



The Open
University

IRELAND



Department for the

Economy

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The Open University in Ireland

**A Skills Strategy
for Northern Ireland
‘Skills for a 10x Economy’**

Consultation Response

August 2021

1. Are you content with the overarching strategic direction set out in the section The Programme for Government, our Economic Vision (a 10x Economy) and the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland (see page 28):

“the Skills Strategy must be directly aligned to the PfG aim of improving wellbeing for all by supporting efforts to tackle inequalities, providing low skilled, low paid, or unemployed individuals with the opportunities they need to work in ‘better jobs’, whilst concurrently focusing on provision of the skills and qualifications needed to drive economic growth and competitiveness in the sectors where Northern Ireland has real global potential.”

If you do not agree, please provide further detail.

The analysis on which the strategy is based

The overarching strategic direction is perhaps limited by the lack of analysis (at least not included in this document) of previous strategies, not highlighting the lessons learned, and detailing any corrective steps taken in that regard.

There is some reference to the previous 2011 Skills Agenda but no analysis of progress since the 2004 and 2005 reports is provided. Similarly, the context of the 10X Economic Strategy dominates the narrative with little reference to previous economic strategies or their impact.

In the same vein as *Economy2030*, the context of Brexit is missing so there is no determination of the threats and opportunities of the Northern Ireland Protocol (NIP) provided in this proposed Skills Strategy.

This document relies heavily on two reports.

- *OECD Skills Strategy Northern Ireland*
- *The Strategic Integration of Skills and Innovation in Northern Ireland: An International Small Economy Perspective* from the Landfall Strategy Group.

We would benefit from an analysis of the skills policies of regional economies that have similar limitations with regards to control over macroeconomic policy.

Many references are made to the global competitiveness of Northern Ireland’s sectors which is laudable - however many are not, and they purely serve domestic markets (GB) as well as the Republic of Ireland.

Better jobs and tackling inequality

That said, we welcome the focus on improving well-being for all by tackling inequalities through providing opportunities to work in better jobs. The Open University believes that where you start in life shouldn’t limit where you go and what you can do.

However, a Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland must be inclusive and reflective of the diverse needs of society we live in – recognising the fullest range of diversities that contribute to an inclusive and vibrant society and the value of cognitive diversity being key to achieving this.

Supporting and enhancing the opportunities in STEM

The strategic focus on the supply of in-demand STEM qualifications is important. In fact, 34% of Open University module registrations are in ‘narrow’ STEM subjects. However, this should not be to the detriment of other skills and knowledge areas that contribute to a vibrant, inclusive, and successful society. Industries and economies with a STEM focus benefit from other skills such as management, leadership, communications, and creativity. Recognising the value of these skills and knowledge areas would provide opportunities for citizens for whom a STEM qualification may not be attractive or appropriate.

It is crucial that the focus on STEM qualifications does not disincentive other subjects, as forward-thinking [business founders have acknowledged](#) about the value of employees with broad and diverse educational backgrounds. [Studies](#) have also shown that STEM graduates often do not end up in related occupations. This should be considered when developing a delivery plan for these proposed commitments.

2. Do you agree with the need to rationalise the skills landscape by limiting the number of strategies governing separate parts of the skills system, instead focusing on a single, overarching, Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland (see page 40-41)?

If you do not agree, please provide further detail.

An overarching Skills Strategy is crucial for bringing coherence and focus to the skills and education landscape. It should provide a vision and key objectives that organisations can clearly align to.

However, the Skills Strategy cannot capture the nuances of individual policy areas that require specific attention. For example, areas like Higher Education, Further Education, Widening Access, Tackling Economic Inactivity, Apprenticeships etc. are all vastly different. These areas need strategic direction beyond what can be provided in a high-level skills strategy.

A shorter, sharper approach to strategy development followed by a robust implementation process could be used to better effect. This should also facilitate active review, evaluation, and corrective action processes.

The strategy is currently short on analysis of how it can be operationalised to make a real difference. The roles of Higher Education Institutions, FE Colleges and schools in skills formation and development along with other stakeholders is not clearly defined, neither is the proposed skills system they would be feeding into.

