



Skills for Learning Professionals

A SECTOR SKILLS AGREEMENT FOR THE LIFELONG LEARNING SECTOR

STAGE 1 – SKILLS NEEDS ASSESSMENT (SNA)

NORTHERN IRELAND

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skills
FOR BUSINESS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This executive summary and its full Northern Ireland report, along with three other country reports, the UK wide report and their associated annexes, represent the main outputs of an extensive programme of both primary and secondary research undertaken between May and November 2006. The research forms the first and foundation stage of the Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) process for the lifelong learning sector – the skills needs assessment. It was undertaken by independent consultants SQW, in collaboration with Lifelong Learning UK, the Sector Skills Council (SSC) for the lifelong learning sector. This summary and the full report address issues in Northern Ireland in the context of what is happening across the UK as a whole and in different constituencies.

Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) is the SSC representing five key constituencies, which together make up the lifelong learning sector:

- community learning and development (CLD)
- further education (FE)
- higher education (HE)
- libraries, archives and information services (LAIS)
- work based learning (WBL).

The lifelong learning sector occupies a unique position within the ‘Skills for Business’ network. Its employers provide services which meet the workforce development needs of other employment sectors. It is an employment sector in its own right, with its own workforce, who also have development needs.

The Sector Skills Agreement process was developed by the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) in order to ensure that organisations both public and private are equipped to meet the realities of the modern working environment and that the workforce is able to offer the right skills in the right places at the right time. The SSA comprises five key stages, with the fifth resulting in a final agreement of how the SSC and employers will work together with key partners to secure the necessary supply of appropriate training for the future.

In addition, because of LLUK’s key role in supporting employers delivering lifelong learning and because of the extent to which the skills needed by the lifelong learning workforce will be shaped by the workforce development needs identified within other employment sectors, Lifelong Learning UK will undertake an additional stage. This will comprise an **‘Impact Review’** of the SSAs produced by other SSCs, the purpose of which is to consider the effects and demands that the SSAs will place on the lifelong learning sector, both now and in the future.

Methodology

The research undertaken for Stage 1 of the Sector Skills Agreement necessarily adopted a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods, drawing on a range of existing secondary data sources and primary data collection. This included:

- a comprehensive review of relevant existing literature
- the identification and analysis of existing standard and sector-specific secondary data sources
- the design, collection and analysis of a range of new primary data, to deepen the understanding of policy priorities and employers’ current and future skills requirements in Northern Ireland:
 - 22 key stakeholder consultation interviews

- a survey of sector providers/employers with 10% of all UK responses from providers/employers in Northern Ireland
- a future scenarios workshops in Northern Ireland.

The profile of the lifelong learning sector

Various existing secondary data sources such as the Labour Force Survey (ONS, 2006a), constituency-specific data (e.g. DEL, 2004/05) and other stakeholder approximations (e.g. Jobskills Providers Forum; Youth Council for Northern Ireland) have contributed to the development of an estimate of the total workforce of the lifelong learning sector in Northern Ireland, as being in the region of **16,200 people**. In comparing the four nations, Northern Ireland had the highest proportion of the workforce involved in FE and the lowest proportion in HE, with the LAIS workforce comprising the smallest proportion of the total lifelong learning workforce in any home country.

Estimates also suggest that HE, FE and CLD are the largest constituencies in terms of their workforce, with LAIS being the smallest.

Examination of the characteristics of the existing workforce in Northern Ireland, based on a range of existing secondary data sources (mainly LFS, DEL 2004/05, HESA Staff Record 2004/05 and CILIP membership database 2006), reveals that:

- The majority of the lifelong learning workforce is **female**. This is the case in each of the four nations but the female majority in Northern Ireland is greater than in any of the other countries. However female employment is limited in the more senior or professional employment categories.
- The majority of the workforce is **aged between 35–54 years**, with a slightly younger profile amongst women apparent within the HE constituency.
- Northern Ireland has the highest proportion of its workforce employed within **professional** roles compared to other parts of the UK. The proportion employed in professional roles in Northern Ireland and each of the other countries is higher than for other sectors or the economy as a whole.
- **Full-time, permanent employment** is the norm – particularly within the HE and WBL constituencies and for staff at less senior or professional levels. However, teaching staff in FE are more likely to be part-time than full-time.

