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Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland: November 2004



SKILLS STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

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by BARRY GARDINER MP Minister with responsibility for Employment and Learning	
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FOREWORD

Northern Ireland, in common with the rest of the United Kingdom has, in recent years, achieved economic growth, falling unemployment and higher economic activity rates. In contrast, productivity and thus the competitiveness of our businesses, lags behind the rest of the United Kingdom, we have lower employment rates and a significant proportion of long-term unemployed. At the same time, we face competition from countries such as China and India, and from other Asian and Eastern European countries which produce significant numbers of talented and high-skilled workers. Northern Ireland therefore faces significant challenges if it is to meet future economic competition and take advantage of opportunities.



The skills of our workforce is a significant factor in addressing these issues. Government invests heavily in higher education, further education and in vocational training. If we are to move towards the aspiration of a world class workforce it is essential that that investment is well focused and delivers the skills required. A major review of the strategy for further education has been completed and good progress has been made in implementing the strategy for essential skills to address the weaknesses in literacy and numeracy among our adults. But we need to do more.

This Strategy, seeks to provide, for the first time, an over-arching 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.

I very much look forward to the response of all of the stakeholders in Northern Ireland; employers, providers, individuals, trade unions and others, to the proposals set out in this paper.

BARRY GARDINER MP

Minister with responsibility for Employment and Learning

SKILLS STRATEGY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The future economic direction for Northern Ireland is articulated in the Government's Economic Vision, published alongside the Draft Priorities and Budget 2005-08. It sets out a view of the longer term objectives for the economy, the importance of higher value-added jobs, enhancements to productivity and competitiveness, increasing skill levels and, improving participation in education and training. Ensuring that individuals have the skills relevant to future employment opportunities is one of the key drivers to achieving the Economic Vision.

It is widely recognised that the skills levels of the workforce play a vital role in raising productivity and increasing competitiveness. Skills are also important in promoting social inclusion, since for individuals, they provide a route to stable employment, better wages, and long-term prosperity, as well as to personal development and fulfilment. Out of this come wider benefits, including better health and greater social stability. The investment in skills therefore, is central both to economic and social well-being, and lies at the heart of public policy.

2. Northern Ireland has a number of challenges to face in the skills arena. They include:
 - dealing with the impact of the new skills and flexibilities demanded by increasing globalisation, which has meant a migration of traditional manufacturing to low-cost economies, an acceleration in the pace of technological change, and the potential for new jobs with higher skills requirements;
 - working with the reality of a national and increasingly international labour market, in which labour is mobile, and in which not only will many young people take their skills outside Northern Ireland but where others will bring their skills here, to the benefit of the economy;
 - raising the general level of skills, in the existing workforce, through

sustained investment, reducing the scale of the problem of literacy and numeracy, and ensuring that the educational system, which has significant strengths in the general curriculum, is equally strong in relation to more applied skills;

- addressing the high level of economic inactivity, which constrains the size of the workforce available for economic growth; and
- addressing the negative impact of skill deficiencies in the workforce on productivity and competitiveness.

Many of these challenges are not unique to Northern Ireland. If, however, Northern Ireland businesses are to compete successfully and public services are to meet citizens' expectations, individuals, together with employers, unions and Government will need to work effectively together to identify current and future skills needs, raise skill levels and promote lifelong learning.

3. The proposed strategy has to be comprehensive in approach. It must focus on raising the skills of the current workforce; enhancing the quality of those entering the workforce both from within Northern Ireland and from those entering Northern Ireland from outside; and addressing the employability skills of those not in employment. All three groups are important to our future, and their different needs must be addressed.
4. In this context there are different kinds of skills to be considered:
 - the essential skills of literacy and numeracy and, increasingly, information and communications technology (ICT);
 - employability skills, including the key skills of team working, problem solving and flexibility; and
 - work-based (occupational/sector) skills, including skills and competences established in the National Qualifications Framework and employer specific skills which build on the qualifications framework.

Throughout the document qualifications are accepted as the most appropriate measure of skill levels. It is the contention of this strategy that skill levels, generally, are too low and that if Northern Ireland is to compete successfully in the global economic arena there must be a concerted effort to drive up the level of skills on all fronts.

5. The last decade has seen the decline of major traditional industries, especially textiles and engineering, and significant changes in agriculture. Despite this, Northern Ireland was the fastest growing region of the United Kingdom (UK), during the 1990s in terms of Gross Value Added (GVA). The growth has slowed in recent years but the provision of new jobs grew strongly with an increase of approximately 10% in the number of jobs in Northern Ireland compared with 6% in the UK as a whole.
6. Northern Ireland faces, however, a number of key challenges. These include, the effects of globalisation, rapid technological advancement and the decline of traditional industrial sectors. It faces competition from countries such as China, India and other Asian and Eastern European countries which are producing significant numbers of high-skilled and talented low cost workers. The manufacturing and service sectors are routinely outsourcing to developing economies. Unemployment at 4.7% is at a record low level but this masks a high proportion of adults (29.4%) who are economically inactive, including 24% who are long-term unemployed. This means that around 3 out of 10 adults of working age in Northern Ireland are outside the labour market altogether and are not adding to economic productivity.
7. Northern Ireland has many strengths in terms of skills with the number of students in higher education steadily increasing, including a greater number of full-time undergraduate students entering higher education institutions from the lower socio-economic classes. The number of pupils (59%) achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C in their final year of compulsory education is also steadily increasing and 95% of school pupils, in 2002/03 who entered for A levels achieved two or more. Despite this relative success, Northern Ireland has a legacy of under-achievement in key areas, especially, in a large number of low-skilled people in the workforce. Almost 1 in 4 adults have significant deficiencies

in literacy and numeracy and the Labour Force Survey shows that over one in three of the workforce is not qualified to level 2 in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (equivalent to 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C) and, within this group, almost one quarter have no qualifications at all.

8. Projections to 2012 show that demand for jobs is likely to increase for professional, associate professional and technical, and personal service jobs and demand is likely to fall in areas requiring low skills. Northern Ireland has too few people qualified at technician level (level 4). A major issue for skills is the impact of demographic change with 18% more people over age 50 by 2011 compared with 2001, and 11% fewer children. Consequently, there will be fewer young people entering the workforce and a need to retrain the existing workforce in order to update their skills.
9. Government, with the support of employers and unions, has, for some time, supported individuals in skills development. Demand has been articulated, at regional and local levels, by employers and their sectoral or representative bodies. In some cases, this has worked effectively but is not universal. It is, therefore, recognised that Government needs to support business in articulating its skills needs. The funding of learning in support of skills creation is complex where individuals invest in their own learning, employers bear all or part of cost of maintaining workforce skills and Government makes a considerable contribution, especially in relation to higher education and, to vocational education and training for young people. There is, however, often a misunderstanding about who pays for training. A large number of providers help create the skills in Northern Ireland across universities, teacher training institutions, the further education colleges, agricultural colleges, contracted training organisation providers in the private and community sectors and employers.
10. The principle underlying the Government's Welfare Reform agenda is "work for those who can, security for those who cannot". A system of work-focused interviews and mandatory New Deal programmes have been introduced, with the aim of increasing the numbers of those claiming Jobseekers' Allowance, to obtain work. Participation in training and employment programmes is an option for many covered by the Welfare

Reform programme and raising their employability skills is a key factor of the Reform programme. In addition, the Disablement Advisory Service (DAS) provides a range of programmes to assist people with disabilities to gain and retain work.

11. Despite the considerable and wide variety of learning and training programmes across Northern Ireland, the large number of providers and the significant financial investment, these are not effective in addressing Northern Ireland's skills needs. There is need for an over-arching strategy for skills with a much clearer set of goals and with an action plan designed to achieve them if the challenges for the economy and for individuals are to be addressed, and best use to be made of the considerable investment in education and training provision, as well as the key initiatives such as the Essential Skills Strategy and the Review of Further Education.
12. A central value of this strategy is that it is demand-driven by the needs of the economy, both the private and public sector, and the need for that economy to be more productive. The identification and articulation of the business need for skills, by employers and their representative bodies, must be made more clearly and must become a central driver of the overall strategy. It has always been difficult to assess the demand for skills. The strategy aims to improve this position by structural changes which will engage employers and their local providers, to determine local demand. The Department will foster a wider regional debate and will draw together local, national and international data as well as ideas on potential labour market properties. To assist the drive for employer engagement and better information the membership of the Northern Ireland Skills Task Force will be reviewed and strengthened to ensure that the work on labour market information is focused so as to provide a clear and broad-based picture of current and future needs. The Skills Task Force will put in place a strong research base linked closely to the work of the Department's research strategy and to labour market research provided through the new Sector Skills Councils and the Sector Skills Development Agency.
13. The strategy must reflect fully both the current position and future needs and must be demand driven by the needs of the economy. It must deliver a ladder of skills, suited to the different needs of the economy and

aspirations of individuals, enabling individuals to build up skills throughout their career and to achieve employability for life. The overall aim of the strategy will be:

- to help people progress up the skills ladder, in order to lift the skills levels of the whole workforce;
- to raise productivity;
- to improve competitiveness; and
- to enhance the employability of those currently excluded from the labour market.