If limiting the number of strategies is to be a success, coordination with economic strategies and learning lessons from previous strategies is essential. More detail is needed on the implementation plans in this vein.

3. Have you any other comments on the Strategic Context Chapter?

Working across and within Departments

Skills is a cross-cutting, cross-departmental policy area for government and must be an Executive priority.

To see any meaningful results, a real step change is needed in the approach to the Skills Strategy. We must see all facets of government working cohesively in its approach to skills and education. This is the only way to meet the objectives outlined in this strategy. An inter-departmental approach has proven successful in the past e.g., [Delivering Social Change](#). There is no reason why this approach could not be taken again in a new and improved way.

An example - Health and Social Care

This would prove particularly useful given the demand for skills in the Health and Social Care (HSC) sector, which is largely unaddressed in this document. There is currently a deficit of qualified nurses with over 1,600 current nursing vacancies in the HSC and a similar vacancy rate estimated in the independent sector.

The Open University's in-work Nursing degree programmes are just one example of the transformative power of flexible part-time higher education. Nursing student example:

<https://www.open.ac.uk/northern-ireland/news/%E2%80%9Cwee-student-nurse%E2%80%9D>

The Open University's part-time degree programme in Social Work is now recognised by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council and is in its second year of funding from the Department of Health. This type of programme, like our nursing programme, meets the needs of employers due to a lack of downtime/timeout for the workforce compared to traditional degrees as well as allowing the employee to learn while they learn as well as bring new skills directly back to their work environment.

There is also a demand for flexible online supported distance learning for registered health professionals who have a legal requirement to complete Continuing Professional Development (CPD) each year. The Open University is well placed to deliver formal and informal flexible distance learning to meet this demand and would welcome greater collaboration with The Department of Health in the Skills Strategy to support and complement the HSC Workforce Strategy 2026.

An example - Justice

Greater collaboration with the Department for Justice in a strategic plan for how prison education can meet skills needs and the development of skills infrastructure design to reduce criminality.

The Open University's work with students in secure environments is a testament to the power of education in rehabilitation and meeting skills needs. Below is a recent update of their results:

- 20 students commenced study from Oct 2020 – several are studying more than one module during the academic year.
- 16 students successfully completed their module, with 7 gaining a distinction grade. 1 of this student group achieved a Certificate of Higher Education in Natural Sciences and 1 other student achieved a Certificate of Higher Education Open
- 2 students will not receive their results until the Autumn.
- A further 2 of the students who were successful with their October-start modules also commenced study in April and have module results due in the Autumn

Supporting citizens to access opportunities through HE and Skills Development

More generally, access to finance remains a huge barrier in access to Higher Education. The introduction of part-time top-up loans by the Department in 2017 has helped increase the number of citizens across Northern Ireland availing of OU study which enabled them to undertake higher education on a part-time basis and at a pace which suited their work and life commitments. Other strategic levers in other devolved nations of the UK such as maintenance support for part-time students in Wales show how the Skills Strategy's focus on lifelong learning could be supported. Recent funding for short, accredited HE provision via the Skills Intervention Fund and the new Flexible Skills Fund have supported citizens undertaking short, fast, accredited learning here which is beneficial for learners and employers alike. The development of microcredentials, particularly working with industry leaders across the UK and beyond, is an area which The Open University has pioneered through our FutureLearn platform.

4. Acknowledging the need for the development of 'SMART' targets, do you agree that the skills supply gap identified under the Skills Barometer's high growth scenario should be placed at the centre of the proposed Strategy (see page 43)?

If you do not agree, please provide further detail / preferred proposals.

As outlined in this document, The Open University agrees with the broad thrust of the following identified strategic goals:

- increasing the proportion of individuals leaving Northern Ireland higher education institutions with degrees and post-graduate qualifications in 'in-demand' STEM subjects, including physical, environmental and computer sciences, engineering, and mathematics.
- significantly increasing the proportion of individuals achieving level 3, 4 and 5 qualifications, in line with forecast demand; and
- increasing the proportion of the working age population with qualifications at level 2 and above.

However, this should not be the sole focus at the centre of the strategy.