These findings suggest particular challenges for the lifelong learning sector. For example, the greater prevalence of female employment amongst non-professional and part-time staff suggests enduring gender barriers to skills development and career progression, which need to be addressed. Similarly, older workers, who make up much of the sector and have not benefited from recent reforms to the compulsory education system, are likely to have different skills needs and qualifications than their younger colleagues, and this also has implications for future 'succession planning' and renewing the workforce (particularly the professional workforce) within the sector.

Drivers of the demand for skills

Central and devolved government policy in a range of areas plays a considerable role in influencing the development of the lifelong learning sector and the future demand for skills

within its workforce. Currently the Review of Public Administration (RPA) is transforming structures within which lifelong learning is being delivered.

Strengthening economic prosperity, productivity and social justice are key themes within policy in Northern Ireland and across the UK, to which the development of skills within the population as a whole is expected to contribute. Public Service Agreements (PSAs) and target indicators have been established with the Northern Ireland department, which set out clear targets for improving the education/training attainment of young people and improving adult skills levels.

Moreover, the way in which the lifelong learning sector responds and develops, in order to meet the demands placed upon it, is also largely governed by policy development. Although specific policies have been developed and implemented in different ways within different constituencies, some common policy themes have been identified, including:

- setting standards for service delivery and professional practice
- developing capacity within the lifelong learning workforce
- developing responsive and flexible services, offering greater choice and personalisation, to meet the needs of employers and individuals
- strengthening partnership working, collaboration and service integration, involving employers and individuals in determining service provision
- reducing bureaucracy and inefficiency within the system and service delivery infrastructure.

Some of the key strategies relating to the above policies are presented in the following documents:

- 'Essential skills for living: equipped for the future, building for tomorrow' in 2002 (DELNI, 2002)
- 'Entrepreneurship and education action plan' (DETINI, 2003)
- The Costello report – 'Future post-primary arrangements in Northern Ireland: advice from the post-primary review group' (DENI, 2004a)
- The Burns report – 'Education for the 21st century' (DENI, 2001)
- The 'Skills strategy for Northern Ireland' (DELNI, 2004b)
- 'Success through skills: the skills strategy for Northern Ireland' (DELNI, 2006a)
- 'Youth work: a model for effective practice' (DENI, 2004b)
- 'Northern Ireland's libraries: a framework for change' (DCALNI, 2005)

Several initiatives to reform the lifelong learning system in line with the policies listed above include:

- 'Building real partnership: compact between government and the Voluntary and Community sector in Northern Ireland' (Department of Health and Social Services, NI 1998).
- 'Further education means business: a programme for implementation' (DELNI, 2004a)
- 'Success through skills' (DELNI, 2006a)
- 'Training for success: professional and technical training: consultation document' (DELNI, 2006b)

Closely related to policy development, **expenditure on lifelong learning** is also acknowledged as both reflecting and being a significant driver of change. Analysis suggests that, whilst total funding levels are likely to remain healthy and stable in Northern Ireland in the near future, this will not necessarily affect individual constituencies equally and increasing investment by employers and individual learners will be required. The sector will need staff skilled in securing and sustaining funding from an increasingly diverse range of

sources, as well as staff skilled in offering provision that responds to the needs and demands of 'paying customers'.

Demographic change clearly has implications for **trends in participation** in lifelong learning and participants' specific demands and needs. The UK population is predicted to increase from nearly 60 million today to around 69.5 million by the year 2054, and this population is expected to be an increasingly ageing population. Population in Northern Ireland is also expected to grow but at a lower rate. Hence, demand for lifelong learning amongst older learners may increase – this is already apparent within the HE constituency across the UK, for example. Older participants in lifelong learning may have very different needs, preferences and behaviours, compared with the more traditional, younger users, with whom lifelong learning staff may be more familiar. This may require an updating of staff skills and approaches to service delivery.

The increasingly **global economy** will place an increased premium on skills within the workforce as a whole. New industries, occupations and working practices will require new skills and knowledge, with associated demand for 'replacement skills'. The implications of this for the lifelong learning sector will also become clearer as a result of the LLUK 'Impact Review' of the skills needs identified by the Sector Skills Agreements undertaken by other Sector Skills Councils.