14. To put the skills progression ladder in place, priorities are required. These are to:

- raise the profile of the demand side, existing and potential, improve the flow of labour market information and the impact of demand on supply;
- improve the relevance, coherence, response and quality of current education and training provision;
- promote the acquisition of skills with particular emphasis, initially, on those who have not yet achieved a level 2 qualification or require assistance with essential skills;
- improve access to skills and sustainable employment; and
- make the supporting infrastructure easier to navigate, especially in the field of qualifications.

15. In the light of the strategic aim and priorities, the following action plan is proposed to take forward the overall skills agenda.

- The Skills Task Force will develop a Regional Framework for Employment and Skills Action, including an agreed set of regional skill priority areas.
- A small number of employer-led Workforce Development Forums will be established, at local level, to advise the Department on the local demand for skills.
- The collation and use of Labour Market Information and Research will be enhanced in order to improve the demand side of skills.
- The training provision for 16-19 year olds will be re-configured and Apprenticeships will be developed and extended.
- The findings of the Further Education Review will be implemented, including revised curricular, planning and funding processes.
- The number of Foundation Degrees in areas of priority skills will be increased significantly.
- Essential skills will be extended to include computer literacy and will utilise the existing provision for ICT.
- An entitlement to a first level 2 qualification for those aged over 19 will be introduced.
- Management and leadership skills in Northern Ireland companies and organisations will continue to be developed.
- Welfare Reform will be extended to help those on Incapacity Benefit and those with multiple barriers, to enter or re-enter the labour market.
- A revised qualifications system, covering vocational provision, will be in place by 2007.
- The financial implications of education and training will be clarified and communicated to employers and individuals.

SKILLS STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The future economic direction for Northern Ireland is articulated in the Government's Economic Vision, published alongside the Draft Priorities and Budget 2005-08. It sets out a view of the longer term objectives for the economy, the importance of higher value-added jobs, enhancements to productivity and competitiveness, increasing skill levels and, improving participation in education and training. Ensuring that individuals have the skills relevant to future employment opportunities is one of the key drivers to achieving the Economic Vision.

The skills levels of the workforce play a vital role in raising productivity and increasing competitiveness. Skills are also important in promoting social inclusion, since for individuals, they provide a route to stable employment, better wages, and long-term prosperity, as well as to personal development and fulfilment. Out of this come wider benefits, including better health and greater social stability. The investment in skills therefore, is central both to economic and social well-being, and lies at the heart of public policy.

- 1.2 Northern Ireland has a number of challenges to face in the skills arena. They include:

- dealing with the impact of the new skills and flexibilities demanded by increasing globalisation, which has meant a migration of significant parts of traditional manufacturing to low-cost economies, an acceleration in the pace of technological change, and increased the potential for new jobs with higher skills requirements;
- working with the reality of a national and increasingly international labour market, in which labour is mobile, and in which not only will many young people take their skills outside Northern Ireland but where others will bring their skills here, to the benefit of the economy;

- raising the general level of skills, in the existing workforce, through sustained investment, reducing the scale of the problem of literacy and numeracy, and ensuring that the educational system, which has significant strengths in the general curriculum, is equally strong in relation to more applied skills;
- addressing the high level of economic inactivity, which constrains the size of the workforce available to support the economy; and
- addressing the negative impact of skill deficiencies in the workforce on productivity and competitiveness.

Many of these challenges are not unique to Northern Ireland. If, however, Northern Ireland businesses are to compete successfully and public services are to meet citizens' expectations, individuals, together with employers, unions and Government will need to work effectively together to identify current and future skills needs, raise skill levels and promote lifelong learning.

1.3 The proposed strategy has to be comprehensive in approach. It must focus 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 our future, and their different needs must be addressed.

1.4 In this context there are different kinds of skills to be considered:

- the essential skills of literacy and numeracy and, increasingly, ICT;
- employability skills, including the key skills of team working, problem solving and flexibility; and
- work-based (occupational/sector) skills, including skills and competences established in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and employer specific skills which build on the qualifications framework.

Throughout the document qualifications are accepted as the most appropriate measure of skill levels. It is the contention of this strategy that skill levels, generally, are too low and that if Northern Ireland is to compete successfully in the global economic arena there must be a concerted effort to drive up the level of skills on all fronts.

- 1.5 This proposed strategy seeks to provide, for the first time, an over-arching framework for the development of skills. The approach builds on a great deal of previous work. The Programme for Government (PfG) and Priorities and Budget documents have emphasised the importance of skills to Northern Ireland, as have a range of Departmental and inter Departmental strategies and policies. A series of reviews and evaluations have also added to the understanding of the change required to ensure that individuals have the right skills for current and future employment opportunities.
- 1.6 There are also existing and highly relevant targets for skills set out in the Public Service Agreements (PSAs) of the Department for Employment and Learning and other Departments, in the medium-term strategic priorities identified by the Economic Development Forum and, in the Corporate Strategy of Invest NI. For example, the Department is committed to increasing the proportion of the workforce with at least a level 2 qualification from 63% in summer 2003 to 75% by spring 2007, and by 2010, reducing the proportion of long-term unemployed in Northern Ireland to the same levels as the rest of the United Kingdom (UK), currently 24% of the unemployed in Northern Ireland compared to 16.3% in the rest of the UK.
- 1.7 There is a significant, and growing financial investment in skills from Government, employers and individuals. For example, higher and further education enrolments have increased, as has the number of people following apprenticeships. This has helped to ensure, over the last decade or so, strong levels of growth, of employment and, prosperity for many in Northern Ireland. However, there is still a long way to go, if Northern Ireland is to meet the economic challenges and opportunities, of the present and of the future.

- 1.8 An agreed strategy on skills, guiding a collective investment in skills, has an important role to play, and will help galvanise action. The strategy is about creating a clear overview of what is needed and relating this to organisations and programmes which are in place already; seeking to integrate them, and as necessary, amend them; building better co-operation and consensus on the overall direction; and, making proposals to cover perceived gaps. It will provide a strategic framework which will be reviewed and developed over the coming years, will build on progress and refine objectives of economic and social policy.
- 1.9 The Department is committed to promoting equality of opportunity and good community relations, the delivery of the goals of targeting social need, and to strategies on regional development and rural development. Those issues will be addressed in the course of general consultation on this document, and the Department will meet its obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and ensure that equality impact assessments and policy proofing will be carried out.
- 1.10 **Your views are, therefore, sought on the approach set out in this document.**

2. THE SKILLS CHALLENGE

- 2.1 Since 1990, Northern Ireland has seen a decline in the major traditional industries, in particular textiles and engineering, and significant change, also, in agricultural employment. At the same time, Northern Ireland was the fastest growing region of the UK in terms of Gross Value Added (GVA)¹. Whilst relative growth has slowed in recent years, the improved economic performance has persisted into the current decade. The provision of jobs grew strongly, over the 1990s, with a 21% increase between 1992 and 2002; compared to an increase of 11% for the UK. In the period 1997-2004, service sector employment levels increased by 15%, compared to a 9% increase in the UK, while manufacturing has decreased in the same period by 15%. The growth areas within the service sector included computer and related activities, wholesale and retail and, hotels and restaurants. The construction sector also experienced significant growth.
- 2.2 The last five years has seen an increase of approximately 10% in the number of jobs in Northern Ireland, compared to a 6% growth in the UK over the same period. Northern Ireland has performed better than any other UK region, with the exception of Greater London, but still requires to make progress if it is to complete the transition to one of equality with the other regions. It is also important to note that a higher proportion of the working population is employed in public services than the rest of the UK, and that this has played an important role in the labour market.
- 2.3 The Labour Market statistics of July 2004 identify an economically active population of 750,000 and employment of 712,000. Around 80% of those in employment are either full-time or self-employed, while 20% are part-time; a much higher proportion of part-time workers are female. The unemployment rate in Northern Ireland is at a record low and for the first time ever is at the UK level of 4.7%. However, productivity in Northern Ireland remains only 84% of that of the UK. In turn, output per hour in the United States, France and Germany is significantly higher than the UK as a whole. Further, the employment rate in Northern Ireland for people of working age is currently 67%, compared to a UK figure of 75%, and the economic inactivity rate is considerably higher than the UK; around 3 in 10 adults of working age in Northern Ireland are outside the labour market.

¹ Gross Value Added measures the contribution of the economy of each individual producer, industry or sector in the UK.

