

Chapter 3. Implementing employer engagement strategies in Northern Ireland

This chapter highlights examples of programmes in Northern Ireland that aim to engage employers in vocational education and training delivery. It also highlights recent initiatives to develop a national strategy for career guidance as well as better anticipate the future skills needs of the Northern Irish economy. It also provide an overview of recent actions by District Councils to implement local employment and skills strategies.

Understanding how employers are engaging with government on skills needs

Formal governance bodies to engage and consult employers on skills

In Northern Ireland, the skill needs of employers are voiced through different representative bodies including the NI Chamber of Commerce, Confederation of British Industry (CBI), Invest NI and Federation of Small Business (FSB). Matrix is the Northern Ireland Science Industry Panel, a business led expert industry panel formed to advise government, industry and academia on the commercial exploitation of R&D and science and technology in Northern Ireland and whose role includes help to the business community to inform government policy. This includes advice on priority sectors and priority skills for business.

Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and Sector Training Councils (STCs) also provide a platform for employers to express their demands for skills training. The Sector Skills Councils provide sector specific advice on skills development for employees doing particular jobs. They are independent employer led organisations that provide a range of services to help employers to reduce skills shortages and improve learning standards. Each Sector Skills Councils will agree on priorities and with its employers and partners to reducing skills gaps and shortages; improving productivity, business and performance; increase opportunities to boost the skills and productivity of everyone in the sector's workforce, including action on equal opportunities; and improving learning supply to include apprenticeships, higher education and national occupational standards.

Box 3.1. Sector Training Councils in Northern Ireland

Sector Training Councils were established in 1994 as independent employer representative bodies in Northern Ireland. There are currently eight in operation in Northern Ireland. They include the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB), Electrical Training Trust (ETT), Engineering Training Council, Food & Drink Sector Skills, Northern Ireland Screen, NI Polymers Association and Transport Training Services. Their role is to articulate the skills, education and training needs of their sectors in the short and long term; advise on training standards required for their sectors; and work with the Department for the Economy (DfE) and SSCs to ensure that training needs and standards are met.

It has been challenging keeping SSCs and STCs involved and operational. Many of their funding structures have changed from being central government funded to become self-funded and only some of these organisations have survived. Some still exist in Northern Ireland and some are based only in England. For example, the Food & Drink Sector Skills in Northern Ireland is now self-funded through its own reserves and through support projects including an education programme in schools. The Electrical Training Trust, for example, provides advice and support services to employers in the electrical contracting sector with apprentice recruitment and skills training needs.

This includes liaison with the careers service, post primary schools and other support agencies on behalf of local industry. However, constraints and shifts in local government policy brought about an end to the organisations lengthy history in training apprentice electricians. Until 2016, the organisation had successfully recruited and trained over 5 000 apprentice electricians in the local economy.

One of the most recent initiatives has been Tech Partnership (formerly "e-skills UK") which is the UK's sector skills council for the IT industry representing the interests of employers to ensure that the UK is equipped to manage the worldwide digital marketplace. While the organisation closed in 2018, many of its activities are now carried out by other institutions and government departments. These organisations had a crucial role to play in the 'Success through STEM' Strategy from the Department for Education and the then Department for Employment and Learning which placed a strong emphasis on business (in terms of private sector employers) in growing the supply of STEM skills into the local workforce (Department of education,(n.d.)^[23]). Employers were viewed to have the key role to play in improving the attractiveness of the STEM sector and in highlighting the opportunities that exist locally and in working with the supply side to articulate demand and ensure that the courses that are in place meet their needs.

Box 3.2. STEM champions in Northern Ireland: Gearing to the skills system to emerging and innovative sectors

A Business sub group, chaired by a STEM Champion was established to lead a network of stakeholders, including the relevant Sector Skills Councils, STEM charity bodies, Business Education Partnerships (BEPs) and other employer representative bodies to work with local companies and facilitate their engagement with both students and teachers within local schools, further education colleges and universities to promote STEM. However when the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Education and Learning were merged in 2016/17, the STEM Business Group was put on hold while the strategy was reviewed and has not been reconstituted since then. The role of STEM Champion is no longer an official departmental position but the original STEM champion maintains contact with the department on all things STEM and has taken over the responsibility for the production of the STEM Supplement through Catalyst Inc. Twice a year, Catalyst Inc and Matrix, the Northern Ireland Science Panel, work with industry, government and education to publish a STEM Courses and Careers Supplement which is aimed to provide information to pupils, teachers and parents about the career opportunities and pathways.

Finally, the Collaborative Networks programme is a more sectorally focused initiative in Northern Ireland. Through this network programme, Invest NI supports business-led collaborative networks to stimulate economic development within Northern Ireland (Invest NI, 2015^[24]). The objective of the support is to develop the capability and capacity of regional clusters/networks by attracting private sector companies, investors, researchers and academia to maximise collaborative opportunities in the development of new products, processed or services.

Invest NI engaged with sectors to identify common skills needs and helped facilitate a response from training providers. For example, companies have had particularly issues with a lack of software engineers. Invest NI worked with the universities to increase the number of places and part-time masters in computer science as well as with companies to increase their upskilling investment levels in this field. A collaborative approach between employers and Invest NI in addressing skills needs can be also found in advanced engineering, agri-food, hospitality and tourism sectors.

Invest NI also facilitated effective employer engagement in developing the Software and Systems Design A Level. Invest NI has acted as broker for industry in designing the A level. They have been doing this on an on-going basis ultimately to ensure a better connection and alignment of business needs.

Better gearing the skills system to the labour market

National strategy for career guidance

The government also provides a publicly funded Careers Service that is delivered by 95 professionally qualified Careers Advisors in 27 locations including Careers Resource Centres, Job Centres and Jobs & Benefits offices throughout Northern Ireland (OECD, 2014_[10]). There is a well-defined strategy for careers guidance in Northern Ireland called 'Preparing for Success' which sets out the Executive's aim to support people to make the best decisions for their careers (Department for the Economy, (n.d.)_[25]). The initiative is a joint strategy between the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy. The Strategy aims to ensure that young people and adults will:

- have access to good quality careers education provision, up-to-date labour market information, and impartial careers information, advice and guidance, to assist them to make well-informed career choices, to achieve their potential and prosper in employment;
- be lifelong learners and be motivated to pursue continuous professional development to achieve their own potential, to become effective employees and to make a valuable contribution to the local economy;
- develop the skills to plan their career, and manage planned and unplanned career change; and
- have a clear understanding of the impact of their education, training and employment choices and make career choices which are informed and well thought through and based on self-awareness; understand the relevance of their education, skills and experience; and be aware of the opportunities and pathways available.

This includes more and better work experience for young people and improved access to impartial advice. A key feature of the Strategy is to ensure that the careers system going forward will be able to secure a balance between the needs of the individual, employers and the wider economy within the guidance process. It aims to ensure that all career advisors continue to have a number of placements with employers in growth sectors each year.

Through the Careers Advisory Forum (CAF), the government develops strategic and local partnerships to better understand the employability skills, qualifications and attributes needed by employers to grow their business (Department for the Economy, (n.d.)_[26]). With the support of the CAF, there is an emphasis on facilitating better links between schools, colleges, local businesses, local councils and enterprise agencies. Employers are engaged to attract more people, and in particular young people, to consider careers in priority, growth and emerging sectors (see Box 3.3). The government also encourages employer participation by providing support and guidance to employers in the delivery of work experiences; and exploring how teachers can access relevant work placements to help them better understand current and future local labour market opportunities.

Box 3.3. Careers Advisory Forum in Northern Ireland

The role of the Careers Advisory Forum is to advise the government on current and future Careers provision in the context of the refreshed Careers Strategy 2015-2020; facilitate system level engagement between employers, educators and other key stakeholders, including parents, to support them in their advisory role; and support local level stakeholder involvement with service users and the education and business sectors. There is strong representation of the business and the education sectors, including business bodies, youth entrepreneurship, Education Authority, Parenting NI, Colleges NI, Education & Training Inspectorate (ETI), CCEA and others. They have working groups focusing on three strands of work: i) School-employer engagement; ii) Work experience; and iii) Upskilling the existing workforce.