Migration is another important facet of globalisation. Stakeholders interviewed in Northern Ireland confirmed that inward migration potentially increases demand for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) provision, as well as requiring lifelong learning staff to work with an increasingly diverse population. The migration of skilled workers (both inwards and outwards) also increases the need for internationally comparable standards for skills and qualifications. The development of the proposed 'European Qualifications Framework' would also enable and potentially result in increased competition for students between lifelong learning providers in the UK and those overseas.

Finally, **technological change** has considerable implications for the development of skills across the workforce as a whole, thus influencing demand for lifelong learning provision. According to the stakeholders interviewed, developments in technology also shape the delivery of that provision and hence the skills needs of the lifelong learning workforce within Northern Ireland and across the UK. Skills will require continual updating in order to keep pace with rapid technological innovation.

The competitive position of the sector

There are known difficulties in measuring the impact of the lifelong learning sector and its competitive position, performance, success and productivity. Unlike sectors that produce tangible 'products' (and that consequently have an impact on Gross Value Added – GVA), the lifelong learning sector lacks a single standardised scale, which can be used to measure its success and productivity.

A few formal measures and 'hard' performance indicators do exist, although these are generally constituency-specific and, where there are similarities across constituencies, data is often not collected in directly comparable formats. Moreover, informal, 'softer' measures, identified through this research, emphasise the competence and knowledge of employees as a proxy for success. However these measures are qualitative in nature, are necessarily hard to quantify and therefore do not lend themselves easily to generating statistical trends.

Various sources indicate that increasing participation in lifelong learning could result in **benefits to the Northern Ireland economy**. For example, within the HE constituency,

research suggests that the UK constituency had an income of £16.87 billion in the year 2003/04 and gross export earnings of £3.6 billion (Kelly *et al*, 2006). Similarly, projections made by Lord Leitch claim considerable benefits to the economy of increasing the skills of the UK workforce as a whole.

Trends in participation also provide an indicator of the success of the sector. In an increasingly commercially oriented environment, potential participants will 'vote with their feet'. Continued increases in the number of participants in lifelong learning suggest that the perceived benefits or value of participation still outweigh the personal investment increasingly required. **Participant satisfaction** surveys also support this finding.

Levels of success experienced by lifelong learning participants provide another indicator of the success of the sector, as well as potentially influencing levels of future participation. For example, the substantial increase in the numbers of employees with qualifications at NVQ4 or higher may be taken as an indicator of success within the Northern Ireland lifelong learning sector.

International comparison of the lifelong learning sector is similarly complex, with each country collecting the relevant data in different ways. However, some indicators have been identified as producing robust comparison between 30 OECD and 37 EU (and associated) countries and these can be used to measure the UK lifelong learning sector against its worldwide counterparts. The main sources enabling some form of international comparison include Eurostat (2006a) and OECD (2004).

It has already been stated that **female employees** make up a high proportion of the Northern Ireland lifelong learning workforce. The predominance of men within academic roles which has also already been noted was less marked within the UK as a whole than in Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Switzerland. Moreover, of these countries, the UK saw the biggest increase in numbers of female academics between 1998–2004.

Similarly, whilst the issue of an **ageing workforce** remains, the UK has a lower proportion of staff aged more than 50 years employed in delivering tertiary education, compared to many other countries, including Norway and Italy.

Average **academic salaries** in tertiary education in the UK were second only to those in the United States (after taking into account the cost of living) and considerably higher than those in Sweden.

Expenditure on tertiary education in the UK, representing 1.1% of GDP, is the same as that in France and Japan, but considerably lower than that in the USA (2.7%). However, more is spent within the UK on primary-, secondary- and post-secondary non-tertiary education (3.9% GDP), ranking it 13th amongst OECD countries.

In terms of **learner outcomes**, the proportion of 25–64 year olds which had attained upper-secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education (57%) was higher than the OECD average of just 44% in 2002, and had remained stable since 1998.