There is an over-reliance on the Northern Ireland Skills Barometer that records equivalent qualifications with little analysis of non-accredited skills that are frequent in many sectors. Too often we see the *conflation of qualifications with skills*. Qualifications are a useful passport to evidence skills; however, they are not the only mechanism in which to gain them.

The Skills Barometer identifies a certification issue but not necessarily experiential learning as a basis of skills development pathway.

There has been [significant growth](#) globally in high quality, non-accredited and, often, free online learning providers such as badged open courses (BOCs) and Massive Open Online Courses ([MOOCs](#)). The strategy makes no reference to the role that such innovative provision can have to improve the skills of the Northern Ireland population. The Open University's OpenLearn platform received, for example, 132,000 unique visits throughout the last year, supporting the upskilling of citizens in Northern Ireland. There is, however, no room to the benefit of this to Northern Ireland within the Skills Strategy as it primarily focuses on the need for greater uptake in qualifications. Often gaining skills through such platforms such as OpenLearn and FutureLearn can be a more efficient and effective way to engage in lifelong learning than by enrolling on formal qualifications. "Informal"

learning can also provide a pathway into “formal” learning for those for whom they need to build their skills and confidence before enrolling on accredited qualifications.

Prioritising high growth high value-added sectors would require a fundamental transformation of the Northern Ireland Economy that would relegate employment growth to non-tradable services and intermediate goods markets.

The stress on high-tech high growth sectors can boost capital productivity yet as [John van Reenen’s \(MIT\) work](#) shows the UK productivity problem is associated with Total Factor Productivity (TFP) in the form of poor management and process innovation and not technology. The strategy does make a mention of this, but it does not sufficiently analyse the issues.

The Open University would welcome:

- Consideration of other development measures such as the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI): <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>
- More information about how focussing on a high growth scenario will ‘provide a fairer distribution of opportunities for all our people’ as referenced in the 10x vision document.
- Weight given to the Carnegie Trust’s work on ‘Improving Wellbeing’ across the UK and Ireland: <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/>
- Greater clarity on how the Skills strategy links with the Energy strategy and the skills needs of the net zero economy, and how the focus on high growth will translate to a socially just transition to a green economy.

5. Are you content that the proposals contained in pages 43 - 56 provide an ambitious and comprehensive approach to ‘Addressing Skills Imbalance, Driving Economic Growth’?

Proposed Commitment 1:

The Open University welcomes the commitment to mainstream remote or distance learning provision. As pioneers of the distance and online learning experience, we are happy to offer our expertise. It is important to note that online is not a cheap nor easy way to deliver learning. Considerable thought and work is required to make learning impactful and accessible through online delivery.

Our OpenLearn platform is an extremely popular and accessible resource that can be used for partnership provision. Our latest figures show that in 2019/20, 132,000 citizens across Northern Ireland accessed this free, online learning. This can be a very effective platform to engage with individuals with low or no qualifications. In addition, The Open University has worked with the Department for the Economy to provide an online hub of curated online learning to support school leavers in 2021 transition successfully to higher education at other universities and colleges in Northern Ireland.

The Open University is proud to have partnerships with three of our local further education colleges to validate courses. Many of these validated courses are in priority skills areas such as Cyber Security and Networking Infrastructure; Software, Cloud and Application Development; as well as Biological and Pharmaceutical Science.

Proposed Commitment 2:

Inter-departmental working should be the rule and not the exception.

The Department for the Economy and the Department for Communities working together should be essential in the development of a new Skills Strategy. An example of what can be achieved when this approach is embraced is an [initiative to tackle the common skills gaps among jobseekers](#) between The Open University , the Department of Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus in Great Britain is. Collaboration between these departments to support those furthest from the labour market and for whom traditional educational approaches may not have been successful is vital to achieve social inclusion and mobility in Northern Ireland. Proposed Commitments 3 to 6:

Reform of the 14 to 19 educational system to better meet the needs of learners is a vital component to underpin the skills landscape in Northern Ireland. Too often, The Open University supports students for whom the education system has not worked for and who could have been better supported to achieve their goals

earlier on in their lives. The Department for the Economy and Department of Education need to agree on a shared vision for this policy agenda that is focused on the needs of young learners.