The first strand of the work includes greater encouragement/support of teachers/lecturers and trainers on how to spend time with employers to better understand their needs, develop a best practice model for local engagement between Area Learning Communities (voluntary coalitions of schools in different areas to support collaborative working and greater access to occupational studies) and employers, increase employer representation on local school and college Board of Governors, encouraging employers to articulate skills needs through established Government digital portals (e.g. ceca.org.uk) and encourage employers to support teachers, lecturers and trainers through Continuous Professional Development (CPD) activities that improves understanding of the modern work place.

The second strand includes encouragement of more employers to provide work experience through Connect to Success (see below) and ensure that all pupils have good quality work-related learning experiences including work placements. The last strand focuses on the role of the Careers Service and others in better engagement with employers on upskilling and reskilling including ways of showcasing best practice examples of how Northern Ireland employers, particularly SMEs, have successfully upskilled their workforce. There is a dedicated careers website hosted by NIDirect that points individuals to the various paths to interact with Careers Advisors including online chat, email, phone and at the 25 offices located across Northern Ireland. It also provides access to different online career tools for both young people and adults. The Department for the Economy is currently procuring additional software so that up front labour market information is available further explore trend data.

Northern Ireland has had the advantage of significant Ministerial buy in for careers approaches. There has been good collaboration at the Executive level across all political parties. The system is viewed as agile and flexible with a short chain between the Minister and delivery on the ground. In England, schools have a statutory responsibility to provide careers advice but have no ring-fenced budget. Scotland and Wales have arms-length bodies doing careers (private and public funding). For example, Skills Development Scotland is the national skills body supporting the people and businesses of Scotland to develop and apply their skills.

In Northern Ireland the role of careers advisor in schools is being diminished by falling budgets. Teachers and not careers professionals are typically responsible for the careers advisor role. There is still a belief in Northern Ireland that the higher education system is the pinnacle of achievement and a significant job is needed to convince parents and teachers particularly but also students that apprenticeships/high level apprenticeships are of significant value in developing a strong career.

The objective of the Apprenticeship NI 2017 strategy is to ensure that apprenticeships are held in equally high esteem to higher education and to provide a direct route into a range of occupations and sectors previously only accessible through traditional higher education pathways. There have been definite inroads made into highlighting the advantages of pursuing apprenticeships and other forms of vocational training as a career. It will take further investment of time and effort to convince all parents in Northern Ireland that this is a strong and viable career option.

The implementation of career guidance programmes in Northern Ireland

Careers guidance is a compulsory part of the curriculum in Northern Ireland and each school must provide support to its students on this matter. However, the Executive is not prescriptive about what schools have to teach rather it specifies a minimum content and schools have autonomy on the delivery. There is no separate funding available for this and it must be met out of each school's budget. Each school is inspected on its careers education content on career's education although largely focusing on 'best practice' guidance. This flexibility about the way career guidance is implemented means that it varies significantly across schools in the country on the basis of funds and school's priority. For example, some schools teach careers from Year 8 while others do not teach careers until Year 10.

Careers guidance comes under the subject of Learning for Life and Work (LLW) which is a core part of the curriculum from Key Stage (KS) 3 and 4 aimed at helping young people develop the fundamental skills, knowledge, qualities and dispositions that are pre-requisites for life and work. At KS4, LLW includes the contributory elements of employability, local and global citizenship and personal development. The main focus however is to try to give students skills to make the right choices and recognise that there is no 'job for life'. It is therefore about self-awareness, skills and aptitudes, that is, how to look at the labour market and match up with jobs/skills in labour market. There is a section on entrepreneurship, and then a specific section on career management which schools are required to teach. LLW is a GCSE but also part of the wider curriculum. The Department for Education also expects careers guidance to be built into all subjects taught at school. This is so that students can see the relevance of each subject to careers recognising that curriculum and careers need to go together and be economically relevant.

There are 95 professionally qualified Careers Advisers employed by the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland. In 2016/2017, 201 post-primary schools (66 grammar and 135 secondary) and 39 dedicated special schools have partnership agreements. These agreements are in place will all statutory funded post primary schools in NI which define the careers support which will be delivered to students at key points in careers decision making. In the past some schools were reluctant to avail of this offer, but in recent years participation has increased. The Careers strategy contains a commitment to provide face to face impartial advice to at least 95% of all the year 12 cohort. In addition, all year 10 pupils received help from the Careers Service when making choices for GCSE. The aim of this partnership approach is to compliment the careers education programme with personalised careers guidance to widen and deepen a young person's understanding of the world of work.

An inquiry into Careers education and advice in Northern Ireland set out evidence from the Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association that the careers advice offered in schools and colleges is of variable standard due to a lack of or old qualifications and lack of staff dedicated specifically to careers advice.

Better gearing the education system to the labour market

The Education and Training Inspectorate's Chief Executive's report (2014-2016) highlighted that 99% of post-primary schools provide well-informed, impartial careers education, information, advice and guidance alongside relevant, well-planned and challenging workplace experiences for the pupils (The Education and Training Inspectorate, 2016^[27]). However, links with local employers seem to be underdeveloped and, more generally, insufficient attention is paid to the coherent development of the skills needed in the local economy.

In work-based learning, a majority of the provision is better structured: there is an appropriate focus on establishing successful career progression pathways for the trainees and apprentices who are mostly knowledgeable, well-informed and supported with up-to-date insightful information within their sectors. The curriculum provision for senior pupils has a highly effective focus on employability skills and innovative programmes of careers education, information, advice and guidance.

The most effective careers provision is characterised by well-informed, impartial careers education, information, advice and guidance and relevant, well-planned and challenging workplace experiences for pupils which enhance their employability and inform individual career planning. In the less effective practice, insufficient attention is paid to the coherent development of the skills and attitudes valued by employers, including resilience, resourcefulness, team-working and the ability to communicate effectively.

There is a commitment in the Programme for Government to look at school employer engagement (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2016^[28]). Under Outcome 1 – *We prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy* – there is a commitment to ‘create an environment to promote and enable innovation’ which includes a commitment to increase the integration of education and work – supporting schools to embed innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship at all levels of education from primary to career development and to strengthen the knowledge exchange system between universities, colleges and businesses.

In February 2017, the then Ministers for Education and the Economy agreed that the two Departments should work together to develop a more strategic, joined up approach to 14-19 education and training provision with a focus on the achievement of outcomes. The project aims to develop a joint DE/DfE strategy on education and training which should deliver appropriate flexible routes through education where young people aged 14-19 are fully informed about coherent and relevant possible pathways. The initiative supports the overarching aims of the draft Programme for Government, draft Industrial Strategy and the NICS Outcomes Delivery Plan 2018/19 which recognise the high value of education and skills in preparing young people for life and work.

The Departments have developed a draft vision statement for education for 14-19 year olds called ‘Educating all our young people to help shape their future in a prosperous Northern Ireland’. This statement assumes that clear pathways through education would exist so that young people can progress to achieve their full potential. It should deliver clearly defined routes through education, making the best use of the resources available and enabling every

young persons to make good careers decisions and to acquire the knowledge, skills and qualifications (general and/or professional and technical) to secure meaningful employment and contribute to society and the economy.

The Departments held an Innovation Lab in early August with a wide range of stakeholders participating to examine the key issues. The report from the event is being used to scope the activities necessary and the Departments have put in place a joint team to progress this complex area of work.