And finally, the UK has a fairly high **rate of return**, a measure of the benefits of education over time, relative to the costs of the investment in education, and analogous to the percentage returns from investing in a savings account. Of the nine countries where data existed, only Finland and Hungary had better rates of return.

The current skills profile, skills needs and priorities in the lifelong learning sector

It is acknowledged that it is hard to find a suitable proxy measure for 'skills' within the available secondary data sources. The most common and widely used indicator is qualifications, although this is limited in that it does not take into account skills held or developed by employees but which are not formally recognised in any way. Nonetheless, qualifications data does allow comparisons to be made across different occupations and employment sectors and there was little option but to take this approach for this research.

In addition, there are challenges in terms of identifying and comparing skills and qualifications at different levels as a range of different qualification frameworks are currently in operation across the different lifelong learning constituencies and across the UK. However, the majority of the sources on which this report draws (including the Labour Force Survey) are based on the five level National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) framework. For this reason, **the five-level NVQ framework has been adopted throughout this report**, despite the fact that this has recently been updated to an eight-level National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Examples of qualification types and levels and their equivalence to this five-level NVQ framework are shown in table B2 in Annex B.

It has already been stated that the lifelong learning sector is made up of a high number of senior and professional occupations. It is not surprising, therefore, that a high proportion of the UK lifelong learning workforce hold qualifications equivalent to NVQ level 4 or above (66%, compared with 24% in the economy as a whole (LFS, 2005)). **Northern Ireland had the highest incidence of NVQ level 4 or above qualifications within the lifelong learning workforce**, while England had the lowest.

Moreover, between the years 2001–2005, **the numbers of the lifelong learning workforce holding an NVQ level 4 or above qualification has increased** across all home countries of the UK, but particularly, more recently, within Northern Ireland.

However, against this backdrop of already high and increasing skills levels within the workforce, especially among professional and support/associate professionals, the demand for such high-level skills continues to outweigh supply. Employers across the UK lifelong learning sector face **difficulties in recruiting staff as a result of skills shortages**, with applicants for vacant posts not having the required skills, work experience or qualifications. There is also evidence of **an even greater challenge in terms of the numbers of existing staff with skills gaps**, individuals lacking the skills required for the successful performance of their role.

Skills shortages made up a higher proportion of vacancies within lifelong learning establishments, compared with the all-sector average in Northern Ireland, and were responsible for more 'hard to fill' vacancies within lifelong learning than the all-sector average. However, the considerably lower all-sector average and lifelong learning figure in Northern Ireland suggest that other issues were involved in the recruitment challenges faced there. Skills shortages were faced, particularly at **NVQ level 4**, for **managers and professional occupations** and comprised predominantly occupationally-specific **professional/technical/ practical skills**, followed by **transferable skills**.

Skills gaps involved considerably higher numbers of cases than skills shortages. However, the proportion of employees within the lifelong learning sector deemed to have skills gaps was lower than the all-sector average in the UK home countries, where comparative data was available. Of the UK home countries the lowest proportion of skills gaps vacancies was reported in Northern Ireland. The low incidence of skills gaps in Northern Ireland may be

associated with its higher proportion of the workforce already qualified to NVQ level 4 or above. As with skills shortages, skills gaps were most commonly reported at **NVQ level 4**, for **managers and professional occupations** within Northern Ireland, in line with the rest of UK.

In addition to the priorities resulting directly from these skills shortages and skills gaps, stakeholders interviewed identified **leadership and management**, and **transferable and wider employability skills** as particular priorities across all lifelong learning constituencies within the UK. Some particular skills priorities within individual UK home countries and individual constituencies were also identified. Section 6 of the main report includes a detailed discussion of specific skills gaps and shortages.

Future skills needs in the lifelong learning sector

Future trends forecasts, based on the Labour Force Survey (ONS, 2006a) for the **UK as a whole**, suggest that:

- The lifelong learning workforce, already comprising a high number of professionals, is expected to become even more dominated by **professional occupations** – reaching 56% by the year 2014, an increase of 3%.
- Overall, **almost 300,000 new recruits will be required** in the lifelong learning workforce by the year 2014 to satisfy both predicted expansion and replacement demand. The lifelong learning sector (reflecting its age profile and high incidence of professional occupations) has a high replacement demand – raising considerable issues in relation to skills development, career progression and succession planning.
- An increasing proportion of the lifelong learning workforce is expected to work on a **part-time** basis – 38% in the year 2014, an increase of 2%.