- 2.4 As stated earlier Northern Ireland continues to have a significant proportion of long-term unemployed, well above the UK average. In addition, the wider economy is going through a period of transition, with a continuing reduction in traditional manufacturing industry and a greater focus on jobs in the service sector. In effect, many of the former skills in the workforce are no longer in demand, leaving many established workers in a more marginalised position, unable to find a market for their skills. In recent years the economy has been able to absorb much of the structural changes taking place and unemployment has steadily decreased. However, this will not continue indefinitely. A key component in looking ahead is to consider what skills will be required in the future to be able to take advantage of fresh opportunities both locally and internationally. Equipping people with the highest possible level of skills will have long-term benefits.
- 2.5 In all sectors, but particularly in the construction, engineering and hospitality and tourism sectors, there is an emergence of a skilled and willing migrant workforce. This trend is likely to continue and is being embraced actively by many employers as an alternative source of skilled and available labour. These employees are a welcome addition to the local skills pool but will often have significant language and other vocational learning needs.
- 2.6 The factors which explain productivity can be grouped into five categories:
- human capital (skill levels in the population)
 - physical capital
 - innovation including Research and Development (R&D)
 - enterprise
 - competition

Whilst it is estimated that over one third of our lower productivity, compared to the UK, is due to the lower employment rate and the higher economic inactivity rate skills issues are a very significant contributory factor.

Accordingly, increasing emphasis is placed on raising the skills levels of the population to raise productivity and employers are seeking higher skilled workers. This is being driven by technological change, globalisation, management de-layering and rising customer expectations.

2.7 It cannot be assumed that the comparative economic success of the 1990s will continue, or that Northern Ireland will close the gap on the rest of the UK. The challenges are increasing. Whereas in the 1980s, Japan and Germany provided the main economic competition, it is now emerging strongly, also, in China, India and other Asian and Eastern European countries. The developing countries are producing significant numbers of high skilled and talented low cost workers. For example, wages in China are less than 5% of those in the UK and labour costs in Korea are just under half the UK levels, while the proportion of graduates in the working age population is identical.² Multi-national companies, in both the manufacturing and service sectors, are outsourcing routinely to developing economies. Globalisation can be regarded as a challenge or an opportunity. It is, however, developing at a rapid pace, spurred by the increasing globalisation of computer/telecommunications technology. The response cannot be passive.

2.8 Northern Ireland must, therefore, engage seriously with innovation, creativity and skills development, in both its private and public sectors, to sustain and indeed to build a competitive position for our companies and more effective public services. The education and training system and employers must produce:-

- more qualified and skilled workers;
- stronger management, leadership and team-working skills;
- more people who are literate, numerate and skilled in the use of ICT; and
- a greater focus on creativity and design; an ability to translate ideas into saleable products; and to solve problems.

² Source: DTI Innovation Report - Competing in the global economy: the innovation challenge (December 2003)

2.9 Northern Ireland has many strengths in terms of skills:

- over the past 10 years, the number of students in higher education in Northern Ireland has been increasing steadily and was at its highest level in 2002/03 with just under 65,000 enrolments;³
- in the 2003/04 academic year, there was a greater proportion of full-time undergraduate students entering higher education institutions in Northern Ireland from the lower socio-economic classifications⁴ than any other country of the UK (22% in Northern Ireland compared to 19% in Scotland and England and, 21% in Wales).
- in 2002/03, 59% of pupils in their final year of compulsory education achieved 5 or more GCSEs grades A*-C or vocational equivalent, 2 percentage points higher than in 2001/02 and 4 percentage points higher than in 1997/98;⁵
- in 2002/03, 95% of school pupils who entered for A levels achieved 2 or more at grades A-E, 2 percentage points higher than in 2001/02;⁶ and
- at the end of March 2003, there were approximately 6,400 Modern Apprentices in full-time employment⁷.

2.10 However, despite Northern Ireland's relative success and continuing improvements in performance, and its ability, in particular, to produce a high proportion of students with strong academic skills, it is also important to recognise that the education system in Northern Ireland has a legacy of under-achievement in key areas, most obviously, in the significant proportion of low-skilled people in the workforce. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) 1997, showed almost 1 in 4 adults to be at lower levels of document and prose literacy. The Labour Force Survey shows that over 1 in 3 of the workforce is not qualified to

³ Source: HESA

⁴ Source: SEC data is provided by UCAS which has approx 80% coverage of new entrants to full-time undergraduate courses at HE institutions in NI

⁵ Source: Summary of Annual Examinations Results

⁶ Source: Summary of Annual Examinations Results

⁷ All participants within the Modern Apprenticeship strand of the Jobskills Programme have 'employed' status

level 2 in the NQF (the equivalent of 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C), and within that group almost one-quarter have no qualifications at all. While the numbers below level 2, overall, are similar to the rest of the UK, the numbers with no qualifications are significantly higher (see Table 1). This presents a major problem for employers and for future growth employment.

TABLE 1
Percentages of People of Working Age Qualified at each Level

	Level 5	Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Below Level 2	No qualification
UK	5	20	20	22	19	14
England	5	20	19	22	20	14
Wales	5	19	18	23	17	17
Scotland	4	24	22	20	16	14
Northern Ireland	4	18	19	23	12	23

Labour Force Survey⁸

2.11 In Northern Ireland, 41% of the workforce are qualified at level 3 and above compared to 45% for the UK as a whole; this is explained, in part, by the long tradition of migration of well qualified young people, after school and university, out of Northern Ireland. A recent survey⁹ of Northern Ireland domiciled full-time graduates showed that 13% of those who studied in Northern Ireland left Northern Ireland after graduation and 72% of those that studied in GB did not return. On average, nearly 30% of Northern Ireland domiciled students moved away from Northern Ireland to take their university course and did not return, after graduation. In addition, it is recognised that many graduates are vastly over-qualified for the jobs they are doing and, consequently, are under-employed.

2.12 Evidence of skills problems has emerged from the comprehensive labour market research conducted on behalf of the Northern Ireland Skills Task Force. It has published a number of key labour market studies, most notably the Skills Monitoring Reports, and the sector-based Skills

⁸ Source: DfES estimates from the Labour Force Survey, Autumn 2002

⁹ Source: The First Destinations survey of 9,153 students was undertaken by the Higher Education Statistical Agency six months after their 2001/02 graduation

Forecasting Papers. The evidence suggests that Northern Ireland faces some specific skills shortages, most frequently reported in the business services and manufacturing industries and for managers, senior officials, skilled trades, professionals and operatives. Technician skills in particular are sought. There has been some tightening of labour supply; for example, 10% of employers reporting vacancies experienced difficulty in filling the vacancy. There is also a continuing proportion of the workforce who requires employability skills; 13% of employers reported a gap between the skills of the current workforce and those needed to meet their business objectives. There are particular problems at occupational skills levels 3 and 4 with some employers reporting a degree of mismatch between the skill needs of their industry and the content of the qualifications on offer and, in respect of the significant numbers with low or no qualifications impacting on productivity levels.

- 2.13 The National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) survey of adult participation in learning across the UK, in 2003, showed that fewer adults participated in learning in Northern Ireland (30%) than in any other UK country (England 39%, Scotland 38%, Wales 42%, UK average 39%). The number of full-time full-year students on placement in Northern Ireland has declined over the last year, decreasing from 1,749 students in 2001/02 to 1,473 in 2002/03¹⁰. These may indicate that many individuals do not fully recognise the degree to which better skills and qualifications can assist them achieve personal goals, and, in particular, widen the range of employment opportunities open to them.
- 2.14 It should, also, be noted that the public sector in Northern Ireland employs 27% of the workforce. The 2002 Skills Monitoring Study determined that the public sector was a major player in the recruitment of labour with 24% of organisations having vacancies. The sector has also reported growing skills and labour shortages, most particularly in Health and Education and individual departments, especially the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) have been focusing on the needs of the workforce for which they have direct responsibility.

¹⁰ Source: HESA

- 2.15 A major issue for skills and, subsequently, for the workforce is the impact of demographic change. Population projections suggest that by 2011 there will be 18% more people, over age 50, in comparison with 2001, and 11% fewer children. Consequently, there will be fewer school leavers entering the workforce and, potentially, a greater need for the retraining of those within the existing workforce, and an increased demand for employees to update their skills.
- 2.16 Level 2 qualifications and essential skills are recognised as a necessary pre-condition to improve employability and gain employment, but level 2 qualifications are not sufficient, in themselves, to gain higher quality employment or to improve, significantly, productivity. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) reports that, when learners gain level 2 qualifications and develop skills in literacy and numeracy they are much more likely to continue their learning, and, thereby, to achieve higher value-added employment.
- 2.17 The evidence suggests that employers gain from the development of skills, both directly in terms of improving productivity and, perhaps less directly, through promoting flexibility. Many employers in Northern Ireland invest significantly in the skills of their workforce. Some, however, take a more sceptical view of the benefits of training and fear that their investment will be wasted, if employees choose to move on to other employers. The structure of employment, with a large number of very small businesses, may also militate against investment in training by employers.
- 2.18 Innovation is an important element in productivity and in promoting economic development. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) recognised this in its strategy “Think/Create/Innovate”, which sets out a plan of action to support innovation across Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland’s current performance in innovation is weak. For example, in 2002, there were 27 Value Added Tax (VAT) registrations per 10,000 adults in Northern Ireland compared to 37 per 10,000 in the UK as a whole. Equally, there are not as many business start-ups in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the UK. Expenditure on R&D, another indicator of innovation, lags behind the rest of the UK. A key related question in the

skills area is how best to embed enterprise and entrepreneurship skills, within both the existing workforce and, the education and training system.