Training for Success is a programme designed for young people aged 16-17 (or under 22/24 years for those with extended eligibility entitlement) which provides training to give them the tools and skills they need to get a job. The training provides young people with relevant qualifications as well as the required personal and behavioural skills to progress into work. There are four options, each of which comprises a common curriculum of Essential Skills, personal and social development skills, employability skills, and professional and technical skills. One aspect of the programme is a work placement which allows young people the opportunity to develop their professional and technical skills and employability skills. For example, SERC which is one of Northern Ireland's regional colleges, has over 600 young people on TFS all of whom require work placements as part of their programme. The college currently works with over 500 employers across 22 disciplines to secure work placements. SERC employs a team of 16 Training Support Officers to help secure a work placement suitable to the young person's needs. They make contact with employers and assess all potential work placements around suitability for that young person to develop their skills along with any barriers that person may have and ensure standards are met in terms of accessibility and health and safety.

Collaboration with firms in gearing career guidance to demand

An objective of the "*Preparing for Success*" Strategy is to ensure that all career advisors continue to have a number of placements with employers in growth sectors each year (Department for the Economy,(n.d.)^[25]). The Careers Advisors must have a least five exposures to the world of work which includes visits, industry placements and perhaps ongoing relations with companies. The Food industry in Northern Ireland was one of first sectors to have careers people into their companies to see what they did and the jobs/skills on offer. This has been going on for 4 or 5 years.

The Careers Strategy is a joint Strategy between the Department of Education and Department for Economy reflecting the importance of making the link between teachers/trainees and industry. A Careers Strategy Steering Group (comprising senior officials from both departments) was established to oversee the implementation of the updated Careers Strategy. The Steering Group has developed two joint action plans for 2015/17 and 2016/17 which have been completed. A draft action plan for the 2018-2020 period has been developed but in the absence of Ministers has not been signed off. Officials are progressing some of the actions contained in the draft plan.

There have been no actions from a Northern Ireland Executive perspective in engaging teachers with industry until recently. It has been down to each school and this has meant that the approach has been quite ad hoc. This research would suggest that some schools are better than others. Some schools do send their teachers out into the business environment. An example is St Mary's High School in Downpatrick where the principal requires every teacher to have experience in industry.

This is becoming more strategic with the draft Programme for Government and Industrial Strategy. For example, there is a commitment in the draft Programme for Government to look at school employer engagement. The Department of Education has recently undertaken a survey of schools to ascertain a baseline position in relation to the types and extent of school employer engagement. The findings of this survey will help inform future work in this area

The local Councils are becoming increasingly involved through their Community Planning process. They can be a strong catalyst for bringing together schools and local employers. Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon are involved in this through a community-planning workshop involving the Department for the Economy also. Belfast City Council is also strong in this regard.

Online resources

There are a number of online careers tools currently accessible from the NIdirect website (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/careers>). They include 'Career starter' (11 to 13 year olds) to help students match their skills and interests with future career options and help them choose what subjects to study. The match is based on what people are interested in and what they are good at. There is an on-line tool called 'Career Ideas' intended to be used by 14-19 year olds which suggests and helps students explore different career options. Further improvements and additional online tools are expected to be implemented by April 2019.

Connect to Success NI is an online central system launched in September 2017 that the Department for the Economy (DfE) have developed to advertise work experience opportunities for young people. The main objectives are to:

- provide employers with an online platform on which advertise their work experience opportunities.
- give employers access to a wide range of young people to promote their company and the skills they need for the future.
- broaden awareness of the range of occupations that exist across all sectors in Northern Ireland.

The online system aims to i) reduce burden on schools to find placements; ii) improve access for all and iii) for employers to show case what they have on offer. Since summer 2017 all apprenticeship opportunities are included on the Connect to Success portal.

It has been challenging getting employers on board. Time is the key issue even though the point of Connect to Success is to help cut down on the time taken for employers to secure work placements and apprenticeships. The Chair of the CAF has worked with business bodies and others to highlight business responsibility to advertising vacancies on the portal. Employers need to communicate better about what they need although there is a view that employers have to be educated about what they need.

NIbusinessinfo.co.uk contains detailed advice and links for employers to follow up on apprenticeship programmes. This is Northern Ireland based. There is also a link on higher education training opportunities for business but the link takes you to a UK Training Gateway. There is also a link to a Graduate Talent Pool which is also a UK wide initiative.

There is a dedicated website where employers can advertise apprenticeship positions. Connect to Success NI is an online central system that the Department for the Economy

have developed to advertise work experience opportunities for young people. Connect to Success NI went ‘live’ in September 2016 and the hope is that the online system can benefit employers and young people in a range of ways.

Employers can also advertise vacancies on the Employers Online NI website which enables employers to notify and manage their job vacancies online from their desktops. It helps employers to fill vacancies and jobseekers to find employment through the display of full and accurate vacancy information. Employers can also contact their local Jobs and Benefits offices and Jobcentres websites as well as contact their local further education college, university or contracted training provider who may be aware of potential employees.

Regional colleges also extensively advertise apprenticeship and work-based training programmes. For example, Southern Regional College has ‘*The Job Hub*’ where employers can advertise vacancies for apprenticeships and higher level apprenticeships.

Better anticipating future skills needs of Northern Ireland

In 2015, the Department for Education and Learning (DEL) launched the NI Skills Barometer which has been developed by the University of Ulster’s Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) (Department for the Economy, (n.d.)^[29]). This is a detailed modelling exercise to estimate future skills needs and gaps by level, sector and subject area across the country. This includes analysis of:

- *Job growth* – including both expansion demand (when sectors grow or contract) and replacement demand (e.g. people leave due to retirement, for family reasons or to move to another sector and they must be replaced);
- *Changing skills mix* – based on previous trends and related to the increasing the level of skills in the workforce across all sectors; and
- *Supply of skills into the economy.*

After the first publication of the Skills Barometer research in November 2015, significant engagement has occurred across a wide range of stakeholders to complement the quantitative findings of the research. In particular, the following stakeholders were involved: careers advisors to help inform young people and their parents when choosing future career pathway; teachers and schools to contribute to curriculum development; business groups to develop and articulate skills needs; and Department for the Economy and wider Government to inform policy development and level of provision to meet skills needs of the NI economy.

A wide range of sectoral bodies, rather than individual employers were consulted to obtain their views on skills requirements across a number of sectors. These include People First representing the retail and hospitality sector, the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) representing the construction sector, and Food & Drink Sector Skills representing the Agri-Food sector. A number of other sectoral bodies had been involved but are not longer in existence, for example, e-skills representing the IT sector. The sectoral bodies were consulted to further study employment projections for their sectors, the typical annual requirement of staff from education, the current and projected sectoral skills mix of the sector and the qualifications needed for each sector and occupation. The interaction with the sectoral bodies also involved discussions around emerging skills, skills that should be incorporated into existing qualifications and the most important subject areas for work in a particular sector.

As a consequence of the challenges faced by a number of Sector Skills Councils, the involvement of employers in the Skills Barometer has been relatively difficult. Those employers that have contributed to this initiative were part of sectors that recognise the importance of understanding and anticipating future skills need and that have enough funds to support employers participation in this exercise. Another issue faced when listening to sectoral bodies was that they invariably all needed more people with skills relevant to their sector.

The Skills Barometer is an important source of information about skills needs and employers are extensively consulted before its production. The Department for the Economy is also looking at new techniques to identify skills requirements using, for example, web scraping of job vacancy sites. The Department for the Economy is working with UUEPC to supplement the Skills Barometer with additional labour market information and present this in an interactive and user-friendly approach. It has been recognised that it is important that all can understand it and teachers and others have been asking for this. This will be part of the new online careers software that the Careers Service are currently developing.

Box 3.4. The Skills Barometer

Latest results from the 2017 Skills Barometer shows that employment is going to increase in the next decade in Northern Ireland. However most of the new job opportunities will be filled by people already in the labour market. The remaining jobs will be filled either by people currently in education or new migrants. This second component is harder to anticipate also in relation to Brexit.

Estimates show that the demand for high skilled people is going to increase while the demand for low skilled people is expected to decrease meaning that achieving higher levels of qualifications increases the chances of being employed.