Higher Education in Further Education (HE in FE) is an exciting area of work which caters for both the young and adult population, opens doors of opportunity for those who are located rurally, those who cannot travel and those who are more comfortable/confident in the local FE setting. We are actively engaged in the Review of "HE in FE" and strongly support enhanced FE provision with whose mission we are strongly aligned with.

It is clear that there is a substantial anticipated undersupply at level 3 and a significant oversupply of individuals with low or no qualifications. This highlights the key role of the FE sector in addressing the skills deficit. Addressing the mid-level 'skills deficit' must be balanced against the need to provide progression pathways to those who have not reached their potential in school-based education. From both an economic and social perspective, it is essential that the FE sector is properly resourced to deliver this dual mandate.

The focus on Maximum Student Number on page 52 does not provide the full picture around the volume of places available at higher education institutions in Northern Ireland. The Department must also support flexible part-time provision, which is uncapped, but needs to be fully funded to support HEIs to deliver part-time provision. Part-time higher education is an important vehicle for meeting the Strategy's upskill and reskilling objectives and to create a culture of lifelong learning, particularly for the adult population for whom full-time study may not be practical.

Qualifications need to be able to be studied at a time, place, and delivery mode (whether part time or full time) which suits the learner.

Proposed Commitment 7:

We welcome the recognition of the need to make university provision more sustainable in Northern Ireland. Any review of HE funding should pay attention to the particular needs of part-time learners and learn from what has happened across the rest of the UK, [particularly the fall in numbers in England after the Brown Review changes were implemented](#). The importance of part-time education for the economy and the improvement of social mobility cannot be overstated. It is important that any future funding model supports, rather than disincentivises part-time.

For those areas where there are skills shortages, the Department should provide incentives to study these courses rather than attempting, consciously or subconsciously, to disincentivise study of other subjects. The Flexible Skills Fund is a good example of this.

A 'one-size fits all' solution to upskilling needs to be avoided, studying STEM is not for everyone. A variety of interventions to address different needs is essential. While we welcome the proposal on recognising the Women in STEM working group recommendations, we would like to see the work of the Athena Swan Charter recognised.

Proposed commitment 8:

The Open University welcomes the expansion of post-graduate opportunities and greater collaborative investment. As we highlighted within our response to the Department's recent consultation of post-graduate student support, we believe that the system should support part-time postgraduate students and include greater access to maintenance support.

Proposed commitment 9:

The Open University fully supports improving participation of women in STEM. We have developed a [free course](#) on our OpenLearn platform to support women returning to STEM careers. We look forward to playing an active role to support any future Women in STEM Action Plan.

Proposed Commitments 10 to 12:

The Open University has invested significantly in the expansion of our Careers and Employability Service in recent years as we recognise the importance of high-quality careers advice and access to labour market

information for our students. We fully support this commitment and look forward to developing closer relationships with the Northern Ireland Careers Service in the coming years.

Employers should be involved in providing meaningful work-based learning opportunities through Higher Level Apprenticeships, placements, and internships. The Open University has worked with employers across Northern Ireland and Great Britain to deliver successful virtual placements and internships in a variety of sectors.

Proposed Commitment 13:

We look forward to the publication of bespoke action plans for each identified cluster. While an overarching strategic direction is important, we need to see how each sector will be catered for and what plans are in place to implement this strategy.

6. Are there any additional proposals you believe should be considered under the 'Addressing Skills Imbalances, Driving Economic Growth' objective?

There are no specific proposals to work with the Department of Health to support skills development in the Health and Social Care sector or with the Department for Justice in prison education even though the latter is an area of policy cohesion identified in the document.

Policy cohesion across Departments is absolutely key to the success of this strategy but input beyond the Department for the Economy in this strategy appears to be lacking. This should be made an Executive priority to encourage cross-departmental cooperation.

While the overarching strategic direction of this document refers to tackling inequalities, there could be more emphasis on this throughout on how the proposed commitments will achieve this. The development of skills and access to education is crucial to reducing systemic inequalities in our society but the focus on that has been lost.

7. Are you content that the proposals contained in pages 57 - 75 provide an ambitious and comprehensive approach to 'Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning'?