- 2.19 There are, therefore, significant challenges with skills available from the existing labour force. These are accentuated by continuing problems with the flow into the labour market. There are many positive outcomes from the education system but too many young people still leave school with low or no qualifications. For example, in 2002/03, 5.2% left school with no formal qualifications of any kind, a figure broadly in line with that in England but still much too high. Too many leave with essential skills problems. These young people find their way either into unskilled jobs, unemployment, or remedial-based training. For many, there is no clear view of their career aspirations. The Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education (DE) commissioned a review of the provision of careers advice and guidance in schools. The report indicated that young people are more likely to be influenced by their parents, peers and teachers rather than careers advisers and that they had insufficient knowledge or experience of the world of work. A further worrying trend has been the decline in the number of young people undertaking study in science and mathematics, areas of the curriculum which are linear in nature, and which underpin much of the learning required for the new technologies.
- 2.20 Many young people are not well served by what might be termed the educational infrastructure. There is a premium on academic education and the pathway for young people with strong academic achievement is straightforward. There has been movement, in recent years, to increase flexibility in the curriculum for 14-16 year olds, who now have the opportunity to undertake vocational courses through the further education and training systems. Vocational provision is not, however, sufficiently available to most young people, whether they wish to pursue more general or more applied education. Furthermore, the qualifications system makes their choices complicated and progression difficult. These issues are, however, being tackled through the review of Post-Primary Education, and in recent initiatives by the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).

- 2.21 There are a number of key and recurring challenges, which emerge from the evidence. Firstly, Northern Ireland is fully exposed to the effects of increasing globalisation and rapid technological advancement, as demonstrated in the decline of the traditional industrial sectors. Civil strife also reduced the capacity, over several decades, to attract or generate new employment, with new skills, to address enough of this decline. High public sector employment has helped cushion some of this structural weakness. Secondly, there is a strong link between economic inactivity and the overall productivity level in Northern Ireland. A historically low level of unemployment has been reached but much of what remains is stubborn, long-term unemployment, which is spatially concentrated. Further, the low level of unemployment tends to mask a high level of economic inactivity, and also low level of qualifications, likewise geographically concentrated. Many, but not all of those unemployed or economically inactive, lack skills and are at some distance from the labour market. In addition, the low level of skills of those in employment means that, unless there is significant up-skilling of the workforce, new high value added investment will not be attracted and relatively low levels of productivity will persist.
- 2.22 In a perfect market the supply of skills would match labour market demand. There is evidence which suggests that this is not the case in Northern Ireland. In many areas labour market information suggests that there is a mismatch between the existing job opportunities and the skill levels of too many of the unemployed and economically inactive. This would suggest also that the economy might have difficulty, in some areas, providing skilled workers for jobs in new and emerging business enterprises. The Careers Review, and evidence from employers, point to difficulties with careers provision for young people and, indeed for adults. There is an enormous range of labour market information available, but it is not easily accessible to education and training providers or to parents. The choices and pathways for young people towards and within the world of work are too often complicated by the variety of courses, organisations and qualifications with which they are confronted. Society values the academic route to the labour market, and it is the most straightforward. Outside of the academic pathway, the qualifications system is complex with multiple providers, different forms of assessment, an enormous



range of qualifications and difficult routes of progression. The curriculum, since the late 1980s, has reinforced the value of the academic over the vocational. There is concern, in some quarters, that provision is not sufficiently responsive to demand nor is it sufficiently flexible.

Do you accept this analysis of the skills challenge facing Northern Ireland? Are there additional factors which the Department should address in this context?

3. THE CURRENT RESPONSE

- 3.1 Government, with the support of employers and unions, has, for a long time, been engaged in supporting individuals in skills development. There is a wide range of current policy responses, programmes and initiatives aimed at helping individuals identify the skills they need and enabling them to acquire them. In addition, businesses in both the private and public sector are investing in their people, to achieve their business objectives. The evidence suggests, however, that there are some continuing skills weaknesses in the economy, amongst those in employment and those seeking to enter the labour market.
- 3.2 The demand for skills has, traditionally, been articulated at regional and local levels, by employers and their sectoral or representative bodies. In some cases, this has worked effectively. For example, the construction industry has identified its needs through its Training Board; the engineering and software industries have worked successfully, at representative level, with the further education sector, and some individual companies have been very pro-active in stating their positions on skills needs. The picture, however, is not universal, and Government has recognised that it needs to support business in articulating its skills needs. In 1998, the Northern Ireland Skills Task Force was established to debate the demand for skills, at a regional and sectoral level, and to commission monitoring and forecasting research in particular skills areas.
- 3.3 More recently, the Department has signed up to the UK-wide policy on sectoral skills development which has established the Skills for Business Network (SfBN). The network comprises the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) and, ultimately, around 25 employer-led Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), covering some 80% of UK employment. The SSCs will work with the relevant stakeholders in Northern Ireland to address the skills needs of the various sectors, and will agree priorities and targets with employers and partners to address four key goals:
- reducing skills gaps and shortages;
 - improving productivity, and public service performance;

- increasing opportunities to boost skills and productivity; and
- improving learning supply.

The SSCs also have responsibility in Northern Ireland for producing Labour Market Information including skills forecasting, and developing and maintaining national occupational standards, and modern apprenticeship frameworks.

- 3.4 What has not worked sufficiently successfully has been the link between the articulation of demand and the supply of skills. Individual supply side organisations have often worked well with companies or employer bodies to affect curricula or to determine outputs, and there are good examples to be followed. However, there is a need to strengthen this approach, both regionally and locally, so that training fully meets employer demand. Further, in today's world, it is, no longer sustainable to rely completely on existing employers and providers to determine skill needs. As economies engage with transition the need for forecasting potential future skill needs and opportunities is even more critical.
- 3.5 The creation of skills is a partnership between Government, individuals and employers. The funding of learning in support of skills creation is a complex issue within which there is a history of individuals investing in learning and employers bearing all or part of the cost of maintaining workforce skills. The relationship between the various parties has not, however, been well articulated. At present, in broad terms, Government bears the cost in relation to vocational education and training for young people, under 19, who are not in full-time employment. Funding is provided through the further education and Jobskills systems, alongside post-16 school provision.
- 3.6 For those in higher education, there are a number of support mechanisms with individuals investing jointly with Government in the learning process. Further education carries a significant subsidy for both full-time and part-time participants over 19, and those who are unemployed have access to a range of initiatives with fee remission. Essential skills provision is free for all learners.

- 3.7 For most companies and organisations, however, training relevant to their needs must be part of their business investment, and they need therefore to buy in their own training at their own cost or provide it in-house. Some make use of further education provision on a negotiated basis. There is, sometimes, a reluctance to pay for what is regarded as Government-funded education and training provision, but this is a misunderstanding of the colleges' responsibility. Outside of the basic training which Government can support, and which is described above, it must be the responsibility of employers and the individual to fund personal development, professional development or bespoke training. It is, however, appropriate that Invest NI supports part of the training costs of its client companies through the Company Development Programme, as part of their agreed development strategies.
- 3.8 A large number of providers help create the skills in Northern Ireland ranging across the universities, the teacher training colleges the further education colleges, agricultural colleges, contracted training organisations, providers in the private and community sectors and employers.
- 3.9 The largest institutions are the three universities – the Queen's University of Belfast, the University of Ulster and the Open University. The universities are largely free to determine their own provision, though Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster, clearly, take cognisance of developments in the regional economy. This is extremely important since the two main universities provide c.30,000 full-time and c.10,000 part-time undergraduate places and c.4,500 full-time and c.7,500 part-time post-graduate opportunities, thus making a major contribution to the skill base. Together, the two universities have provided the vast majority of the graduate level skills available to the regional economy, and will continue to do so. In addition, the teacher training colleges alongside the universities make a significant contribution to the skills required in the education sector and beyond.
- 3.10 In introducing additional under-graduate places to universities, the Department has encouraged them to bid in areas which are of significance to the economy. Since 1999, of some 4,000 additional full-time

equivalent higher education places in the universities, over 3,000 have been in areas such as computing, electronics, and various engineering disciplines, including software engineering. Furthermore, individual support for high-level post-graduate research is targeted mainly in the areas of science and technology.

- 3.11 Like the universities, the further education colleges are free to determine the range of provision they offer, taking account of the needs of their local area. However, the Department introduced, in 1999, an incentive in the funding mechanism to promote enrolments in six priority skill areas: construction, ICT, manufacturing engineering, electronics, software engineering, and, tourism and hospitality. In the last four years, recruitment in these areas has increased, with particular success in computing at 47%.
- 3.12 The Department has used its approval power in relation to higher education in further education colleges, in recent years, to support the six priority skill areas above. Of 13,536 under-graduate level enrolments in 2001/02, 3,596 were in the priority areas, an increase of almost 13% since 1998/99. Further education provides learning and training for approximately 120,000 enrolments each year, from essential skills to post-graduate level, on a full-time or part-time basis, and in a full range of vocational areas, which makes a very significant contribution to the skills base of Northern Ireland.
- 3.13 Since 1995, the Department has provided the Jobskills Programme, (Access, Traineeship and Modern Apprenticeships) which is the main vocational skills programme for young people, offered through a network of training organisations, which include all of the further education colleges. The programme offers a training place to all 16-19 year olds, not in full-time education or employment, to ensure that those seeking to enter employment have access to an alternative route to qualifications. Traineeships are targeted on the achievement of a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 2, while the Access programme has targeted young people with physical disability, and young people with other disadvantages, who may not immediately aspire to or benefit from a form of provision aimed at a NVQ level 2 outcome. In each case, there is a

requirement to ensure that the programme is, as far as possible, tailored to the needs of the young people and to improving their employability skills.