Analysis of people with high levels of qualifications (NQF Level 6 and above) shows that students are unevenly distributed across fields of study. More precisely, there is an undersupply of graduates in engineering and technology, maths and computer science, physical and environmental sciences (mainly STEM subjects) while there an oversupply of students in fields like education, social studies and law, which are relevant mainly for jobs in the public sector.

However, District Councils have become increasingly involved in skills development planning, particularly through their Community Plans which involves discussion with local employers on their skills needs. For example, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Council recent Employability and Skills Strategy for the Borough involved extensive consultation with employers on their skills needs. To understand this better, DfE has commissioned UUEPC to develop a sub-regional Skills Barometer that will forecast the future demand for skills on a geographic bases across NI.

As mentioned previously, Sector Skills Councils continue to provide sector specific advice on skills development for employees doing particular jobs. They are independent employer led organisations that provide a range of services to help employers to reduce skills shortages and improve learning standards. Any of the Sector Bodies/Sector Councils involve representation from business and therefore engagement with business in terms of their skills needs.

Promoting inclusive growth in the labour market

Focus on the low skilled or disadvantaged

Providing people with the skills needed in the labour market as well as bringing economically inactive people in the workforce are seen as a priority in the *Draft Programme for Government Framework (PfG)*. Nearly a third of the 134 training programmes reviewed by the Department for the Economy as part of its employer engagement review are dedicated to employability skills and NQF level 1 qualifications. This has been identified as a potential area of duplication for the Department which noted that ‘a significant variation in outcomes and impacts’ had been reported across the programmes. Further work is being undertaken on this issue.

In support of the Draft PfG, the Economy 2030 strategy notes that improving the skills and employability of those who face the greatest barriers to accessing the labour markets will remain a priority (Department for the Economy, 2016^[13]). It also recognises the importance of reducing NI’s historically high levels of economic inactivity, setting a target of helping 18 000 economically inactive people back to work by 2021. In order to achieve this, the strategy makes the following commitments:

- Supporting those who need help to access the skills that will help them compete for employment opportunities;
- Helping those furthest away from work so that they can take full advantage of employment opportunities and contribute to NI’s future prosperity;
- Proactively supporting those furthest from the workforce, removing barriers, providing access to skills and encouraging participation;
- Increasing the number of economically inactive claimants taking up formal programmes of support to develop and improve their skills levels and help them into work;

A number of other public sector strategies also have targets related to the commitments above. These include:

- The Skills Strategy for NI (2011) - Success through Skills – Transforming Futures, aims to ‘increase levels of social inclusion by enhancing the employability of those currently excluded from the labour market’ (Department for Employment and Learning, 2011^[30]).
- The Further Education Strategy (2016) states it will ‘support social inclusion by providing those with low or no qualifications, or who have barriers to learning, with the skills and qualifications needed to find employment and to become economically active’ (Department for Employment and Learning, 2016^[31]).

Northern Ireland has made considerable progress in implementing social clauses, due to the work that the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) conducted particularly in the construction sector to get agreement on a model for including apprenticeships in all construction contracts. In November 2015 the Procurement Board agreed the Strategic Review of Social Clauses and the Buy Social Construction model for implementation from April 2016. From April 2016 the Buy Social requirements are to be used in procurement above £2m for construction and above £4m for civil engineering contracts.

For example, the Steps to Success contracts provide employment support for the long-term unemployed to help them enter the labour market and sustain employment. The contracts are for 4 years with a possible extension, and commenced in October 2014. They are based on a high degree of payment by results: contractors are paid an attachment fee when a person is referred to them, a job-placement fee when that person enters employment, and then additional outcome payments when the person is still in employment after 6, 9 and 12 months. There are no guaranteed numbers of referrals but the tender process is based on assumed volumes and assumed proportions of starters that progress to sustained employment.

In terms of social benefit requirements, the specification for the contracts set out the following employment and training requirements:

- Objective 1: The Contractor will provide a minimum of 936 Person Weeks of paid employment opportunities for a long-term unemployed person(s), either directly or through its supply chain, within the four (4) year period of the contract, to be arranged throughout the contract lot in Northern Ireland.
- Objective 2: The Contractor will provide a minimum of 936 Person Weeks for apprentices on formally recognised paid apprenticeships within the four (4) year period of the contract, either directly through its workforce or through the workforce of the supply chain (with 20 or more employees). An apprenticeship is one that is delivered within the framework of the DEL ApprenticeshipsNI programme, or equivalent subsequent programme.
- Objective 3: The Contractor and their supply chain shall provide opportunities for all employees to develop essential skills, for example, through the promotion of DEL Essential Skills–Programme.

The Draft Programme for Government emphasises the importance of targeting the economically inactive and more vulnerable people in Northern Ireland. In particular, the initiatives should support transition into work and will involve a wide range of stakeholders including a number of government departments, the local government, the voluntary and community sectors and the employers. This initiative includes a suite of programmes and services to support people to find work and employers to fill jobs which will be in place from 2018 and to develop a new pattern of school-to-employer engagement for pupils to gain an understanding of what the world of work looks like.

Focus on key sectors

The government also commits to a “*Local Works*” approach to improving employability through the “Buy Social” partnership with the local government. This initiative takes a sectoral approach to employability creating a pipeline to better match skills supply and demand in key sectors. It recognises that a ‘*one size fits all*’ approach does not work at the regional level and therefore focuses on tailored solutions to the specific skills needs of each council area. It is aimed at economically inactive people, working with all councils, with a specific focus in areas of disadvantage. It involves working with the sectoral skills bodies, local councils and the DfE to design and implement an “employability pipeline” model similar to those trialled in Scotland where jobs in specific sectors (an initial focus on hospitality/tourism, caring and retail) are ring-fenced for economically inactive clients who are then supported to access these through skills development, employability and mentoring provision.

Where a Forum does not exist government commits to establish, with support from DE, DfE and local partners, an Employability Forum in each council area to effectively bring about a change in how better match the supply and demand for work, through the Community Planning process.

Gas to the West is a result of a social clause requiring contractors to provide apprenticeships, training, and work experience opportunities for "new entrant trainees" in the construction and gas engineering sectors. A number of Councils have made a commitment to promote employment and skills development among low-skilled and disadvantaged people in their areas. For example, Belfast City Council have committed to deliver a *'Belfast Employability Pathway Model'* as part of their Belfast Agenda which is a scalable integrated whole life programme that will support those furthest from the labour market through to employment. The Council is working with employers to identify, plan and prepare for emerging job opportunities and to create effective pathways to employment. One example is the Hospitality Employment Academy, an employability programme to help unemployed residents across the city to develop the necessary skills needed to gain employment opportunities within the hospitality sector. The academy includes a two-week intensive training programme to give participants the skills they need to access a range of entry-level positions within the hospitality sector. In addition to developing new skills participants are matched to employment opportunities and as a minimum are guaranteed interviews with employers with job opportunities available.

Employer engagement in delivering VET at the local level

The role of employers in influencing training provision

Northern Ireland has been relatively slow to develop a culture of employer engagement in skills development with much of past focus being on the supply of skills rather than on demand. This has led to a misalignment of skills and has also meant that the education and training system has been slow to respond to the rapidly changing labour markets as a consequence of digitalisation. There are now around 8 to 9 mainstream employer engagement programmes and upwards on 160 employer engagement programmes operating at both a regional and Council levels. Queen's University and Ulster University have dedicated employer engagement units as does many of the Further Education Colleges in terms of business development support.

The local Further Education colleges are playing an increasingly important role in working with employers to develop programmes/courses locally. One local employer interface initiative is the 'GET Engineering Cluster' which is a college-industry partnership that includes 76 indigenous and international companies and South West College (SWC). The cluster meets monthly and has directly influenced the development of a suite of GOLD Level 3 and Higher Level Apprenticeships along with an annual 'GET Engineering' careers fair. This college-industry partnership has led to a fully aligned system where the curriculum, provision and services provided by a regional College is aligned with the demands of the manufacturing sector.