If you do not agree, please provide further detail.

The Open University is in the forefront of creating a culture of lifelong learning. We strongly welcome this policy objective and action plan proposal. With over 50 years' experience providing high quality, part-time, flexible supported distance learning, we are keen to share our expertise and insight. The role of accessible, flexible part-time learning must be fully realised in the Lifelong learning action plan.

Proposed commitment 14:

We welcome the aim to embed a culture of lifelong learning early in life. The concept of having a linear career is well and truly in the past. Within all jobs, continuous learning throughout life is going to be required. By embedding a culture of lifelong learning, it will better embed career resilience and citizen's ability to adapt flexibly to the changing employment market.

We support a data driven approach aimed at supporting children who may be most vulnerable. It is important to recognise as well about the positive impact that adult education has on parental attitudes to children's education and that this should factor into holistic place-based interventions.

As many HEIs discovered during the Covid-19 pandemic, this approach requires infrastructure, resources and commitment and cannot not be done cheaply or easily. The Open University should be relied upon as a model. We welcome recent developments within the Department to establish a tertiary sector group and look forward to contributing to that in a collaborative and open manner.

Proposed Commitment 15:

The Open University welcomes taking a structured and coordinated approach to lifelong learning. We would welcome the opportunity to play an active role in the proposed lifelong learning project and development of a subsequent action plan. As pioneers of making lifelong learning a reality to millions of adults across the UK and Ireland, we have considerable expertise and enthusiasm for supporting Northern Ireland to make a step change in making lifelong learning accessible across all educational levels.

Proposed Commitment 16:

The proposed expansion of childcare support is crucial to creating a culture of lifelong learning. Childcare has traditionally been for those in work but making childcare more accessible and affordable to those in education or training would open doors for many with parental responsibilities. Again, it is crucial that part-time higher education students are able to benefit from this. We would welcome this proposal to be actioned as a priority.

It is important that government policy across the board reflects the ambition to truly create a culture of lifelong learning. There must be a recognition that the needs of adult learners are different to the traditional student. Therefore, improved, and appropriate opportunities and support must be available for adults across the system.

Proposed commitment 17:

We very much welcome any relaxation of Equivalent or Lower Qualification (ELQ) policy that would enable students who have previously studied in other subject areas access funding to help them to reskill. Part-time higher education is a particularly effective vehicle to support such learners.

Proposed commitment 18:

This would be a welcome initiative, particularly the emphasis on ensuring that this is accessible to SMEs.

Proposed Commitment 19:

The Open University already delivers flexible, modular learning. Our unique “Open Degree” allows students to build a personalised degree pathway across multiple subject areas, often in partnership with their employers. We would welcome the support of the Department to highlight the benefit of this approach more widely across citizens and employers. We are also very happy to share our expertise with our partners in the FE Sector to make their provision even more accessible.

Policy Commitments 20 and 21:

The Open University has provision for all levels of management and leadership developed by our “triple-accredited” Business School. It is important that training in this area is delivered flexibly, particularly to enable those in SMEs to engage. The future action plan should recognise this.

The Management and Leadership Action Plan should also recognise the need to embed the importance of positive employee relations and support the skills needs of trade unions.

Policy Commitment 22:

Recognising the needs for skills development within the NICS and wider public sector is important for the delivery of effective public services and innovative responses to complex policy challenges. The Open University has considerable academic expertise in public management and leadership and would very much welcome the opportunity to support the NICS with this commitment.

Policy Commitment 23:

The Open University has recently launched a new Employability Strategy with the aim of embedding the aim of supporting students to achieve their personal and career objectives across all aspects of the student journey. Our Employability Framework supports module teams to embed employability skills within the curriculum of all qualifications and draw attention to these to students. A qualification in its own right is insufficient to ensure that career objectives are met; individuals must be able to articulate how they have developed employability skills throughout the qualification and recognise their importance. We are very happy to share and build upon this learning in partnership with other providers.

Again, within this section, there are several references to the setting post-Covid but not post-Brexit, which is not referred to. Post-Brexit issues cannot be ignored, and they need unpacking in the development of this strategy and any further strategies and action plans deriving from it.