- 3.14 The Modern Apprenticeship programme has grown steadily since its introduction and, at present, around 6,400 young people follow apprenticeships with the aim of achieving NVQ level 3, along with additional supporting qualifications. Employers have, through Modern Apprenticeships, made an investment in the young people they train and report benefits from a close relationship with the apprentice. The average starting age for apprentices is around 17 years old and there are relatively few young adults participating in the programme.
- 3.15 Since the introduction of the Lifelong Learning Strategy, in 1999, the Department has also supported a range of initiatives to widen access to learning. New technologies are used to encourage the demand for learning through access to on-line learning materials at home, in work, or in one of a network of local learning centres. All individual learners are supported, but the highest level of intervention is for the unemployed and low waged. Improving the essential skills of literacy and numeracy amongst the adult population in Northern Ireland remains a significant challenge. Poor literacy and numeracy can lead to unemployment for the individual and lower productivity in the economy and, are associated with social disadvantage and social and health problems. The “Essential Skills for Living” strategy (October 2002) provides for a high quality, flexible curriculum, underpinned by appropriate assessment and accreditation. It put in place, also, relevant training and development for tutors, and the focusing of resource on those in greatest need. The objective is to increase demand, and to enable supply from a wide range of providers, all of whom work within a quality framework. A range of essential skills qualifications has been developed to allow progression from entry level to level 2, and a comprehensive management information system has been established to track the progression of essential skills learners at all levels. The current target is to assist 46,000 adults to improve their literacy and numeracy skills, by March 2007.

- 3.16 In tackling the problems of those who feel excluded from learning, and focusing on essential skills, the work of Trade Union Learning Representatives has been particularly important. They are helping to instil a learning culture in the workplace, especially encouraging their members to undertake training in literacy and numeracy and developing computer skills. Initiatives such as Unison's "Return 2 Learn" programme have been successful in introducing learning to many adults who believed that education and training was not for them.
- 3.17 The principle underlying the Government's Welfare Reform agenda is "work for those who can, security for those who cannot". A system of work-focused interviews and mandatory New Deal programmes has been introduced, with the aim of increasing the numbers of those claiming Jobseekers' Allowance, who obtain work. The focus has broadened recently to include work-focused interviews for those on all other working age benefits including lone parents, partners and persons with incapacity. Participation in training and employment programmes is an option for many of those covered by the Welfare Reform process and raising the employability skills is a key factor for the reform programme.
- 3.18 Young people and adults need realistic and sound advice about choices in education, training and employment. High quality information, advice and guidance plays a significant role in improving employability, in particular, for those who are disadvantaged or who face barriers to engagement with the world of work. The Department's Careers Service works with key stakeholders including careers teachers in schools and colleges to provide appropriate advice and support. The Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA) has played a significant role in signposting and assisting adults back to learning. More recently, EGSA has worked closely with the Department in the delivery of the Lifelong Learning Strategy.
- 3.19 The role of DAS is to provide advice, guidance, training and a job placing service for people with disabilities and health difficulties. DAS provides a range of programmes to assist people with disabilities to gain and retain employment. These include New Deal for Disabled People, which assists those on health-related benefits to gain employment; Access to Work which provides financial assistance to help overcome barriers faced by

people with disabilities to obtain and retain employment; Employment Support, the aim of which is to assist people with significant disabilities, who are unable to reach the output levels of employees without disabilities; the Job Introduction Scheme which provides a “job trial” to allow the disabled person and the employer to judge if the job is suitable, as well as access to vocational training.

3.20 Outside the immediate remit of the Department there is in addition a range of provision aimed at specific sectors or groups of individuals. DARD manages and administers the agricultural college which provides an invaluable vocational service to the land based sector; employer groups particularly in the public sector deliver a range of professional, technical and vocational training; and organisations involved with young offenders and others provide facilities to help those returning to the labour market obtain relevant skills.

3.21 Taken together, there is a considerable learning and training base across Northern Ireland, a large number of providers, a wide variety of provision and a significant level of financial investment from Government, employers and individuals. One could assume that this was sufficient to meet Northern Ireland’s skills needs. However, the quantifiable evidence suggest that this is not the case, and that change is necessary.

4. THE STRATEGY

- 4.1 In order to address the challenges to our economy, which have been set out earlier, and make best use of the considerable educational and training provision in place and of key initiatives such as the Essential Skills Strategy and the Review of Further Education, there is a need for a more comprehensive and over-arching strategy for skills, with a much clearer set of goals, and with an action plan designed to achieve them.
- 4.2 A central value of this strategy is that it is demand-driven by the needs of the economy, both the private and public sector, and the need for that economy to be more productive. The identification and articulation of the business need for skills, by employers, must be made more clearly and must become a central driver of the overall strategy, just as skills must be an integral part of each business's plans. It has always been difficult to assess the demand for skills. The strategy aims to improve this position by structural changes which will engage employers with their local providers, to determine local demand. This will be of major importance. However, it cannot be the whole picture. The Department will foster a wider regional debate about skill demand around the Skills Task Force and, with Invest NI will support strongly the Task Force's focus on skills forecasting through research and engagement with national and international bodies. The Department will also ask the Skills Task Force to review quickly the current priority skills areas.
- 4.3 On the supply side the Department wishes to relate provision more explicitly to the emerging information on demand, both locally, regionally and where appropriately nationally. It also wishes, however, to integrate more closely the pursuit of employment opportunity with skills, training and education. This will help to deal with issues such as the mismatch of available jobs and skills, at a local and regional level, and the capacity to provide skilled workers for new and emerging businesses.
- 4.4 The aspiration of the strategy is the development of a motivated, competent and flexible workforce on a par with that available to Northern Ireland's leading competitors, and which is well placed to meet the challenges of economic change. People must realise that skills are central

to their future employability, and understand how they can get the skills they will need. Employability must be the central plank of economic regeneration. In practical terms, this means that a key goal must be to optimise skill levels and maximise qualifications in the workforce. The existing realities, however, mean that current priorities cannot be focused exclusively on level 3 achievement. There are too many in the existing workforce with low or no qualifications for whom the achievement of a level 3 would be beyond reach without addressing their underlying barriers; too many with essential skills difficulties; and too many with skills which must be refreshed.

4.5 In effect, the strategy must reflect fully both the current position and future needs. It must deliver a ladder of skills, suited to the different needs of the economy and aspirations of individuals, enabling individuals to build up skills throughout their career, and to achieve employability for life. It must also ensure that the core concepts of enterprise and entrepreneurship are included early in the experience of young people and that the influences of young people are challenged, to address those concepts. Its success will be judged on a wide range of measures, by whether:-

- information about skill demand, both existing and potential, and the interaction between demand and supply are improved;
- employers and their representative bodies are able to identify specific skills problems in key sections of the economy;
- the numbers in the workforce, and flowing into the workforce, with essential skills problems are reduced;
- the numbers with a level 2 or above qualification, are increased;
- the curricula in second and third level education reflect enterprise and entrepreneurship and these are embedded in careers guidance;
- the disadvantaged and economically inactive are assisted to engage with skills acquisition and the labour market; and

- the gender stereotyping in skills and jobs and wage differentials are reduced.

4.6 In short, the overall aim of the strategy will be:-

to help people progress up the skills ladder, in order to lift the skills levels of the whole workforce, to raise productivity and improve competitiveness and, to enhance the employability of those currently excluded from the labour market.

4.7 To put the skills progression ladder in place, priorities are required. The evidence in Sections 2 and 3 suggests that there are five main areas which require particular action, if the main problems are to be tackled and if the aspiration is to become realisable. These priorities are to:

- (i) improve the assesment of skill needs, existing and potential, and improve the flow of labour market information;
- (ii) improve the relevance, coherence, response and quality of current education and training provision;
- (iii) promote the acquisition of skills with particular emphasis, initially, on those who have not yet achieved a level 2 qualification or require assistance with essential skills;
- (iv) improve access to skills for sustainable employment; and
- (v) make the supporting infrastructure easier to navigate, especially in the field of qualifications.

4.8 The aspiration and the priorities for action give rise to five strategic targets, which are set in a 10 year timeframe:

By 2015 - to support the essential skills learning for 100,000 adults, with a milestone of 46,000 by 2007, of whom 18,500 will acheive a qualification.

- By 2015 - increase to 90% the proportion of adults in the workforce having a level 2 qualification, with a milestone of a 75% proportion by 2007.
- By 2015 - increase to 60% the proportion of adults in the workforce with at least a level 3 qualification with a milestone of 50% by 2007.
- By 2015 - demonstrate significant progress on increasing the employment rate, especially among disadvantaged groups, taking account of the economic cycle.
- By 2015 - increase the competences of the Northern Ireland management cohort, and treble the number of organisations gaining recognition of Investors in People.