Another programme is called the Bridge to Employment and provides customised training to unemployed people to give them the skills necessary to compete for new employment opportunities. The programmes are run in response to employers with job vacancies so the training is tailored to meet the skills needed for that job. These are directly focused on what the company needs.

The sectoral partnerships are also a way of giving employers influence over programmes with aim of giving young people the right qualifications/skills. The curriculum is key here. An example given is the Hospitality and Catering sector which worked with the Department to ensure that the curriculum and qualifications achieved met the sector's needs. This is challenging because of the number of steps to go through. Any modification to course content/ qualification has to go through a regulator and this takes time and effort. In terms of full-time education, there are advisory boards in the schools made up of a wide range of stakeholders including employers.

There are mechanisms in place through some of the projects/programmes and working groups involved in skills development in Northern Ireland. For example, with the Public Private Partnerships, a number of Northern Ireland's large and flagship companies including Fujitsu, Capita, Dale Farm and Randox Laboratories are involved. With the Assured Skills Academy model the company selects the trainees to commence the Academy, a pre-employment training programme is designed by the company in conjunction with a local college or university, the training programme is delivered by the college/university with input from the company and the company interviews the trainees at the end of the programme. Examples of Academies include Advanced Cyber Security Analyst, Java, Salesforce, Cloud – using AWS qualification, Data Analytics – both generic and for individual companies, Financial Technology and Software Testers.

The Assured Skills programme seeks to assure potential investors, and existing employers considering expansion, that the skills they need to support a growing business can be found in Northern Ireland. It does this by employing all of DfE's responsibilities for the higher and further education sectors and the Department's skills and training programmes. Assured Skills supports the company's business plan by:

- adding value to their training and skills development activity by facilitating links with the further education and university sectors
- designing pre-employment training solutions
- supporting recruitment and other pre-employment activities

The programme focuses on pre-employment training to graduates. The Academy model is a short-term intervention to help companies meet specific needs. To date, the Programme has up-skilled unemployed graduates in software testing, cloud computing, data analytics, sales & marketing, financial and legal services and professional software skills.

Facilitating the involvement of SMEs

SMEs are a challenge in getting involved. Typically they do not have an explicit HR function so the owner/ management team representative is trying to support skills development doing this. They have limited time and cost is prohibitive. It is mainly a capacity issue. This comes back to the need to provide better education to business on how to use staff more effectively and make more informed decisions around skills development in the company. There is a need to bring employers and educators together. Employers, particularly smaller employers, expect to be beneficiaries but not influencers. They do not understand the language of educators and this needs to be addressed. Ideally it is important to demystify the education language e.g. speaking in 'levels'. A point was made that even the simple terms like 'apprenticeships' evokes different interpretations. Many businesses do not appreciate that this is work-based training.

Understanding the role of local councils in Northern Ireland

Employer engagement in Northern Ireland varies significantly across firm size and sectors. Typically, SMEs have not developed the same capacity to identify and articulate current and future skills needs. The issue concerns especially Northern Ireland's micro businesses, with less than 10 employees that are often challenged by time and resources constraints.

In recent years, under the local government reform, the 11 District Councils in Northern Ireland have taken on a wider role in economic development and skills development. For example, a number of Councils have developed Employability and Skills Strategies which promote partnerships within their Council areas and include a strong focus on the role and involvement of business and employers in supporting economic development priorities locally.

Box 3.5. Implementing a local employment and skills strategy in Northern Ireland

Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon (ABC) Borough Council have developed an Employability and Skills Strategy, which has a strong employer engagement focus to include a role in an Employability and Skills Forum within the Borough to provide input into the skills needs of the area. This also includes membership from government, the private sector, training and education providers and others. ABC's Skills Strategy also has a sectoral focus, recommending the introduction of a competitive bursary scheme for local SMEs in the Council area's 5 priority sectors - Digital and Creative Technologies, Advanced Manufacturing, Materials and Engineering; Life and Health Sciences; Agri-Food; and Tourism – which focuses on re-skilling and up-skilling the existing workforce within the ABC Borough Council area.

Some local Councils have also made a strong commitment to employer engagement through their Community Plans. Each Council has developed a Community Plan which sets out the long-term vision for the social, economic and environmental development of their area. This includes the unique selling points for the area to help attract business investment and growth. A wide range of partners, including representatives from the business, statutory, higher education, community and voluntary sectors, have worked with each Council to develop their Community Plans.

For example, Belfast City Council's Community Plan is called the '*Belfast Agenda*' and it makes a number of commitments around employment and skills which actively engages the business community (Belfast City, 2016^[32]). This includes a draft Employability and Skills framework 2015-2025 whose vision is to '*realise the potential of Belfast's economy and its people by transforming skills, employability and aspiration, resulting in higher levels of business growth, employment and incomes*'. This includes engagement with employers on a number of levels including Academies working with local construction companies involved in Belfast City Council capital projects and paid work experience for students in sectors including IT and creative and digital technologies.

Derry City Council makes a commitment in its Community Plan to develop a community that is '*better skilled and educated*' and this includes an action to increase industry engagement in careers advice and guidance.

Mid Ulster Council has established a Mid Ulster Skills Forum charged with understanding and communicating the needs of employers and investors in the District relating to skills gaps and employability issues which impact on the economic wellbeing of the area, and identifying and implementing appropriate actions through partners to improve provision and support. Representatives from a wide range of local employers, further education colleges and business organisations have been involved in devising the terms of reference and programme of work for the Forum. The Forum is chaired by a Director with one of the region's largest employers, Dunbia, which is a meat processing plant.

Box 3.6. Area Learning Communities

Area learning communities (ALCs) are voluntary coalition of schools in different areas focused on providing a real opportunity to develop the Entitlement Framework and a shared responsibility for its delivery to all the young people in an area by providing them with access to a wide range of learning opportunities suited to their needs, aptitudes and interests, irrespective of where they live or the school they attend. They came in recognition that each school cannot provide every subject/course and ensure that the curriculum could be planned on an area basis. All of the post primary schools in NI are members of ALCs. From September 2017, schools have to offer pupils access to a minimum of 21 courses at Key Stage 4 and 21 courses at post-16. At least one third of these courses should be general and at least one third applied (with more practical content). A growing number of schools are now engaged with their local College in innovative and creative approaches to collaborative working. There are currently 30 ALCs established across the Northern Ireland within which 250 schools and Colleges are working to increase the range of courses for pupils in the local area. This has opened up many more occupational studies at local Further Education colleges for students.

Flexibility of public institutions in responding to local employer needs

Most businesses are very busy so tend to engage with public institutions only when the need them. More sophisticated businesses naturally behave more strategically and are well switched on to engaging with, for example, the universities. This is evident from the lists of businesses that tend to engage in, for example, the Higher Level Apprenticeships. Smaller companies are less likely to approach their local college or equivalent for support.

Business in the Community is a UK business-led membership organisation made up of businesses of all sizes who understand that the prosperity of business and society are mutually dependent. Business in the Community in Northern Ireland has a wide range of employer engagement programmes which brings together employers with the skills and education system in Northern Ireland. This includes supporting about 10,000 placements a year of school children with employers which more recently has focused on 'Work Inspiration' days in companies which allow children to see in practical terms how a business works. This is an inclusive programme open to children across all schools in Northern Ireland. Previously school placements were organised on an ad hoc basis and were difficult for children from more marginal communities to access.

Colleges have been working flexibly with the Department through the Assured Skills Programme. A good example is provided by Belfast Met and e3. The aims of e3 are to enhance the employability and skills of learners, support enterprise through incubation and

small business programmes and foster innovative approaches to economic development. The services offered from this facility and across the colleges include customer training programmes and support for enterprise development. They deliver innovation voucher programmes with the support of Invest NI, product development and apprenticeships. They operate across a range of sectors including composites, financial services, tourism, retail, health and life sciences, and digital and ICT.