It is perhaps not then surprising to learn that employers anticipated increased demand for skills at NVQ level 4 and above, and also at NVQ level 3, and that increasing the skills levels of the existing workforce was more important to them than increasing the workforce within particular sector occupations. Higher-level professional skills are, therefore, a priority for lifelong learning sector employers, but transferable and wider employability skills are also recognised to be important for a wide range of lifelong learning occupations in the future.

Lifelong learning employers across the UK identified the following as their overall priority future skills needs. In addition, specific reference is made to findings for Northern Ireland where appropriate.

- increasing demand for professionals and support/associate professionals, especially in FE, HE and WBL. In Northern Ireland, employers also expected future demand for support/associate professionals to grow, with the exception of employers within the HE and WBL constituencies.
- increasing demand for particular professional/technical/practical skills for professionals within individual constituencies, such as; teaching and supporting learning in FE and HE; records management and librarianship in LAIS; and occupational competence for WBL trainers and assessors.
- increasing demand for transferable and wider employability skills, such as ICT and customer service skills, and especially leadership and management skills, across most constituencies. More employers across the sector in Northern Ireland cited

transferable skills as the key area of future demand, but none within the HE constituency expected increased demand for employability skills.

- increasing integration between lifelong learning constituencies resulting in growing demand for overlapping job roles and multi-skilled staff, and partnership skills.

The future scenarios workshops also provided participants with an opportunity to speculate on and envisage what the future lifelong learning sector might look like. In line with some of the drivers of the demand for skills already identified from the review of relevant literature, participants in the Northern Ireland workshop identified three broad themes, which they believed would have a significant impact on the sector and its workforce in the future:

- globalisation
- integration
- responsiveness.

Participants at the workshop described how imminent changes to the lifelong learning infrastructure in Northern Ireland will affect most constituencies substantially:

- Education and Skills Authority to replace the five Education and Library Boards and take on other support functions. A new Regional Library Authority to assume responsibility for all libraries
- number of FE colleges will be reduced from 16 to six area-based colleges;
- training provision will be reconfigured for young people aged 14–24 and ‘Jobskills’ contracts will be replaced by new contracts for a new ‘Professional and Technical Training programme’.

Despite future scenarios being particularly difficult to conceptualise in the Northern Ireland context as a result of these changes, workshop participants identified a number of additional key priority areas for the different constituencies. These are detailed in the next section, alongside UK wide priorities.

Future priorities

The final chapter within the report draws together the findings from the previous chapters to suggest future priorities for:

- the lifelong learning sector as a whole
- specific constituencies within the lifelong learning sector
- Lifelong Learning UK as an organisation.

In relation to the **lifelong learning sector as a whole**, priority issues for the future relate to:

- the policy context
 - improving education and training participation and attainment among young people aged 14–19
 - improving literacy and numeracy and increasing qualifications levels in the working-age population
 - increasing social inclusion and improving individuals’ employability
 - lifelong learning system reform and quality improvement
- the changing social, economic and technological context
- the changing global and international context
- major trends across the lifelong learning workforce
 - an ageing workforce
 - a predominantly female workforce, except in the more senior and professional roles
 - a highly qualified workforce in predominantly professional roles

- an increasing need for high level skills, rather than an increase in numbers within particular occupational groups
- a high 'replacement demand' within the workforce, with implications for future workforce succession planning.

Key priorities for the future identified in relation to **individual constituencies** within the lifelong learning sector and with additions specific to Northern Ireland include:

In CLD:

- skills related to management and leadership
- information, communications and technology (ICT) skills
- demand for youth workers and parent training practitioners
- other constituency specific skills, including partnership working, outreach skills and the ability to promote social inclusion and empower communities
- expansion of partnerships and collaboration between the voluntary and statutory sectors (Northern Ireland)
- employees and volunteers will require stronger transferable and wider employability skills, with a particular focus on business skills and advice and guidance skills for youth workers Northern Ireland).