4.9 These priorities will determine the approach of the Department and other Government Departments. However, as has been emphasised throughout, the acquisition of skills is a key responsibility of all individuals; it is also a key business objective, and all employers must invest in skills if their organisations are to succeed. Therefore this strategy will only work if it has the engagement and support of all the main stakeholders. Government on its own cannot address the skills problem; employers, trade unions and individuals must share the understanding of the problems and have determination to drive skills levels upwards.

4.10 Employers must play a key role in identifying their skill needs, and developing their existing workforces to meet market demands, working as appropriate with the trade unions. Government accepts that an exclusively market driven policy will not always result in the appropriate level of skills in the economy, and that there is, therefore, a need to consider future skill opportunities and to ensure that programmes aimed at creating skills and enhancing employability reflect the aggregate needs of the economy, in the widest sense, and prepare individuals for the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

- 4.11 Meeting the expectations of employers, whilst a main strategic target, has to be set alongside the needs and aspirations of individuals, who make decisions about their own futures, in order to ensure that the widest participation in employment and learning is achieved. Individuals, therefore, are, also, major contributors to the strategy. Trade unions often can play a major role in assisting their members in this process. Creating a balance between Government, employers, trade unions and individuals in recognising the value of skill acquisition and investing in learning and training is a key step in delivering a sound way forward.
- 4.12 An important aspect of the Strategy is to improve the information available about the demand for skills, from employers, from individuals and through the mechanisms of the Skills Task Force (including Skills forecasting). However, equally important, is ensuring that supply side provision is capable of responding smoothly and quickly as the demand picture becomes clearer or changes. As identified in the Further Education Review Report, the Department will strengthen the levers which determine the provision on offer in further education and training; it will also improve the dialogue with universities around how provision might reflect, more explicitly, their regional role.

Do you accept that the priorities for the Strategy as set out above?

Do you agree with the long term over-arching targets expressed?

5. ACTION PLAN

- 5.1 In the light of the strategic aim and priorities, the following actions are proposed to take forward the overall skills agenda.

RAISE THE PROFILE OF THE DEMAND SIDE

- 5.2 Greater employer engagement in the skills debate and better information from employers on the levels and volumes of the skills required are key to the delivery of a soundly based skills strategy. Recent initiatives, at the national level, are aimed at encouraging employers to set the agenda, through the developing SfBN, involving the SSCs and the SSDA. Northern Ireland has committed to supporting the network and will maintain local contact on issues which are relevant to the regional economy, including ensuring maximum co-operation between the Department and Invest NI on sectoral issues. The current network of Sector Training Councils in Northern Ireland and other representative bodies are constructing links into the relevant SSCs and, where appropriate, SSCs are developing local representation and liaison arrangements. Invest NI will work closely with the SSCs to add value to their work. At national and regional level, sector agreements will be developed with each of the SSCs, aimed at addressing the major skills concerns and issues of each sector.
- 5.3 The other key to demand is the forecasting of future opportunities on a wider base. Employers and their representative bodies can help in this process. Government, however, will need to play a significant role in drawing together local, national and international data and the ideas on potential labour market opportunities.
- 5.4 To assist the drive for employer engagement and better information the membership and remit of the Northern Ireland Skills Task Force will be reviewed and strengthened to ensure that the work on labour market information is focused so as to provide a clear and broad-based picture of current and future skills needs. The Skills Task Force will put in place a strong research base linked closely to the work of the Department's research strategy and to that of the SSDA/SSC labour market research.

- 5.5 The Department, working with DETI, Invest NI, the DHSSPS and the Skills Task Force, will articulate better Government's economic objectives, disseminate labour market intelligence, and provide a central contact point for debate on skills-related economic issues in the public and private sectors, including the Health and Personal Social Services. This will create a more coherent planning environment for the national and regional economic bodies, the employer representative bodies, trade unions, and the further education and higher education sectors, and other providers of training. Since many of the same organisations will be involved, the Department will ensure a strong link to the work of the Economic Development Forum. Through the Skills Task Force the wider, more long-term trends and opportunities can be determined; both the local and the wider perspectives will inform a Regional Employment and Skills Action Framework. A review of the existing priority skill areas will be undertaken quickly, taking account of the public sector as well as any additional private sector requirements.
- 5.6 A mechanism will also be established to identify local skill needs and to advise on the response of the further education and training systems to those needs. The mechanism already identified in the Further Education Review will be a small number of employer-led Workforce Development Forums which bring together the further education colleges, local public and private sector employers, the trade unions, the key training organisations, the local Invest NI offices, the Careers Service and the Employment Service. The Forums' key tasks will be to advise the Department on the local demand for skills, and on the appropriate vocational training needs in the areas. In this way, vocational education and training can be brought within a more coherent local advisory framework, designed to ensure that provision of economic importance is employer-led.

IMPROVING THE RELEVANCE, COHERENCE, RESPONSE AND QUALITY OF CURRENT PROVISION

- 5.7 The 14-19 phase of education is increasingly recognised as central to the development of an individual's skills. The recommendations in DE's Post-Primary Review, along with the curriculum changes at key stage 4 are designed, to provide vocational education as an entitlement for all pupils aged 14-19. The curriculum, among other things, will enable pupils to research, identify and develop the skills and capabilities necessary for a variety of work opportunities; to understand better the need for career planning and investigate what it means to be enterprising; and to develop the practical skills for life and work.
- 5.8 The curriculum offered by the further education sector will be differentiated from that offered in school. By 2007, all 16-19 year olds, on completing a full-time programme will have developed employability skills and, along with their main study, have gained qualifications in the essential skills of literacy and numeracy, and ICT. In response to the joint DE/DEL/DETI Enterprising Education Strategy, CCEA has developed a Certificate in Enterprise, to be taken alongside a learner's main course of study. The Department will work with the SSCs, and the representative bodies in Northern Ireland, to define the necessary curriculum requirements for further education, which will include broad vocational education and the development of the requisite occupational skills. In addition, the Department will draw on the National Inquiry into Mathematics, to identify and strengthen the mathematical requirements for various vocational programmes.
- 5.9 Higher education will also address the need to develop an awareness of enterprise and creativity and the skills required for entrepreneurship. The universities will be asked to build on their existing work in these areas and to extend provision to a wider range of students. Ways will also be sought to incorporate business support to students who wish to run their own business and to develop managerial skills. A greater integration of applied management skills to higher education courses will, through time, encourage a greater interest in management careers and help create a more positive attitude to enterprise and entrepreneurship.

- 5.10 A recent study by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) recognised that the Jobskills programme makes a significant contribution to the Department's strategic objectives, and has resulted in trainees gaining a substantial number of qualifications. The study, however, highlighted a number of areas for improvement including using the results of ETI reports more effectively to set quality thresholds for training organisations; improving the provision; and disseminating best practice. Recent pilots in the Access strand of the Jobskills programme have indicated that addressing issues other than qualifications may be more advantageous to the young people, in beginning their transition to the world of work. The Department will, therefore, re-configure training for 16-19 year olds, to address the issues such as improving quality, matching training to social and labour market needs and promoting progression. The Jobskills brand has served the Department well for a number of years enabling the providers to market a comprehensive set of training arrangements with a firm focus on NVQ outcomes. However, there is evidence that the growing popularity of apprenticeships, and more flexible arrangements for young people with disadvantage and disability are challenging the apparent inflexibility of the Jobskills brand.
- 5.11 Employer-based apprenticeships are becoming an increasingly important method of initial recruitment for skilled employees. Currently there are 6,000 Modern Apprentices; this will increase to 10,000 by 2010. A new funding arrangement will be introduced, to encourage employer-based apprenticeships, and provide those participating in a Jobskills traineeship programme with a progression route to Modern Apprenticeships. The Department will also pilot all-age, adult Modern Apprenticeships, for those aged 20 and over, as well as Modern Apprenticeships in the public sector from 2005. These initiatives will be co-ordinated so as to complement the work of Invest NI, through its Company Development Programme.
- 5.12 Support will remain for existing provision in further education and higher education, to improve the position at level 3 and above. As more young people seek to participate in higher education, and employers look for high level technical and professional skills, the new Foundation Degree will be the route by which vocational skills can be developed in higher education. As an end in itself for school leavers, those progressing from

apprenticeships and, those in the workplace seeking to extend their skills, the Foundation Degrees have strong potential. The Foundation Degree is, also, a stepping stone to full degree opportunities, for both full-time and part-time students. The Department will promote Foundation Degrees, and will work closely with industry, especially the SSCs, to develop a wide range of opportunities through Queen's University, the University of Ulster and the Open University, closely partnered by the further education colleges. In order to ensure Foundation Degrees meet specifically the needs of employers and are industry-led, the curriculum followed will be based on the standards set by the relevant SSCs. As more Foundation Degrees come on stream, the Department will, working with employer groups, seek to develop work-based programmes with a Foundation Degree outcome, to meet skills needs at technician level 4. Subject to the availability of relevant Foundation Degrees, a pilot scheme will be developed in 2005.