One of the key component parts and innovations in e3 is FRESH, the project-based learning approach that e3 has piloted. That is a new approach that is embedded in the curriculum and is focused on enhancing students' creativity and innovation skills within their curriculum and across all higher education programmes. In the Titanic Quarter, they are working on larger-scale business engagement, looking at offshore energy and a bioskills academy. They are also delivering the employer support programme, which is funded by DEL, and are working with Invest NI on developing a new cluster called the energy skills training network.

Box 3.7. The Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment

The Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) responded to the needs of the growing Life and Health Sciences sector in Northern Ireland by introducing a unique and innovative A level in Life and Health Sciences, for first teaching from September 2016. The sector, comprising of 130 companies and employing approximately 23,000 people, generates around £800m in sales per annum, accounting for approximately 25% of Northern Ireland's economic output. The qualification was a response to the findings of a key report by the Northern Ireland Science Industry Panel. The Matrix report on Life & Health Sciences in Northern Ireland (2015) identified that the vast and expanding Life & Health Sciences sector requires a highly skilled scientific workforce for projected future job growth. CCEA responded to the needs of the sector and its current recruitment shortfall by working collaboratively with key employers to design a very relevant and engaging qualification. The new qualification has been developed in consultation with the major companies such as Almac, Norbrook and Intelesens and will give students an opportunity to develop critical skills demanded by a growing industry.

An American company, Bemis, recently announced that it was establishing a European Business Service Centre in Campsie, Derry~Londonderry creating up to 95 positions. To help recruit for these roles, in partnership with the Department for the Economy and NWRC, Bemis launched a five-week Global Business Services Academy to equip participants with the skills required to fulfil business financial service roles in the new Centre. The participants who were all previously educated to HND or Degree level gained industry recognised qualifications as a result of the five-week programme.

The Higher Level Apprenticeship (HLA) concept has involved over 600 participants across 40 occupational areas including ICT, engineering, accounting and digital marketing. HLAs currently offer qualifications from Level 4 to Level 6 (Honours degree). The majority are at Level 5 (Foundation degree). They enable employers to train staff to the level required as well as assuring that there are people available with strong technical and good employability skills. Staff are trained to the employer's specific requirements, apprentices

can help fill skills gaps increasing productivity and securing a high calibre of staff for the business. The Metropolitan and Regional Colleges, Open University and University of Ulster can respond quick rapidly to employer requests in terms of HLAs.

Benefits of training for employers

There does not appear to be any formal mechanism for employers to report the benefits of training in Northern Ireland. From experience, employers find it difficult to assess and articulate the benefits of training. This does seem to be a particular weakness in trying to help companies to determine and appreciate the impact of training on sales and productivity which is of particular importance for Northern Ireland.

There is extensive use of case studies to highlight the benefit of certain programmes. This includes, for example, Academies and Higher Level Apprenticeships. Evaluations are undertaken of each programme which would include providing quantitative and qualitative outcomes for employers of engaging in those programmes. It is unlikely that those benefits are fed back to employers.

Apprenticeships in non-traditional fields

Apprenticeships are offered in non-traditional fields, particularly in terms of higher-level apprenticeships. For example, Deloitte recently launched a new Robotics Automation Academy, offering over 20 graduates the opportunity to join its Belfast office. The Department for the Economy has backed the scheme which is a 12-week training programme delivered by Belfast Met. Those candidates who are successful will gain an industry recognised qualification and a potential offer of employment from Deloitte.

Currently there are around 170 Level 2 and Level 3 apprenticeships and over 45 Higher Level Apprenticeships to choose from, including computer science, life sciences, accountancy and digital marketing. Apprenticeships include built environment services, creative industry skills including costume and wardrobe and cultural heritage along with hospitality and catering including front-of-house and hospitality supervision.

Tailored / ad-hoc training courses

There is an opportunity to access short-term bespoke training under the Assured Skills “Academy Model”. Where a company or a consortium of companies have an identified skills need, DfE will consider developing a short-term pre-employment training intervention to meet that need. This typically involves an eight to ten week pre-employment training programme delivered by a local college or university, followed by a four to six week placement with a participating company. The intervention is designed to lower the recruitment risk for companies by providing candidates trained with the initial skills for the opportunities that are available.

The Academy Model is flexible and versatile, and has been used to help companies recruit new staff in areas such as data analytics, human resources, legal services, financial services, sales, software development, software testing, cyber security, welding, control numerical control machining, 2D animation and game development. The benefits of the Academy Model for companies include:

- assistance with recruitment and selection (including psychometric assessment if required);

- a pre-employment training programme designed by the company or companies in conjunction with a local college or university;
- the training programme delivered by the college/university with input from the companies;
- the company interview the trainees at the end of the programme; and
- the Department meets almost all of the costs associated with the intervention.

The Academy recruits students from a wide range of backgrounds including the unemployed, under-employed, school leavers, graduates or have experience and would like to change career direction. However, the vast majority of Academy programmes have been aimed at providing graduate level opportunities for unemployed graduates. Over the last two years alone, the Academies have helped graduates secure jobs in diverse sectors such as data analytics, human resources, financial services, sales, software development, software testing, cyber security, 2D animation and game development.

The Academies have over 80% success rate of participants progressing into full time employment. Current academies are advertised in local newspapers and online resources including jobcentreonline, nidirect, NIJobs, recruitNI and social media.

For example, the Software Testers' Academy was the first Academy Model programme. Four cohorts have taken place since 2011, and almost 40 different companies, both large and small, have used the Software Testers' Academy to meet their recruitment needs.

Improving work organisation, job design and skills utilisation in the workplace

Most public policies have largely focused on boosting the supply of skills, namely the number of people with vocational or academic qualifications. However, there is an increasing recognition within the OECD that more should be done to work with employers to look at the use of skills in the workplace. Skills utilisation concerns the extent to which skills are effectively applied in the workplace to maximise employer and individual performance. As such it involves a mix of policies including work organisation, job design, technology adaptation, innovation, employee-employer relations, human resource development practices and business product market strategies (OECD/ILO, 2017^[21])

It is often at the local level where the interface of these factors can best be addressed. Policies which aim to improve skills use in the workplace can help address the multi-faceted challenges many local economies are facing and contribute to national productivity and inclusive growth objectives. There are a series of internal and external factors that influence the decision of firms about whether to pursue high or low road employment strategies. These strategies can become self-reinforcing not only at the level of individual workplaces, but also within a local labour market.

Box 3.8. The UK Business Productivity Review

Raising productivity is one of the Government's key priorities and is core to the UK's Industrial Strategy. The United Kingdom has strong business environment but productivity remains low in comparison to other international peers.

The Industrial Strategy focused on the five dimensions of productivity: ideas, people, infrastructure, business environment and place. The objective of this initiative is to improve productivity for low productive businesses and for those that underperform relative to national and international benchmarks.