8. Are there any additional proposals you believe should be considered under the 'Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning' objective?

There are a number of additional proposals what would assist in achieving this objective:

- A Careers Service that reflects the modern economy. Tracking outcomes from careers consultations could provide much needed insight and data into aspirations and employment trends. The Open University could set up an arrangement to give feedback on Careers Service referrals to our university for example.
- Microcredentials are a new development within the HE and skills environments relevant to rapidly growing industries. The Skills Strategy should reflect innovations such as these as opportunities that will be increasingly important and more prevalent in the future.
- Improving digital infrastructure and addressing digital inequality and poor broadband access will enable people to meet their potential and continue lifelong learning, particularly given the acceleration of digitisation in a post-Covid-world.
- Consideration could be given to a recent [UK policy proposal](#) recommending telecommunications companies to enforce the zero rating of educational and career resources on mobile data, so that the use of these resources does not count towards users' mobile data allocation. Recommending that this could be paid for by a percentage of telecommunications companies' profits.
- The current level of postgraduate tuition fee loan available does not cover tuition costs and there is no postgraduate maintenance loan. This is a barrier, particularly for part-time students who will be studying a masters over at least 2/3 years. A maintenance loan would help make study more accessible.
- Challenges with numeracy, literacy and digital literacy skills prevents adults from engaging with lifelong learning. This contributes to a range of issues including opportunity deficits, social justice, self-esteem, and confidence. A new strategy for adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy is being developed in the Republic of Ireland.
- Paid virtual internships have proven successful for Open University students and graduates, those with a disability, caring commitments, living in rural areas who require flexible working hours etc.
- Incentivising SMEs to invest in skills development for their staff would address a key weakness in our economy. Creating opportunities for on-the-job training could make a real impact. Incentives would also go some way to address the specific barriers small employers face in delivering training, including scalability and lack of capacity.

9. Under ‘Enhancing Digital Skills, Creating Our Digital Spine’ we include only one recommendation, that an expert panel is appointed to develop a specific Digital Skills Action Plan for Northern Ireland (see pages 76 - 81).

Do you agree with this approach?

If you do not agree, please provide further detail.

As a provider of online, supported distance learning, we welcome the commitment within the strategy to improve the digital skills of the population. Realising this will open up more educational opportunities to citizens. The Open University has just begun a project focused on improving digital inclusion for our students as we are seeing extreme variations in digital confidence as well as access to broadband and appropriate hardware.

We would welcome the opportunity to be involved in the expert panel and look forward to hearing more detail about the vision and scope of such.

It should include membership from the voluntary, statutory, and private sector in order to have a wide range of expertise, all three Northern Ireland universities and the FE Sector should also be represented. Again, like all aspects of the strategy, a whole of government approach will be required to address the various improvements that will need to be made across skills and infrastructure.

The panel also needs to clearly define what basic digital skills are and what a ‘digital worker’ is, as reference has been made to these terms several times.

The proposed panel has an opportunity to introduce transformational KPIs which could contribute to a culture of lifelong learning. This should not be missed.

10. Have you any other comments on the Strategic Goals and Policy Objectives?

Covid-19 has highlighted the need for urgent action on addressing both digital poverty and rural broadband.

The Strategy should have a specific proposal dealing with tackling digital poverty, access to high-speed broadband and rural connectivity. The lack of mention suggests it has not even been considered as a barrier. Consideration should be given to [Jisc’s proposals](#) on digital inclusion.

There exists a digital divide in Northern Ireland:

“...the [digital divide](#) is the gap that exists between individuals who have access to modern information and communication technology and those who lack access.”

- Internet use varies sharply with age, with 55% of those aged 65 and over having used the internet compared to 98.4% of those aged between 16-24.
- 100% from professional occupations report using the internet compared to 24% with unskilled occupations.
- Males are more likely to use the internet compared to females.
- Urban areas are more likely to have faster broadband than those in rural areas

While access to the internet is not the panacea of creating a digital spine, it is a crucial component in addressing the skills imbalance and ensuring opportunities to develop skills are available to all.

