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Department for  
**Employment  
and Learning**  
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# Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland Summary of Consultation Responses August 2005

# **SKILLS STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**

Summary of Consultation Responses

August 2005

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## 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Department for Employment and Learning's draft Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland was launched in November 2004 for consultation.
- 1.2 The Strategy seeks to provide an overarching framework for the development of skills. It focuses on raising the skills of the current workforce, enhancing the quality of those entering the workforce and addressing the employability skills of those not in employment. All three groups are important to the future of Northern Ireland. The identification and articulation of skill needs by employers and their representative bodies must be made more clearly and become a central driver of the overall strategy.
- 1.3 This summary document attempts to bring together the key messages drawn from the responses during the consultation process. Each response has been analysed against the five key priorities outlined in the Skills Strategy:
  - Raising the profile of the demand side;
  - Improving the relevance coherence and quality of current provision;
  - Promoting the acquisition of skills;
  - Improving access to skills and sustainable employment; and
  - Changing the infrastructure.
- 1.4 The Department is grateful to all those who responded to the consultation document. A list of respondents is attached at Annex A.

## 2.0 The Consultation Process

- 2.1 Around 1100 copies of the consultation document have been issued since its publication on 16 November 2004.
- 2.2 Initial closing date for responses to the consultation was 21 January 2005, however, this date was extended to 28 February 2005.
- 2.3 A total of 101 responses were received and were grouped as follows:

Political Parties	5
Government / NDPB's	9
Education / Training	30
Employers	10
District Councils / Education & Library Boards	11
Skills for Business Network / Sector Training Councils	23
Voluntary & Community	10
Trades Unions	3

### **3.0 Raise the Profile of the Demand Side**

3.1 Under this priority, responses fell into 4 broad groupings. These were:

- Issues surrounding the gathering and use of Labour Market Information (LMI);
- Issues concerning the role of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) in development of the Strategy;
- Issues relating to the structure and membership of the proposed Workforce Development Forums and the NI Skills Task Force (NISTF); and
- Issues surrounding joint-working and co-operation.

3.2 Respondents' comments relating to the above areas were collated and the main themes emerging are outlined below.

#### **Gathering and Use of Labour Market Information**

##### Areas that LMI needs to address

3.3 Several responses suggest that LMI gathering needs to have a broader remit – addressing not only UK trends but also those reflected in Ireland generally, the European Union and also the wider International dimension. However, some respondents urged caution in investing too much resource in LMI gathering to the point where actual delivery of skills suffers. However, a key priority for LMI gathering will be to revise the existing Priority Skills Areas for Northern Ireland.

3.4 Coupled with this, the point was made that in addition to the undoubtedly valuable economic data, the personal development needs of learners should be taken into account.

3.5 The point was made that LMI needs to be “predictive” as a means of determining future needs rather than concentrating necessarily on the current position. Allied to this point was the comment that LMI should provide information that relates to why NI's graduates chose to leave or take up positions at sub-degree level as well as the patterns of employment uptake by graduates from elsewhere. A further concern was that due to the high incidence of micro-businesses in NI, a true picture of their skills needs may not be reflected in LMI gathering.

3.6 Some respondents encouraged LMI gathering to address the growing community of migrant workers so that their existing skills levels (as well as their needs) might best be addressed. Part of this argument would centre on how migrant workers' qualifications are not currently used to full advantage to contribute to the competitiveness of Northern Ireland.

3.7 In terms of the ICT sector, the point was made that LMI gathering needs to include the Public Sector rather than purely industry focused.

- 3.8 In terms of the methodology surrounding the gathering of LMI some points were raised which focused on how target groups and sectors might best be identified. The suggestion was made that there are currently gaps between existing available data and the SSC “footprints”. This argument recommends more integration of government, Skills for Business Network (SfBN), LMI (which includes SSCs) and other sources. A further concern contested that LMI needs to include demographic analysis on those with no qualifications, as a basis for more effective planning and use of resources to address their needs.

#### Gaining Added Value from LMI

- 3.9 A point raised concerned the potential “added value” uses of good LMI. It was felt that more use should be made of LMI as a basis for more effective Information Advice and Guidance (IAG). In addition it was felt that LMI could play a useful role in the planning of 14-16 provision in the curriculum.

#### **Role of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) in development of the Strategy**

##### Interaction between SSCs and other Bodies

- 3.10 Several respondents commented on the need for more clarity on the role of SSCs in implementing the Strategy. It was commented that one of the core aspects of the SSCs’ work – Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs) – is not referred to in the Strategy.
- 3.11 It was also felt that the relationship between the work of the SSCs and other local bodies and other strategic partnerships could possibly be more clearly defined.