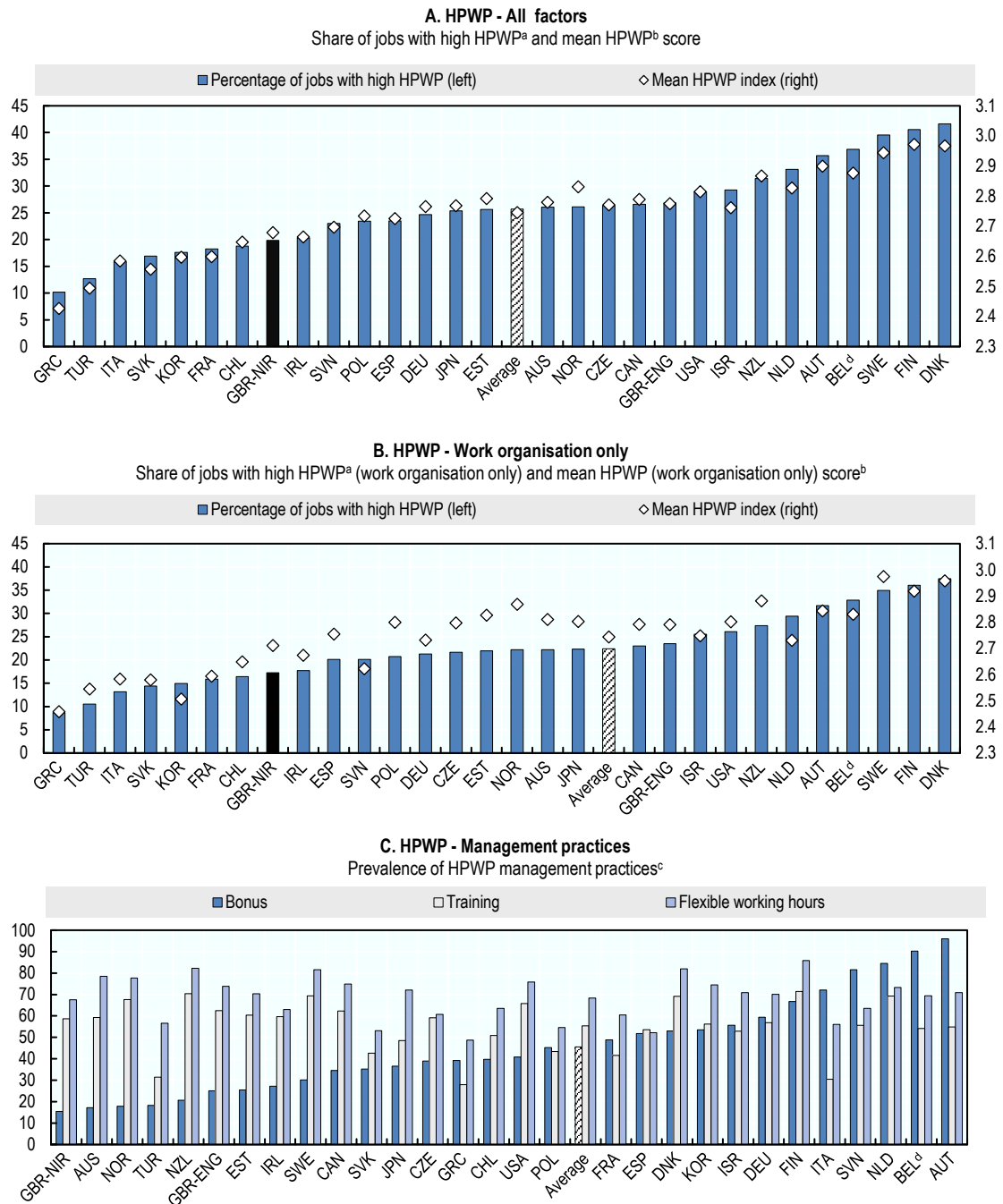
The Business Productivity Review analyses also how new technologies, managing practices and business support services by both the public and private sectors can contribute to increase productivity and working conditions of employees.

Source: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/business-productivity-review-call-for-evidence>.

High-performance workplaces and work organisation in Northern Ireland

Examining workplace practices often associated with higher levels of skills use can also provide useful indications of the degree to which skills are being put to good use. Skills use is generally associated with High-Performance Work Practices (HPWP), which include such things as employee award programmes, flexible job descriptions, regular performance appraisals as well as mentoring and leadership development courses in the workplace. About 20% of jobs in Northern Ireland are characterised by high levels of High-Performance Work Practices, well below that of OECD countries like Sweden, Austria, Finland, Denmark as well as the region of England.

Figure 3.1. High-performance work practices across OECD countries



Source: OECD Survey of Adult skills (PIAAC) database, 2012 and 2015

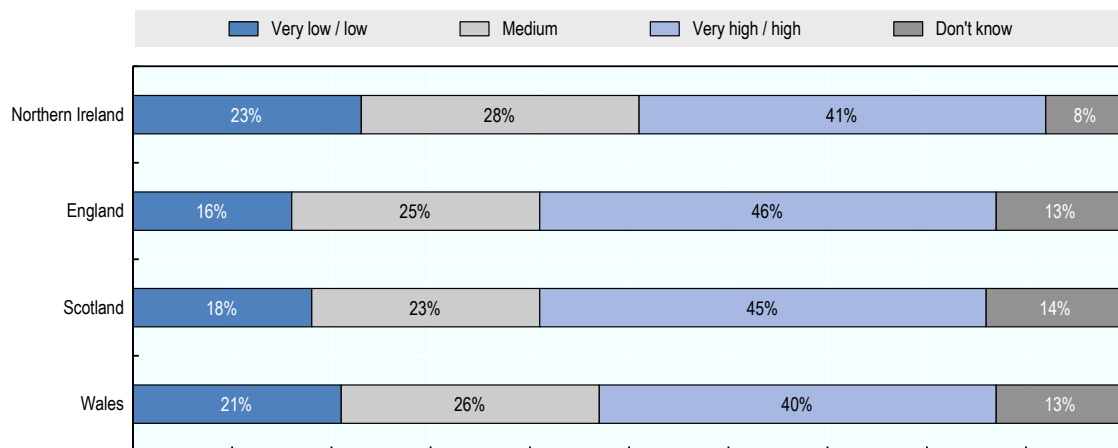
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A number of factors can influence the degree to which skills are put to good use within the firm. Product market strategies are fundamental to understanding the quality of jobs and the potential for firms to better use the skills of their employees. The nature of the business and the competitive advantages pursued can also impact the level and types of skills that

employers seek and use. Product market strategies (PMS) describe the ways in which private sector establishments choose to differentiate and position the products and services they provide within the markets in which they operate (United Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills, 2016^[33]). As companies move into higher value-added product and service markets, the levels of skills that they require, and the extent to which they utilise skills, tends to increase. Evidence from the 2016 UK Commission for Employment and Skills Employer Survey shows 23% of responding employer report very low product market strategies (see Figure 3.2) (United Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills, 2016^[33]). This is an index developed within the survey, which assigns a score of 1-5 based on the following factors:

- the extent to which their competitive success depended on price;
- the extent to which the establishment tended to lead the way in their industry in terms of the development of new products, materials or techniques;
- the extent to which the establishment competed in a ‘premium quality’ product market as opposed to a ‘standard or basic quality’ product market; and
- the extent to which they offered goods or services with a substantial amount of customisation according to customer requirements.

Figure 3.2. Product market strategies, UK countries, 2015

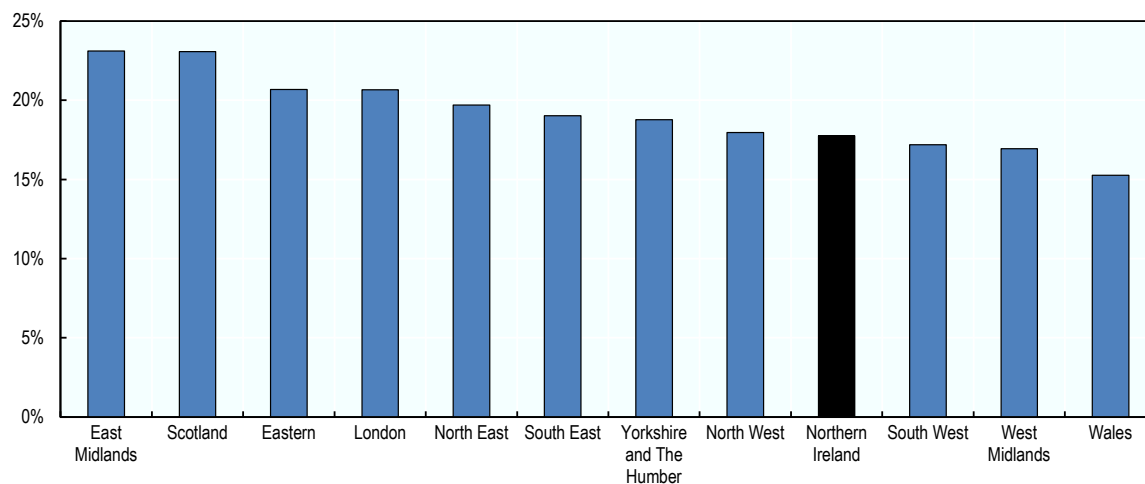


Source: UKCES Employer Skills Survey 2015.