- 5.13 The Skills Task Force, the Workforce Development Forums and SfBN will improve the quality of information about demand. It will be essential to improve the response of providers to this information. In further education and training this will be achieved through the revised planning and funding processes set out in the Further Education Review. In higher education there will be an enhanced dialogue with the universities on how to target existing resources more effectively on strategically important skill areas.

PROMOTE THE ACQUISITION OF SKILLS

- 5.14 The "Essential Skills for Living" strategy is an important building block in the wider Skills Strategy. The Department will achieve its existing targets for essential skills. The objective now is to spread the reach of provision. Within the Targeted Initiatives programme, the Department is piloting a screening process for essential skills, as an element within Welfare to Work. If successful, this will be extended to all those involved, who need to improve their essential skills. Business in the Community has been engaged to support the extension of essential skills to a wider range of employers. The Department will support provision for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses for the growing number of migrants in the workforce. The Union Learning Fund will continue and the Union

Learning Representatives will develop further their role as a major source of helping those in employment to tackle their skills needs. Following a study of best practice elsewhere, the Department is developing a number of approaches to family literacy and numeracy, with the help of an Expert Group. The Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) is considering the introduction of an essential skills programme for particular staff across the Northern Ireland Civil Service, and the Department will work across the public sector to seek to increase its uptake.

- 5.15 The Department's essential skills strategy builds on DE's Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, the main elements of which are early intervention measures for pupils struggling with reading; a programme of training for key teachers; the development of new support materials; the provision of comprehensive advice and bench-marking information to schools; the setting of targets for improvement; and the provision of summer literacy and numeracy schemes. Standards are improving steadily in the primary sector as measured by end of key stage 2 assessment. In the post-primary sector there is also evidence of improvement in key stage 3, although the figures in individual years may be at variance with the overall trend. Recently, DE, in conjunction with the Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, has reviewed the strategy with the aim of strengthening and developing it further. A Strategy Group, made up of all the educational partners, is taking forward the review's findings and other reviews in a coherent way.
- 5.16 The initial focus of essential skills was on literacy and numeracy, however, the Department recognises that to meet the needs of living and working in the 21st century, computer literacy is equally necessary. Indeed, it is vital that those in the workforce, and entering the workforce, are computer literate if Northern Ireland is to improve its competitiveness and attract investment in value-added areas, mainly in new technologies. In consequence, the Essential Skills Strategy will, from April 2006, embrace essential computer literacy, building on the existing provision in schools, colleges, learndirect centres and, community and voluntary organisations. The Department will publish, beforehand, its proposals to improve co-ordination across a diverse range of sectors with an interest in e-learning.

5.17 The Skills Strategy places particular importance on many more in the workforce gaining a level 2 qualification. This is regarded as the key platform for further skill acquisition and as an important individual economic asset in its own right. To address the current deficiencies at level 2, and to respond to economic need, the Department will introduce, over time, an entitlement to a first level 2 qualification, for all those aged over 19. In order to maximise the potential benefits that qualifications can bring, individuals will be encouraged to seek information, advice and guidance and opt for qualifications in vocational areas where job opportunities are available or which could sustain their employability. At the level of the individual employer or local employer groups, the focus will be on encouraging participation in learning and enabling employers to take advantage of the access to level 2 training for their employees.

5.18 Good leadership and management are essential components of a successful business. The Department currently supports a range of interventions to promote better management. Those interventions have tended to focus on the manufacturing and tradeable services sectors, but it is now widely acknowledged that management and leadership skills are required on a wider base. The Department will liaise with the Universities and the Business Improvement Service in Invest NI, to develop appropriate initiatives, designed to raise the level of management and leadership competence, and to enhance business performance and productivity. The Department will work closely with Invest NI to develop the Management and Leadership Network (MLN) and ensure that the management bursary scheme and the business improvement activities of the respective organisations are both effective and complementary. That close working relationship will include arrangements for joint sponsorship of MLN.

IMPROVE ACCESS TO SKILLS AND SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT

5.19 For those who are unemployed or are economically inactive, the Welfare to Work programme and the associated New Deal opportunities provide a vehicle to enable them to gain or re-gain access to the labour market. This is not only important because of the opportunities it offers to individuals, but, also, as a way of strengthening the labour market, which in many areas is tight. Indeed, the importance of this work was underlined in the

Chancellor's 2004 budget statement and his plans for a New Deal for Skills.

- 5.20 The Department is considering how best to assist those who are furthest from the labour market and who either face multiple barriers, or lack skills and qualifications. The Department will, from September 2005, pilot a programme tailored, specifically, to help new claimants of Incapacity Benefit (IB) and those who have claimed IB within the last two years. The objective will be to tailor provision to their individual needs, to encourage them to return to the world of work. The Department is also considering how its Employment Service, more generally, can act as a "portal" through which benefit claimants seeking to return to work can access high quality information, advice and guidance and provision, to address level 2 and essential skills needs. In this way the Employment Service will integrate its work more closely with the existing training and education provision. In order to help people in sectors which are in decline, to reskill in areas of growth, programmes will be developed which focus specifically on the occupational and wider employability skills likely to be in demand. The focus of the training and education link will be to enhance skills levels, address the mismatch between skills and job opportunities, and, in consequence, fitness for the labour market.
- 5.21 There are, currently, four pilot Targeted Initiatives, in West Belfast, the Greater Shankill, Strabane and Londonderry, which are seeking to assist the long-term unemployed and individuals who are far from the labour market, to enter employment, or to improve their skills so that they may achieve this in future. This approach provides a major opportunity to explore the challenges individuals face, and examine how programmes can assist them to make the transition to work. Targeted Initiatives are testing ideas such as a local Stakeholders' Forum, to help co-ordinate local delivery and advise on local priorities; an Employers' Forum; Job Assist Centres to complement the work of JobCentres and Jobs and Benefits Offices and provide additional mentoring and support for individuals who require it; and, a Transitional Employment Programme to provide work experience for those who continue to have difficulty finding employment, including those who have completed New Deal programmes. To support IB claimants the Department will also introduce programmes to help people

enter or re-enter the labour market or, as a step in this direction, to improve their skills. DAS has introduced, on a pilot basis, a new Work Preparation Programme in the Targeted Initiative areas. This is designed to assist people to address barriers associated with their disability, and to access the labour market with the confidence necessary to achieve and sustain their job goal.

- 5.22 The Department will work with other Departments to assist, in areas where there has not been a tradition in education, training and skills acquisition, to raise the profile of skills at all levels. In doing this it will be essential to work with DE, since improved investment in school education and in adult skills are intimately linked. Likewise, the Department of Social Development's (DSD) Neighbourhood Renewal strategy is targeted on many of the areas which need better access to skills, and the Department for Employment and Learning will wish to work closely with other Departments and agencies on this issue.

CHANGING THE INFRASTRUCTURE

- 5.23 The Department will implement the recommendations of the Further Education Review, which will enhance, greatly, the role of the colleges in skills creation and business improvement, and will set targets for the sector, which will sit within the objectives of this strategy. The sector should continue to focus on the provision of skills for the economy, and work with other agencies and local employers, especially Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs). This will include support to employers to overcome technological difficulties, the development of products or processes or, the provision of management support. Colleges may also provide incubation and innovation facilities. Further work will be supported to establish best practice and to promote the dissemination of ideas across the sector. The broad economic role will link colleges more strongly with the economic regeneration activities of local councils and enterprise agencies.
- 5.24 The Centres of Excellence policy in further education will be extended to reinforce the relationship with employers and the specialist nature of some elements of college provision. They will become the recognised

hubs for specialist skills development at levels 3 and 4 and for applied technology and business support, at regional level. Colleges will be the key players in the liaison between the development activity in further education, the identification of employer needs in specialist areas and the R&D and knowledge transfer activity in the universities.

- 5.25 A key aspect of the “infrastructure” of skills, is an effective structure of qualifications. The Department is collaborating with partner departments, agencies and the regulatory authorities across the UK, to review and reform vocational qualifications. Revised qualifications structures, which are tailored and quality-assured to meet the needs of employers, will be in place, by 2007. This will require the SSCs to specify the occupational standards for their sectors, and the skills and knowledge needed to meet the standards. Employability skills will be incorporated into the qualifications, as appropriate, and frameworks will be developed, which specify the qualifications required by employers for entry and progression in their sectors.
- 5.26 This review also includes the development of a credit accumulation and transfer system. Learners will be able to undertake bite-size chunks of learning and will be able to progress at their own pace towards achieving a full qualification. Providers and employers will be able to tailor qualifications and units to meet learners’ skills needs. Such a system of credit accumulation and transfer will extend access to and take-up of learning, improve equality of opportunity, and promote lifelong learning. When combined with the proposals for change to the apprenticeship programme, and the introduction of a unique learner number for every learner, these developments should deliver a more coherent and transparent system of assessing the skills and qualifications that employees and potential employees have attained.
- 5.27 An important aspect of the skills system is the finance given to the individual learner. Proposals have developed over time, for individuals at different stages in their skills training, and in different institutions, but as yet there has not been a combined strategy to ensure that funding does not have unintentional results. For example, the introduction of Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) for 16-19 year olds to increase

participation in education may impact adversely on the numbers entering training. The Department has contributed to the development of proposals, to address this issue, published in the UK Government paper; ‘Supporting young people to achieve: towards a new deal for skills’. The Department will consider its response to the paper and how it can be applied locally to ensure that unintended financial competition does not develop as an issue in career choices.