#### **Structure and development of Workforce Development Forums and the NI Skills Task Force (NISTF)**

##### Membership and Structure

- 3.12. Significant comment was made on the necessary representation on both the strengthened NI Skills Task Force and the newly forming Workforce Development Forums.
- 3.13 Specifically regarding the NI Skills Task Force it was suggested that its membership should have a strong Management and Leadership influence. The SSCs would also seek representation from the SfBN on the NI Skills Task Force.
- 3.14 Suggestions for representation on the Workforce Development Forums included senior representatives from sector-wide industry and

education, as well as representatives from the SfBN and the Community Sector. Furthermore, the importance of ensuring that the forums reflected the high number of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in NI was highlighted. Also there was a significant viewpoint expressed (chiefly by the Further Education (FE) Sector) that SSCs will have a crucial advisory role to play on the forums, in articulating local skills needs.

- 3.15 Questions were raised about the number and location of Workforce Development Forums, with the comment made that these should be aligned with the proposed groupings of Colleges outlined in the Review of Further Education.
- 3.16 Encouragingly, there was a willingness in the FE Sector to service the Workforce Development Forums.

#### Concerns over Success Factors

- 3.17 Concerns were raised over the potential for Workforce Development Forums to add another layer of bureaucracy to the skills landscape in NI. It was pointed out by several respondents that care would need to be taken in clearly defining the roles so that duplication would not occur.
- 3.18 In addressing this point it was suggested that, rather than creating new forums, consideration should be given to existing local forums some of which have proved to be very effective.

#### **Issues Surrounding Stakeholder Co-operation**

- 3.19 It was pointed out that a clarification of the roles of various Stakeholders involved in the Skills Strategy would be helpful. This theme continues below.

#### Linkage between Government Departments (and Policy)

- 3.20 Very apparent in the responses, was support for the idea of greater clarity in the roles and co-operation required of the various Government Departments in Northern Ireland, whose remit includes aspects related to the Skills Strategy. In addition, it was commented that the Strategy could do more in terms of linking with other Policies such as the Economic Vision and the Review of Post Primary Education.
- 3.21 Another comment focused on the opportunity for Government to actively encourage the sharing of cross-sectoral best practice.

### Cross Border

- 3.22 Cross border issues were raised in a few responses. This area includes the need to take account in the Strategy, of cross-border employment patterns and their effects on the NI economy.

### Employer Responsibilities

- 3.23 Although the Strategy does refer to the importance of employers at all stages of skills development, the feeling was expressed that more discussion and clarification of the term “employer commitment” would be valuable in the Strategy.
- 3.24 In terms of commitment to training, two respondents commented that the only true way forward will be the introduction of a levy to fund industry training. It was argued that in the absence of a levy, there is no actual “risk” to employers and they remain reluctant to engage in effective training.

## **4.0 Improving the Relevance, Coherence, Response and Quality of Current Provision**

- 4.1 Under this section responses have been summarised which fall into:
- Foundation Degrees;
  - Modern Apprenticeships;
  - Qualifications;
  - Curriculum related comments; and
  - National Occupational Standards.

### **Foundation Degrees**

#### Structure Role and Linkage with other Frameworks

- 4.2 Several comments focused on ensuring a clear structure for Foundation Degrees (including the important role of employers) and a need for alignment with other existing frameworks in the UK. A view was expressed that too many Foundation Degree frameworks exist at present.
- 4.3 A comment was also made that while Foundation Degrees should have a strong local / regional focus, they should nonetheless also cover the wider national themes.
- 4.4 In terms of areas in which Foundation Degrees should be delivered there was some support for a broad approach that would include areas not traditionally considered to be “priority”.

- 4.5 There is concern that those engaged in the delivery of Foundation Degrees should be able to partner with other UK Universities and not be limited to the two main Universities in Northern Ireland.
- 4.6 Relating to the references to Foundation Degrees in the Strategy, a view was expressed that for such an important area of policy, there is not sufficient emphasis.

#### Parallels with other Qualifications

- 4.7 Considerable comment was made in the responses received concerning the impact Foundation Degrees would potentially have on other existing qualifications such as HNDs and HNCs. Concern was expressed that these qualifications which have good credibility with employers and students themselves, might be undermined by the new qualification. Another view took the opposite position i.e. that the other qualifications might actually undermine the development of Foundation Degrees.
- 4.8 Concerns were raised that while Foundation Degrees are in the development stage, other qualifications should not be replaced. This was a view taken largely by the FE sector.

