

OECD SKILLS BEYOND SCHOOL NORTHERN IRELAND COMMENTARY – AN INITIAL DEPARTMENTAL REPOSENSE

It is encouraging that within an international setting the OECD has recognised many strengths within the vocational education and training system in Northern Ireland. The ‘Skills Beyond Schools’ report points to the Northern Ireland approach to quality improvement, to the lecturer development policy and to the Further Education colleges’ strong links with employers, for example. However, the report also points to the challenges Northern Ireland faces in a number of areas including qualification reform, progression pathways and in valuing further the vocational education and training route.

The OECD report provides the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) with a further source of independent and outward looking evidence to support policy development. It compares and benchmarks postsecondary vocational education and training in Northern Ireland in an international context – providing valuable evidence on best practice and highlighting where lessons can be learnt. While the Department will consider the findings of the OECD report in detail, an initial response to the key challenges identified is set out below.

OECD Challenge:

- a) ***“Reflecting both international experience and local demand, the VET system needs to develop a substantial postsecondary segment above upper secondary level and below the level of a bachelor’s degree.”***

DEL Initial Response:

- The need to develop higher level competences in the workforce is established as a key strategic requirement to support growth and prosperity in Northern Ireland. Vocational education and training can help people realise their potential and will be a vital component in the mix of provision necessary to meet the future needs of the economy.
- Further education colleges are the main providers of postsecondary education below bachelor’s degree level. Of the considerable budget available to the Further Education sector for provision up to and including Level 3, almost two-thirds (63%) is at Level 3.

- In addition, over 97% of FE provision leads to qualifications on regulated qualifications frameworks – primarily professional and technical qualifications on the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), but also academic qualifications on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).
- Further Education colleges are also the sole providers of intermediate level (sub-degree) in Northern Ireland, and Further Education provision accounts for around 20% of all higher education enrolments in Northern Ireland.
- The Department’s review of apprenticeships was published on 13 January 2014 and is currently being consulted upon. It proposes that in future apprenticeships should commence at professional and technical level 3 and above and support progression through a variety of pathways including higher level apprenticeships and to further and higher education.

OECD Challenge:

- b) ***“Reform of the apprenticeship system is necessary to enhance its level and broaden its range. The main challenge is to upgrade apprenticeships, while ensuring that structures remain in place to integrate young people at risk into the labour market.”***

DEL Initial Response:

- The Department has commissioned a review of youth training to support the current review of apprenticeships to ensure that both apprenticeships and youth training support the growth and re-balancing of the Northern Ireland economy. The main aim of the youth training review is the development of a youth training offer of sufficient breadth and depth to enable young people to progress to an apprenticeship programme at level 3, to a level 3 further education programme, or into sustained employment.
- As an outworking of the review of apprenticeships, the Department is proposing to engage with employers, providers and potential participants

to explore the actions required to build capacity of higher level apprenticeships across the Northern Ireland economy. Higher level apprenticeships respond to employers' higher-level skill needs, support business growth, meet the career aspirations of individuals and enhance opportunities for social mobility.

- The aim of higher level apprenticeships is to help provide a better educated and more highly skilled workforce that meets the needs of the economy. A mainstreamed higher level apprenticeship will provide a progression route to higher level skills (level 4, 5 and above) for those in work and those entering the workplace for the first time.

OECD Challenge:

- c) ***“Outside apprenticeships, work-based learning is a limited element in programmes. Work-based learning, systematically integrated into vocational programmes as a mandatory, credit-bearing and quality assured component, is a key element in effective postsecondary provision.”***

DEL Initial Response:

- The Department is also embarking on a review of Further Education Means Business, the current further education strategy for Northern Ireland. The OECD report is very timely, and the Review of Further Education will provide an opportunity to consider the issues raised by the report in the context of further education delivery in Northern Ireland.

OECD Challenge:

d) ***“Routes for further up-skilling vocational graduates, including avenues for apprentice graduates to progress to higher level technical and professional qualifications, need to be developed.”***

- In line with the Department’s review of apprenticeships, which proposes that an apprentice should commence at level 3 and include opportunities for entry between level 3 and level 8, with appropriate progression routes being developed.

OECD Challenge:

e) ***“The qualification system requires reform, in the face of proliferating qualifications and potential divergences between the approach of England and that of Northern Ireland.”***

DEL Initial Response:

- Up until recently, the vocational qualifications used in Northern Ireland have been part of a UK-wide vocational qualifications system.
- While there has been some divergence recently Northern Ireland remains reliant on vocational qualifications that are on the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and which are regulated by Ofqual – the regulator for vocational qualifications in England.
- Adult vocational qualifications (in England) have been the subject of a recent review – led by Nigel Whitehead. While this is an England focused review, some of the recommendations have implications for Northern Ireland and the other Devolved Administrations.
- In addition, Ofqual is currently embarking on a review of the QCF.

- Northern Ireland will continue to be active participants in these reviews, to ensure that the interests of Northern Ireland are recognised, understood and taken into account and that they seek to address the issues raised by the OECD in this report.

OECD Challenge:

- f) ***“Foundation degrees face a number of challenges if they are to become the predominant qualification in the mix of provision”***

DEL Initial Response:

- The Department has initiated a number of initiatives to address this challenge. The Department will continue to work with the higher education providers and other key stakeholders to review and improve the current structures. Enrolments on Foundation Degree courses are now in excess of 2,400 against a target of 2,500 by March 2015. Part-time Foundation Degree enrolments are up 150% over the last 4 years.

OECD Challenge:

- g) ***“More robust data on labour market outcomes are needed, building on already planned measures designed to collect better data on vocational graduates, and encouraging institutions to make use of data for policy evaluation and development”***

DEL Initial Response:

- The Department uses data extensively to monitor and benchmark performance, and to enhance the quality of provision amongst its education and training providers.

- In terms of destinations of leavers from Further Education, a research pilot is underway to collect information on employment and other benefits of the Further Education experience six months after leaving. It is expected that this will become an annual survey similar to the one used in Higher Education. Also, current research into early leavers from Training for Success will allow an examination of why some people leave the programme before completing their training.

Department for Employment and Learning

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