northern Ireland to increase employer awareness and uptake.

### **Question 3**

**Given the pressures on public finances which actions do you believe will make the most difference and should be priority?**

Unfortunately there were no clear conclusions to be made from this section with many of the organisations limiting their responses to reflect their own personal priorities rather than taking an 'overall' view.

## **ANNEX A**

A4E

Advice NI

Alliance of Sector Skill Councils

Alliance Party

ANIC/Colleges Northern Ireland

ASSC Management and Leadership Group

Belfast City Council

Belfast Metropolitan College

Bombardier Aerospace

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

Business in the Community

CBI

CITB - Construction Skills Northern Ireland

Corporate HR, Department of Finance and Personnel

Creative and Cultural Skills

Disability Action

Early Years

Education and Training Inspectorate

Employment Services Board for West Belfast and Greater Shankill

Energy and Utility Skills

e-skills uk

Federation of Small Businesses

Fermanagh District Council

Foundation Degree Forward

GoSkills

Ilex URC Ltd

Include Youth

Institute of Directors

Institute of Engineering and Technology

Institute of Physics in Ireland

INTO

Labour Relations Agency

Lantra

Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) NI

NI Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO)

NICVA

NI Employment and Skills Advisory Group

NI Social Care Council

Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission

Northern Regional College

North West Regional College

NUS-USI

Open College Network Northern Ireland

OCR

Omagh District Employer Focus Group

PDQ Solutions

People 1<sup>st</sup>

Phoenix Energy Services Ltd

Playboard

Prince's Trust

Queen's University Belfast

SEMTA/Engineering Training Council

SkillsActive

Skillset

Skills for Health

Skills for Justice

SkillsSmart Retail

South Eastern Regional College

Southern Regional College

SummitSkills

The Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Employment and Learning

The British Psychological Society

The Consumer Council

The Open University in Ireland

Translink

University and College Union

West Belfast and Greater Shankill Employment Services Board

Western Education and Library Board

Women's Support Network

Women's Centres Regional Partnership