#### **Modern Apprenticeships (MAs)**

##### Provision, Planning and Funding

- 4.9 Questions arose concerning the provision of MAs, their structure, and what priority skills areas should be addressed. Overall the intention to raise the age threshold for MAs was commended, with one respondent recommending that these measures should take into account participants from sectors where the general age-profile is higher.
- 4.10 The point was also made that development and extension of MA provision might have a “displacement” effect on other avenues of education and its provision in Northern Ireland.
- 4.11 In terms of funding, attention was drawn to anomalies in how funding is addressed in other regions of the UK, compared with Northern Ireland.

##### Frameworks

- 4.12 A number of respondents expressed an interest in becoming involved in the devising of MA frameworks. There is criticism that the SSCs role in this area of work is not clearly set out.
- 4.13 One respondent highlighted the importance of management and leadership skills being embedded in MA frameworks.

## **Qualifications**

### Qualifications as a measure of skills

- 4.14 Several respondents asserted that qualifications should not be viewed as the only measure of skills attainment, productivity and competitiveness. In fact, some were critical of the extent of references to the word “qualifications” throughout the Strategy.
- 4.15 Related to this was the view that there needs to be more recognition of “non-qualification” and “job-specific training”, and that the Strategy should contain an explanation of the concept of “Skills Passports.”

### Ensuring flexibility

- 4.16 Some employer representative bodies stressed the need for skills provision to be demand-led, flexible and responsive to the factors affecting industry. The absence of a role for National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in the Strategy was commented upon by one respondent.
- 4.17 The importance of FE working effectively with SMEs was raised.

### Priority Areas

- 4.18 One employer said that the Strategy needs to recognise Maths and Science shortages in NI.

## **National Occupational Standards (NOS)**

- 4.19 This subject did not attract significant comment however the view was expressed that while the reference to NOS in terms of Foundation Degree development is welcome, there also needs to be reference to how they link with and influence the content of Honours Degree programmes. The same respondent commented that the Strategy needs to place more emphasis on the importance of improving NOS to match the needs of industry.

## **Curriculum**

- 4.20 Various suggestions were made concerning issues that should be included or need to be addressed in the Curriculum.
- 4.21 Support was expressed for a greater degree of reference to the importance of including innovation, enterprise and creativity in the curriculum.
- 4.22 A view was expressed that the Strategy should indicate clearly the role SSCs might play in influencing the curriculum including an input to 14+

vocational pathways (along the lines of the Youth Apprenticeships offered in GB).

## **5.0 Promote the Acquisition of Skills**

- 5.1 This section addresses the issues of “up-skilling” and includes themes of level 2, Management and Leadership, Essential Skills and English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL).

### **Level 2**

#### Definition

- 5.2 Some respondents felt clarification was needed surrounding the term “level 2” in the Strategy and what it covers e.g. are academic qualifications included and if so would they attract funding?

#### Priority Areas

- 5.3 Several views were expressed that indicated an uncertainty over eligibility for a “first level 2” and how this will be funded. For instance, will this only apply to priority areas or might those in declining sectors have access to it, perhaps as a means of re-skilling?

#### Funding

- 5.4 How up-skilling will be funded (by Government, individuals and employers) was a key issue for a large number of respondents, some of whom indicated concern over the disproportionate emphasis on level 2 rather than on level 3 and above.

### **Management and Leadership (M & L)**

- 5.5 Comments on this theme not only asked for greater profile for M & L as a priority need, but also encouraged greater integration of M & L at level 4 into all apprenticeships. The FE sector suggested that the Strategy should highlight its role in development of M & L skills.

### **Essential Skills**

#### Definition

- 5.6 Some felt that the terms “Key Skills” and “Essential Skills” were being confused, and would like to see clearer definitions of both in the Strategy.

## Overcoming Barriers

- 5.7 One viewpoint asserted that there is a danger that low income families' essential skills issues might not be addressed as they may not have access to IT facilities. A suggestion was made that community venues could be a valuable resource in delivery of Essential Skills.

## **English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)**

- 5.8 The increased number of migrant workers in Northern Ireland generated considerable response on this topic. So too has the increasing number of young people whose education is primarily delivered in the Irish Language.
- 5.9 Various means of addressing these needs were suggested including more support for Irish Medium Students entering the workplace in Northern Ireland.
- 5.10 In terms of migrant workers the point was made that language and culture needs are becoming as important in Northern Ireland as the issue of essential skills.
- 5.11 Another point asserted that more should be done to understand the degree of equivalency that exists in the qualifications held by migrant workers as compared with UK qualifications, so that their skills can be used here to best advantage.