In FE:

- specific shortage subjects – construction; engineering; ICT; science; management; health and social care
- Essential Skills (and its equivalents – Skills for Life; Adult Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL; and Adult Basic Skills)
- skills related to management and leadership
- future demand for support professionals and technical support staff
- other constituency specific skills, including gaining current industry experience; updating vocational courses; developing a wider range of teaching and learning support skills
- increased collaboration with schools in the delivery of applied (vocational) education and training for pupils aged 14–19 (Northern Ireland).

In HE:

- technicians qualified to NVQ level 4 or above
- skills related to management and leadership
- future demand for skilled teachers for specific subject areas – business management; IT; economics; electronics; law and medicine
- skills related to the widening participation agenda, i.e. skills to cater to a wider student body with diverse learning styles and demands.
- increasing student numbers will require more academic and administrative staff (Northern Ireland)
- academics will require more business-oriented skills, and skills of manual staff will require updating particularly in order to ensure adequate health and safety requirements within the workplace (Northern Ireland).

In LAIS:

- ICT skills – digitisation; metadata management; database building; basic and advanced ICT user skills; web management and web content development
- specific technical skills – cataloguing; indexing; stock selection; conservation; preservation; information retrieval and management; knowledge management; content management systems (CMS)
- customer engagement – interpersonal and communication skills; language skills; skills to support adults with needs in terms of Essential Skills (and its equivalents – Skills for Life; Adult Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL; and Adult Basic Skills)

- skills related to management and leadership
- greater demand for support/associate professionals and also professional staff, but fewer senior managers, administrators and manual staff (Northern Ireland)
- stronger ICT and customer service skills will be required in archives and records management (Northern Ireland).

In **WBL**:

- skills related to management and leadership
- assessment skills
- Essential Skills (and its equivalents – Skills for Life; Adult Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL; and Adult Basic Skills)
- updating of industrial practices
- closer integration with FE colleges is likely (Northern Ireland).

In conclusion, it can be said that skills priorities across the UK and specific constituencies are showing a strong sense of modernisation. Traditional patterns (of student/teacher; librarian/user relationships) are gradually merging into a 'contemporary paradigm', where lifelong learning institutions are expected to function as businesses and the workforce will need to be armed with **agility, competence and business acumen**, in order to be able to liaise with service users as customers in the modern world.

Finally, the production of this report of the first stage of the Sector Skills Agreement for the lifelong learning workforce has identified some **future priorities to be addressed by Lifelong Learning UK** as an organisation.

A programme of LLUK research projects has already been proposed, commencing in 2007, to collect new primary data, which will go some way towards addressing the remaining gaps in the evidence. These research projects will focus on the:

- archives and records management workforce across the UK
- CLD workforce across the UK (including strand-level data for community learning and development, development education; family learning, parenting; ACL and youth work)
- qualifications of FE staff in Northern Ireland
- WBL workforce across the UK.

It is acknowledged that this report has not been able to address some issues relating to the individual constituencies and, more particularly, to individual strands or component parts of lifelong learning constituencies at a fine level of detail. This was recognised particularly by stakeholder reviewers of the report within the CLD and LAIS constituencies. Other issues, which were identified but similarly not possible to address in detail within the scope or remit of this research, include:

- measures and indicators of success and productivity within the sector
- lifelong learning service user satisfaction
- the effects of the introduction of HE fees
- the effects of the introduction of e-learning
- issues relating to private and voluntary-sector provision of lifelong learning services
- issues relating to the volunteer workforce and SMEs within lifelong learning service delivery.

There are, therefore, further decisions to be taken within LLUK about the extent to which additional and more detailed research work focused on individual constituencies, parts of constituencies and specific issues can and will be prioritised for action in the future.

Skills for Business is an employer-led network consisting of 25 Sector Skills Councils and the Sector Skills Development Agency. Through its unrivalled labour market intelligence and insights from employers in all sectors of the UK economy, the network identifies change needed in policy and practice relating to education and skills development. With the influence granted by licences from the governments of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and with private and public funding, this independent network engages with the education and training supply-side, such as universities, colleges, funders and qualifications bodies, to increase productivity at all levels in the workforce.

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