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Figure 3.3 shows the share of enterprise that have introduced new methods of work organisation from 2012-14 within regions of the United Kingdom based on data from the UK Innovation Survey. While the survey results showed a general decrease among firms in undertaking innovative activities between 2012 and 2014, Northern Ireland employers trail most regions in the UK with only 18% of firms reporting new methods of work organisation (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2018^[34]).

Figure 3.3. Share of enterprises that introduced new methods of organising work responsibilities, NUTS2 regions of the UK, 2012-2014



Note: The chart shows establishments that used for the first time a new system of employee responsibilities, team work, decentralisation, integration or de-integration of departments, education / training systems etc.

Source: Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (2016), UK Innovation Survey

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The role of the public sector in promoting better skills use

The Department for the Economy is aware of the importance of fostering better skills use in the workplace. They are exploring international examples from Australia and Scandinavian countries on how to improve job design and support companies to make a better use of existing skills. There has been extensive engagement with the business community in the design of all of the main Strategies in Northern Ireland. This has largely been facilitated through the various business bodies operating in Northern Ireland including the NI Chamber of Commerce, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Institute of Directors and others. A wide range of businesses were also involved in the design and implementation of apprenticeships and youth training policies. They made a significant contribution to the development of the Strategy and members of Strategic Advisory Forum were selected from these groups.

Invest NI are involved in a number of programmes and interventions to improve work organisation and the use of existing skills. The Invest NI Skills Intervention Programme has provided a range of interventions to supported businesses in order to assist them to become *‘more competitive by developing the skills of their staff to create a skilled, trained and adaptable workforce, thereby improving the capabilities of the businesses, people and processes.’* Over the last seven years the Programme has included the following core elements:

1. Business Improvement Training Programme (BITP) programme
2. Skills Growth Programme comprising the Skills Growth Programme Grant (SGP) for larger projects, and Skills Advancement Grant (SAG) for small projects and
3. Training Needs Analysis (TNA) Workshops/Mentoring

The SGP replaced BITP in 2013 and was largely based upon BITP in terms of the specific nature of the support given, with the main variation being that a specific small project support – SAG - was also introduced in 2013. This was to address concerns that small companies were not availing sufficiently of the programme. The Skills Intervention Programme has been open to a wide range of Invest NI client businesses in both manufacturing and internationally tradable services. It has formed part of a wider support package to attract new FDI. Awards cover both standalone projects and those as part of wider expansion and investment plans. Three collaborative projects have also been also supported.

Financial support through the Programme has focused on providing specific training directly related to employee tasks within the business and to general training to enhance the skills of the workforce more widely. The Programme has required companies to align their proposed training activity across four broad themes namely management development, technical skills, soft skills and functional skills. Both external and internal trainers have provided training through the Programme.

Box 3.9. The Curriculum Hub initiative

The Curriculum Hub initiative is a new concept and represents a significant development in the way Further Education colleges deliver education in the priority occupational areas identified in the Industrial Strategy. The initiative sees the designation of a single Further Education college as the Curriculum Hub for a designated curriculum area.

The lead college, acting as the Curriculum Hub, operates in conjunction with the other five local colleges to review the curriculum offer across further education in order to develop coherent pathways, future-scope curriculum, develop Continuing Professional Development at a sector level (including industrial experience), ensure curriculum is developed by appropriately skilled staff and ensure coherent communication and promotion.

This initiative complements developments within Apprenticeship and Youth Training and promotes a more coherent interaction across the Department to enhance engagement with employers and further education.

The following Curriculum Hubs have been allocated to Further Education colleges:

- Belfast Met – Digital and ICT;
- South West College – Advanced Manufacturing;
- Southern Regional College – Life Sciences
- South Eastern Regional College – Construction and
- North West Regional College – Health and Social Care

Applications to be designated as the lead hub in hospitality & tourism are currently being assessed with an announcement pending in December 2018.

Focus on better using skills within SMEs

The Employer Support Programme, encompassing Skills Focus and InnovateUs, has been designed to support the needs of the small to medium sized business in mind and as such offers a flexible training solution in terms of times, class size and also the location of delivery, which can take place within the workplace or at the local college. A skills audit is conducted for all employer engagement under the Employer Support context.

Skills Focus has been developed to increase the skills levels and employability of employees within the existing workforce. It aims to support, promote and facilitate collaborative work between business and FE colleges in order to provide tailored skills provision to small to medium sized enterprises with less than 250 employees.

The purpose of Skills Focus is to meet business needs by increasing the skills levels of the existing workforce to level 2 and above qualifications. The programme allows a tailored training solution for SMEs to upskill the existing workforce. Each project will require a 25% employer contribution and requires the college to invoice the employer for 25% of the cost.

InnovateUs aims to encourage and promote opportunities for businesses and FE colleges to work together (Belfast Met, 2018_[35]). In particular, the focus of the programme is to enable small businesses, with fewer than 50 employees, to acquire the skills necessary to engage in innovation activities. The programme has been designed with the needs of small businesses in mind and to be flexible in meeting these needs, for example to fit with businesses working patterns. As part of this flexibility, the training to be delivered can take place within the workplace or at the college. The role of those programmes is to support the company around how to go about addressing skills needs. Sectors it is involved with include Advanced Engineering & Manufacturing, Health & Life Sciences, Food, Drink & Tourism, ICT and Renewable Energy & Sustainable Technologies. For example, through the South Eastern Regional College O.D Cars, which specialises in a range of engine re-manufacturing, benefited from bespoke, one-to-one CNC techniques and computer aided design mentoring. The business also gained access to resources which have helped them undertake innovation activities, improve their business with new technologies and remain competitive. It would seem from the research however that less emphasis appears go into educating employers on what their skills needs, particularly future needs, are/should be.

In addition to an extensive range of Further and Higher Education Courses, the Economic Engagement Teams across Northern Ireland's Regional Colleges aim to encourage local economic development by supporting companies, large or small, in the social economy, private or public sector, to help them find solutions to their training and development needs. Their focus is to support business through the provision of four integrated services – upskilling, innovation, apprenticeship and start-up.

Local strategies to encourage better skills use in the workplace

Investors in People (IIP) operate in Northern Ireland and help evaluate business internal performance over time and identify areas for further investment. The evaluation is based on an online assessment including 27 scales for comparison. IIP also offers the ability to benchmark against the industry average. The Investors in People framework is designed around the key three principles that make up the Standard; Leading, Supporting and Improving. These key strands are then broken down further to pinpoint the things that any given organisation does well in terms of its people management, whilst understanding where they're going wrong, and helping to innovate ways to improve. In essence, IIP is

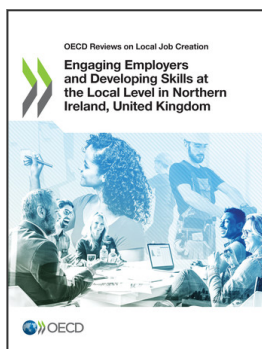
built to add value to a business by helping build strategies to encourage the best from its employees. IIP do use case studies of local companies to demonstrate the benefits of taking the IIP approach. This includes a company called Colorite which highlighted how the new standard applies people engagement practices in order for the organisation to achieve their long term objectives.

IIP used to be part of Northern Ireland government through the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) but is now a community interest company which is 49% owned by the Department of Education (UK). There are 557 organisations with IIP in Northern Ireland. Various Councils, Business Bodies and Media host business award ceremonies, some of which include a focus on skills e.g. Belfast Telegraph Excellence in the Development of Management & Leadership award.

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