## **6.0 Improve Access to Skills and Sustainable Employment**

### **Definitions of key terms**

- 6.1 This section outlines responses received on issues related to the barriers that prevent people from accessing skills that will help them gain sustainable employment. The following key themes are outlined below:
- Definitions;
  - Role of Community Groups and other Stakeholders; and
  - Overcoming barriers to greater economic activity.
- 6.2 Respondents commented on the need for greater clarity in some of the terms used in the Strategy in this area of policy. For example, one mentioned "employability" and how varying definitions of this exist.

Another respondent commented on the use of the word “skills” in the Strategy, and its openness to interpretation.

- 6.3 Similarly, the term “long term unemployed” is believed by some to be open to interpretation and needs to be more specific.
- 6.4 One respondent felt more description was needed in the Strategy concerning the new pilot for Incapacity Benefit referred to in the Strategy.

### **Role of Community Groups and other Stakeholders**

- 6.5 Representatives of the Community Sector had issues surrounding the extent to which the Strategy recognises or details the importance of their role in Skills Development.
- 6.6 Apart from their important advisory role, some groups specifically noted that due to their actual presence in local communities they were best-placed to act in delivery of significant aspects of the Strategy.

### **Overcoming barriers to greater economic activity**

- 6.7 Considerable comment was made that focussed on various barriers to greater economic activity. Several groups were referred to:
- 6.8 Prisoners and ex-prisoners - the view was expressed that more needs to be done in skills development to encourage their resettlement into the community and the economy.
- 6.9 Incapacity Benefit – the need for more stringent assessment methods for Incapacity Benefit was voiced to encourage more into employment.
- 6.10 Employability Skills – the need for emphasis on employability skills needs to start in post-primary education to encourage a more economically active society. In addition, one FE provider commented on Access Training (currently offered at NVQ level 1) and suggested that for some individuals, this might be better served by allowing a focus on Personal Development and Employability skills.
- 6.11 Women – considerable comment focused on the need to remove barriers for women wishing to return to the labour market. One respondent raised the question of whether women whose partners are in employment, are sufficiently targeted.
- 6.12 Collective rights to training – In April 2005 the Information and Consultation Directive offered “an opportunity for the inclusion of training and workforce development under collective bargaining arrangements within the regulations” – a view expressed by a Union body is that there is a lack of commitment to introduce these rights in Northern Ireland.

- 6.13 Funding - issues were raised concerning the cost of addressing those who remain inactive over longer periods of time. Another view asserted that the Strategy should refer to the need for individuals to fund their own development.
- 6.14 Access to Childcare – the view was expressed that more child-care facilities need to be made available as a means of encouraging parents back to work.

## **7.0 Changing the Infrastructure**

7.1 Generally in this section there was broad support for the plans outlined in the Strategy. Comments that were made focused largely on the following areas:

- Linkage with Post Primary Review;
- Centres of Excellence; and
- Careers Guidance.

### **Linkage with Post-Primary Review**

7.2 Two commentators felt more linkage should be made with the Post Primary Review with one suggesting that the Entitlement Framework as outlined in the Review should be adopted.

### **Centres of Excellence**

7.3 The FE Sector is keen to play a key role through Centres of Excellence in the out-working of several aspects of the Strategy.

### **Careers Guidance**

7.4 Comments on careers guidance broadly covered areas that the Strategy has indicated will be addressed. These included the perceived deficiency in provision for the 14 plus age group as well as the need for enterprise and business to be developed as a theme for careers education and advice to take forward in the future. Support for Career Development loans was raised by one respondent.

7.5. It should be noted that in Section 1 of this summary, Careers Guidance is also referred to under the heading of “added-value” uses of LMI.

## 8.0 Funding

8.1 Several comments sought more clarification of how funding would be applied. Specific areas mentioned were:

- Foundation degrees;
- Ways to support SME uptake of training (and assistance to firms with no access to “grants”);
- A need for employers to be less dependant on grants and to show more commitment to training;
- Training for teachers in delivery of entrepreneurship inputs;
- Importance of funding being made available to over 24s and not solely to YPs;
- In consideration of how the Strategy would be delivered important not to overlook the infrastructure that already exists in the FE sector;
- How outputs are mentioned in terms of funding. It should be flexible enough to recognise different ways of measuring achievement;
- Concerns over what funding might be made available to skills areas deemed as “non-priority”;
- With the reorganisation of FE Colleges (and their increasing role in support of employers and economic development), there needs to also be a revised funding model to support this;
- NI needs to increase it’s spend on academic research.