- 5.28 Similarly, bursaries for both further and higher education have been in place for some years. Proposals for the introduction of deferred fees in higher education in Northern Ireland raise important issues about the impact this will have on access to and uptake of skills. The relative costs of part-time and full-time courses and, of foundation degrees to full degrees will become important considerations, as individuals look at different routes and finances in tertiary education. The Department will work with the further and higher education sectors to analyse the impact of these changes and will clarify and communicate the financial implications of education and training for employers and individuals. In addition, in order to retain the best young people in Northern Ireland, the Department, in conjunction with Invest NI, will consider a graduate sponsorship scheme for the top achieving students to encourage them to follow a career with companies in Northern Ireland.
- 5.29 The Department recognises that, while it is valuable for many young people to broaden their experience and study outside Northern Ireland, it is a considerable drain on the potential skills resource for local companies. Working with the Skills Task Force and Invest NI, the Department will develop a strategy to help companies to target graduates studying in universities in Great Britain as well as more experienced expatriots to encourage them to consider returning to take up jobs in Northern Ireland.
- 5.30 Another aspect of infrastructure which requires continuing development is the provision of high quality advice and guidance to the individual to assist him or her to choose the career, skill or course suited to need. To this end, the Careers Service, within the Department, is being restructured to enable it to meet the demand for information, advice and guidance, to

reflect curriculum changes to Careers Education, and to better focus its work within the education system. A major strand within that process will be the redefinition of levels of service to young people and adults, in a range of contexts. The principal focus of this strand is the adoption of an approach which:

- enables those clients who can help themselves to do so;
- provides relevant staff intervention for those clients who require it; and
- prioritises those clients who are most in need of information, advice and guidance.

5.31 Those young people, who are socially excluded or who are vulnerable to social exclusion, will be a priority target group for Careers Service support. The Service will work in partnership with information, advice and guidance providers to enhance the services available to adults, in a range of contexts, and will develop a more coherent and comprehensive approach to adult guidance. This work will be founded on strong networks which will include employers, information, advice and guidance providers, the community and voluntary sector, colleges, schools and training providers. The Careers Service will also play a supportive role in providing referral services for other Department and cross-Departmental initiatives, relating to employability and the development of workforce skills.

5.32 At present Careers Education is a cross-curricular theme at Key Stages 3 and 4 of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. CCEA have recently carried out a review of the statutory curriculum and submitted proposals to the DE for a much less prescriptive curriculum giving schools greater flexibility to meet the needs of all young people. These have been accepted and Careers Education will be placed within Learning for Life and Work, which will form the statutory core of the curriculum. This includes a focus on enterprise and business education. Legislation to implement the revised curriculum will be in place by September 2006, with piloting on some aspects already underway.

5.33 The Department for Employment and Learning will ensure that adequate careers and Information advice and guidance resources are in place to meet the service delivery standards, in particular, for the 14–19 age-

group. In support of its objective in delivering a comprehensive service, especially to those who can help themselves, the Department will make use of innovative delivery methodology through information technology and will launch a dedicated Careers/information, advice and guidance website to provide access to the widest range of information and guidance, on-line. The website became available in 2004, and will be developed progressively. The Careers Advisers employed by the Department will be enabled, through mobile technology, to make effective use of the site in direct dealings with their client groups. The Department will ensure that, through personal contact as required, the website and the learndirect helpline, all adults will have appropriate access to guidance.

Do you agree with the actions proposed to take forward the overall Skills agenda?

6. DELIVERY OF THE STRATEGY

- 6.1 This paper demonstrates that a wide range of current policy responses and provision and actions are in place already which aim to meet the skills challenge. It sets out a range of other actions which, together with existing provision, should enable Northern Ireland to address future skills needs more effectively, with the aim of creating an economy with more high value added jobs, which draw additional wealth into the region.
- 6.2 If Northern Ireland is to be successful, the great majority of the workforce need to be qualified to at least level 3, (equivalent to having 2 'A' levels). However, as has been emphasised, there are, currently, too many adults with low or no qualifications and with deficiencies in literacy and numeracy for this to be a reality in the short or medium term.
- 6.3 Consequently, the aim is to put in place a strategy which embraces the need for higher level skills, also has a strong focus on enabling people to progress up the skills ladder in areas relevant to the economy. It emphasises essential skills needs, the importance of achieving a level 2 qualification, and integrating employment opportunities with training and education to encourage those who are economically inactive to re-enter the labour market or gain the relevant skills to enable them to do so.
- 6.4 A key element in the delivery of this strategy is the provision and use of high quality labour market information drawn from employers, the Skills Task Force, Invest NI, SfBN and other Government and non-Government sources. Individuals and companies require good labour market intelligence to enable them to make informed decisions about future investment, in training, education or employment.
- 6.5 Government accepts that it has a responsibility to meet its part of this challenge and the strategy sets out the priorities for the next 5 years. However, employers and individuals have a major role to play if this strategy is to be realised, as have the trade unions, education and training providers and other organisations that are keen to support learners. To succeed, it will require the engagement of all these stakeholders.

- 6.6 Employers, working with the SSCs and with other representatives bodies, need to identify specific skills problems and develop their existing workforces to meet market demands. At the same time, there is a need to ensure that individuals are prepared not only for the current needs of employers and the economy but also to meet the challenges and opportunities of a rapidly changing world. Education and training providers must, therefore, be in a position to respond flexibly to identified and clearly articulated employer needs, while at the same time, meeting the needs and aspirations of individuals, and ensuring the widest participation in employment and learning.
- 6.7 The Department will take the lead in ensuring that the objectives and targets set out in the strategy are developed, reviewed and monitored. It will carry out that role in close co-operation with other departments, especially DETI, Invest NI, DE, and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL). It will liaise with bodies such as the Economic Development Forum to ensure that the medium term economic targets continue to be supported by the skills strategy.
- 6.8 A strategic overview will be required to ensure that the strategy remains relevant, drives actions in response and that the information needs and research required to support the strategy continues. The Northern Ireland Skills Task Force is best placed to playing this role. It is proposed that the Task Force be reviewed and strengthened as an essential element in both the Skills and Further Education strategies. The Task Force will of course be required to liaise closely with the Economic Development Forum and with Invest NI so that the key aspect of skills is recognised within the wider economic debate.
- 6.9 The proposed actions in the strategy are summarised below:
- The Skills Task Force will develop a Regional Framework for Employment and Skills Action, including an agreed set of regional skill priority areas.

- A small number of employer-led Workforce Development Forums will be established, at local level, to advise the Department on the local demand for skills.
- The collation and use of Labour Market Information and Research will be enhanced in order to improve information on the demand side of skills.
- The training provision for 16-19 year olds will be re-configured and Apprenticeships will be developed and extended.
- The findings of the Further Education Review will be implemented, including revised curricular, planning and funding processes.
- The number of Foundation Degrees in areas of priority skills will be increased significantly.
- Essential skills will be extended to include computer literacy and will utilise the existing provision for ICT.
- An entitlement to a first level 2 qualification for those aged 19 will be introduced.
- Management and leadership skills in Northern Ireland companies and organisations will continue to be developed.
- Welfare Reform will be extended to help those on Incapacity Benefit and those with multiple barriers, to enter or re-enter the labour market.
- A revised qualifications system, covering vocational provision, will be in place by 2007.
- The financial implications of education and training will be clarified and communicated to employers and individuals.

GLOSSARY

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CCEA	Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
DARD	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
DAS	Disablement Advisory Service
DE	Department of Education
DCAL	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
DEL	Department for Employment and Learning
DETI	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
DFP	Department of Finance and Personnel
DHSSPS	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
DSD	Department of Social Development
DTI	Department of Trade and Industry
EDF	Economic Development Fund
EGSA	Educational Guidance Service for Adults
EMA	Education Maintenance Allowance
ESOL	English and Speakers of Other Languages
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate
FE	Further Education
GB	Great Britain
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GVA	Gross Value Added
HE	Higher Education
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey
IB	Incapacity Benefit
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IiP	Investors in People
Invest NI	Invest Northern Ireland
LFS	Labour Force Survey
MLN	Management and Leadership Network
NIACE	National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
NIACRO	Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
NICATS	Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System



NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
PfG	Programme for Government
PSA	Public Service Agreement
R&D	Research and Development
SEC	Socio-Economic Classification
SfBN	Skills for Business Network
SMEs	Small and Medium Sized Enterprises
SSC	Sector Skills Council
SSDA	Sector Skills Development Agency
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Services
Ufi	University for Industry
UK	United Kingdom
VAT	Value Added Tax

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