Addressing these issues are essential to promoting lifelong learning. The Open University’s [partnership with Libraries NI](#) is an excellent example of what can be delivered for communities.

Furthermore, the provision of broadband in rural communities is fundamental to addressing regional imbalances.

11. The first two 'policy enablers': 'Enhancing Policy Cohesion' and 'Building Stronger Relationships' focus on a refreshed approach to the governance of the skills system (pages 84 - 90). Do you agree that these structures are a useful and appropriate approach to improving the development and implementation of skills policy in Northern Ireland?

If you do not agree, please provide further detail.

This document states "It is envisaged that the role of the Council will extend beyond mere advice." However, the strategy is light on detail that demonstrates how the Skills Council will have anything other than a consultative role. Without statutory powers and independence from the Department and Minister it is difficult to see how the proposed council's remit will extend beyond "mere advice".

The proposed structures could be more ambitious. Co-design and co-delivery should be built into the governance to ensure that there is mutual dependence between Government Departments and the Skills Council

The Chair should be independent and equipped with the necessary tools to drive an agenda that is reflective of all Council members and not just related to the Department for the Economy priorities. This would engender confidence in the Skills Council and generate more active buy-in from participants.

The Council should be free to hold the Executive to account for delivery against the Skills Strategy commitments and have this built clearly into any governing charter or terms of reference.

Genuine social partnership would be fostered by ensuring a balanced Skills Council reflective of key stakeholders and composed of business, trade unions, voluntary sector, and education providers. The needs of workers should be to the fore. As the Programme for Government states the aim of seeing inclusive growth in Northern Ireland, it would be prudent to focus on societal wellbeing as well as GDP and employment growth as a measure for economic success. Happy and fulfilled workers are absolutely crucial to achieving this.

Given the focus on "gender diversity" within this document, it is important that the membership of the Skills Council and all proposed governance structures reflect this. The Task & Finish Group working on the development of this Strategy was composed of eight men from outside government, while the only women named as members were representatives from the Department of the Economy.

The Skills Council should also be reflective of all regions across Northern Ireland. It is important that the needs of rural communities are not forgotten in this work going forward. Often the issues and inequalities identified in this document manifest themselves differently in rural areas and require bespoke solutions.

While proposed commitment 31 is an important one, the "diversity sub-committee" cannot be the only structure dealing with issues of equality and diversity. It must be woven into the fabric of overall decision making for any real difference to be achieved.

A ring-fenced Skills Fund is essential to the success of proposed commitment 32 for 2-, 5- and 10-year action plans. The one-year budget rounds in Northern Ireland can often impede forward planning of this nature. Within this, core funding for higher and further education should also see investment as key driver behind meeting the Skills Strategy objectives.

The OECD identifies the following as opportunities for improvement:

Increase vertical coordination between central and local government.

Encourage the development of the skills elements of 'community plans' to reflect local needs, but also recognise regional [Central Government] strategy; and

Increase information exchange and coordination between employers, education and training providers and local and central government.

We would like to see more about how the relationship with local government can be improved and local economic powers more effectively utilised. Further consideration needs to be given to how local skills plans are funded and how they correspond with the Skills Strategy and Skills Council

12. The third policy enabler focuses on 'Investment in the Skills System'. The programme of change proposed in this consultation document is likely to require substantial investment. Do you agree that this should be prioritised?

Please elaborate on your response. -Consultees who agree should remain mindful that this may mean reductions in funding for other public services.

If you disagree, please provide further detail.

Yes, it is vital that funding for skills is prioritised. Without appropriate resources and capacity, this document is just that, a document.

In the last decade investment in skills has fallen by close to 50% in Northern Ireland. We have lost our competitive advantage, and this must be rectified if we are to provide opportunities and meaningful employment to all in our society. We can do better. A ring-fenced fund is particularly important for forward planning.

It is important this includes both mainstream HE and FE funding which requires imbalances to be addressed to fully meet the objectives of the strategy.

It is important that the government continues to invest in key services such as health, and education. While it is crucial that our public services and those who provide them must be protected; creating a more balanced economy with equal opportunity is linked to improved social mobility, better health, and decreased crime levels.

Investing in our economy, in the right ways, is investing in a better future for all.