## **ANNEX A**

### **Consultation Respondents**

#### **District Councils / Education & Library Boards**

Antrim Borough Council  
Ards Borough Council  
Ballymena Borough Council  
Banbridge District Council  
Belfast City Council  
Coleraine Borough Council  
Down District Council  
North Down Borough Council  
North Eastern Education & Library Board (NEELB)  
Omagh District Council  
Western Education & Library Board Curriculum Advisory & Support Service (WELB CASS)

#### **Education / Training Related**

Association of NI Colleges (ANIC)  
Armagh College  
Belfast Institute of Further & Higher Education (BIFHE)  
Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA)  
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)  
Comhairle Na Gaelscolaiochta  
East Antrim Institute of Further & Higher Education (EAIFHE)  
East Down Institute of Further & Higher Education (EDIFHE)  
EDEXCEL  
Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA)  
Higher Education Funding Council  
Institute of Physics in Ireland (IOPI)  
Irish Management Institute (IMI)  
Job Assist Centre West Belfast  
Language Network Northern Ireland (LNNI)  
Management & Leadership Network (MLN)  
National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE)  
National Health Service University (NHSU)  
Newry Institute of Further & Higher Education (NIFHE)  
North Down & Ards Institute  
North West Institute of Further & Higher Education (NWIFHE)  
Open University in Ireland  
Oxford Cambridge & RSA Examinations (OCR)  
Protocol Skills  
Qualifications & Curriculum Authority (QCA)  
Queen's University Belfast (QUB)  
St. Mary's University College

UFI / Learndirect (University for Industry)  
University of Ulster  
Upper Bann Institute of Further & Higher Education (UBIFHE)

### **Employers**

Bombardier Aerospace  
British Telecom (BT)  
Confederation of British Industry (CBI)  
Construction Employers Federation (CEF)  
Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)  
Institute of Directors (IoD)  
Londonderry Chamber of Commerce  
Northern Ireland Tourist Industry Confederation (NITIC)  
Rotary (International) Limited  
Translink

### **Government / Non Departmental Public Bodies**

Education Training Inspectorate (ETI)  
European Policy Unit  
Equality Commission for NI  
General Consumer Council  
Investors in People NI  
Investors in People UK  
Invest NI  
Learning & Skills Development Agency (LSDA)  
OFMDFM

### **Political Parties**

Democratic Unionist Party  
Labour Party  
SDLP  
Sinn Fein  
Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)

### **Skills for Business Network / Sector Training Councils**

Asset Skills  
Automotive Skills Limited  
Construction Industry Training Board (CITB)  
Electrical Training Trust (ETT)  
Energy & Utility Skills  
Engineering Training Council (ETC)  
E-Skills UK  
Financial Services Skills Council  
Food & Drink Training Council + Improve

GoSkills  
Lantra  
Momentum  
Northern Ireland Polymers Association (NIPA)  
Skillfast-UK  
SkillsActive  
SkillSet  
Skills for Health  
Skills for Justice  
Skills for Logistics  
Skillsmart  
Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA)  
SummitSkills  
Tourism Training Trust (TTT)

### **Trades Unions**

AMICUS Manufacturing Union  
NASUWT Northern Ireland  
NICICTU (Northern Ireland Committee Irish Congress of Trades Unions)

### **Voluntary & Community**

Disability Action  
Northern Ireland Association for the Care + Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO)  
Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA)  
Training for Women Network (TWN)  
Upper Andersonstown Community Forum  
Windsor Women's Centre  
Women's Enterprise & Vocational Education Programme (WEAVE)  
Women's Resource & Development Agency (WRDA)  
Women's Support Network  
WomensTec

## **ANNEX B**

### **ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>CITB</b>	Construction Industry Training Board
<b>DEL</b>	Department for Employment and Learning
<b>ESOL</b>	English for Speakers of Other Languages
<b>ETP</b>	Employer Training Pilot
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FE</b>	Further Education
<b>HE</b>	Higher Education
<b>HNC</b>	Higher National Certificate
<b>HND</b>	Higher National Diploma
<b>IAG</b>	Information Advice and Guidance
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communication Technology
<b>IIP</b>	Investors in People
<b>LMI</b>	Labour Market Information
<b>M &amp; L</b>	Management & Leadership
<b>MA</b>	Modern Apprenticeship
<b>NOS</b>	National Occupational Standards
<b>NVQ</b>	National Vocational Qualification
<b>NISTF</b>	Northern Ireland Skills Task Force
<b>SSA</b>	Sector Skills Agreement
<b>SSC</b>	Sector Skills Councils
<b>SfBN</b>	Skills for Business Network
<b>SME</b>	Small and Medium Sized Enterprise

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