

**A SECTOR SKILLS AGREEMENT
FOR THE LIFELONG LEARNING SECTOR IN
NORTHERN IRELAND
STAGE 5 – THE AGREED COLLABORATIVE ACTION PLAN**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*The agreed action plan, which will meet the priority skills needs
of the sector workforce, both now and in the future*

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‘OUR VISION IS THAT THE UK LIFELONG LEARNING WORKFORCE SHOULD BE THE BEST IN THE WORLD. THAT VISION DEPENDS ON ENSURING THAT EMPLOYERS IN THE LIFELONG LEARNING SECTOR CAN RECRUIT, RETAIN AND DEVELOP HIGHLY SKILLED AND EFFECTIVE STAFF.’

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read 'D. Hunter', followed by a long horizontal stroke.

David Hunter, Chief Executive Officer,
Lifelong Learning UK

LIFELONG LEARNING

This is the Lifelong Learning Sector Skills Agreement for Northern Ireland. A sector skills agreement is essentially a three-way agreement between employers, education and training providers and organisations that plan, fund or support education and training. The aim of this agreement is to reach a consensus on how employers will work together with key partners to secure the necessary supply of training for their workforce in the future.

The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland: *Success through Skills (2004)* and its subsequent Programme for Implementation (Feb 2006) stressed the commitment of Government 'to an economic future for Northern Ireland which is underpinned by higher value-added jobs, enhancements to productivity and competitiveness, increased skills levels and improved participation in education and training'. Raising the skills of the current workforce is one of the key recommendations and action points in the Strategy.

If the UK is to remain competitive over the coming decades, then it must raise the skills levels and skills utilisation of its entire workforce. This applies to all sectors of the economy, including the lifelong learning sector (colleges, universities, and other providers of lifelong learning). Not only do they have to continue to improve their own skills levels, but the lifelong learning sector will also be in the front line of raising the level of skills in other sectors of the economy. This sector includes five broad 'constituencies' of employers:

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

Our research shows that in all four nations of the United Kingdom, the lifelong learning sector has critical gaps in its skills base that must be addressed. This Sector Skills Agreement is a major step towards addressing these gaps within Northern Ireland. Similar agreements have been developed for England, Scotland and Wales.

The agreement has been developed through a formal five-stage process:

1. the skills needs assessment
2. a review of current training provision
3. analysis of gaps in current workforce development activity, and priorities to be addressed
4. engaging employers to invest in skills development
5. the final agreement of how the SSC employers and partners will work together to secure the necessary supply of training.

This document is the output of the fifth, agreement, phase of the process. As shown in more detail below, it:

- describes the characteristics of the **workforce** in Northern Ireland, and the **policy drivers** that shape the development of skills provision
- establishes the **key skills issues** in the sector, and
- describes agreement of the **solutions** and specific **actions** needed to resolve them

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FUTURE WORKFORCE CHARACTERISTICS AND POLICY DRIVERS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland, and its lifelong learning sector, are currently going through a period of intense change. The Review of Public Administration is impacting on all parts of the lifelong learning sector, in particular the shape and size of further education (FE) and the libraries sector. The recent elections, and the opening of the Northern Ireland Assembly, present great opportunities for the sector, whilst at the same time underlining the uncertainties that many working across the sector feel. The fast pace of change is reflected in the number of policies developed in the last four years.

National and Government policy play a considerable role in influencing future development and the demand for skills within the lifelong learning workforce in a variety of areas. A consistent theme through all the policies and strategies published by the Northern Ireland departments and agencies is the need to increase skills at all levels across the population. Whilst there is a sense that the structures that deliver services are changing, especially through the implementation of the FE Means Business reforms, nevertheless there is a clear commitment to work together to improve opportunities for all those living and working in Northern Ireland. Part of these reforms has involved the sixteen further education institutes merging on 1st August 2007 to form six, large area based colleges. The Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme (VQRP) and other initiatives are radically changing the curriculum offer and modus operandi of those six new colleges.

Research to date through Stages 1 and 2 of the SSA has shown that the lifelong learning workforce will increasingly be dominated by professional occupations and, to a considerably lesser extent, by support/associate professionals in the coming years. It is also anticipated that a growing proportion of this workforce will be employed part-time. The very high level of replacement demand for professionals reflects the age profile of the workforce.

Particularly important are the management and leadership skills needed to drive forward lifelong learning organisations in this changing environment. Increasing integration between lifelong learning constituencies in Northern Ireland will result in the growing demand for multi-skilled employees and partnership working across all parts of the lifelong learning sector.

Equally important for all practitioners across the sector are the customer, employer and learner engagement skills needed to build a more 'demand-led', 'customer-responsive' system.

The new infrastructures will rely on much improved Information and Communications Technology (ICT) skills at all levels, and there is an ongoing need for the teachers and learner support staff to deliver Essential Skills.

Key policies in Northern Ireland are set to stimulate a step change in the quality and effectiveness of lifelong learning. They explicitly recognise that, to build the world class economy envisaged by the Northern Ireland Assembly, we need to build the capacity and capability of the workforce that will deliver the reforms.

OVERARCHING SKILLS ISSUES ACROSS THE LIFELONG LEARNING SECTOR

Using Stages 1 & 2 evidence, initial gap analysis papers were developed for Northern Ireland for each constituent part of the lifelong learning sector. As this work developed and further consultation was carried out with employers and stakeholders it became evident that there is a series of themes relating to skills issues across the lifelong learning sector. LLUK has used these themes to develop a framework for the SSA and to identify areas for collaboration on solutions development across the lifelong learning sector. Skills issues within each of the nations were mapped under the following overarching themes.

Skills related to learning delivery including pedagogy and information learning technology (ILT)

As the deliverers of lifelong learning, skills related to learning delivery – including pedagogy and ILT – represent some of the most important skills needs across all constituencies. However, the specific skill set related to learning delivery is different in each constituency, ranging from developing and using a range of teaching and learning techniques in FE to the increased demand for ILT within higher education (HE) and libraries, archives and information services (LAIS).

Leadership and management

Across the lifelong learning sector in Northern Ireland, leadership and management skills issues were identified and emphasised through Stage 3 consultation work. The demand for skills to enable effective employer engagement was also highlighted and emphasised across constituencies. Leadership and management skills are a key, overarching theme in the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland. It is thus timely that this LLUK Skills Agreement has been formulated. The Education and Training Inspectorate for Northern Ireland (ETI NI) has reported on various aspects of the need for enhanced leadership and management skills in the Northern Ireland Colleges; these skills are also of paramount importance in the other constituencies within the LLUK footprint.

Learner engagement and customer care

An increasingly diverse learner population, including younger learners, adult learners and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, has resulted in a requirement for learner engagement across the sector. Within libraries, archives and information services (LAIS) these skills needs are related to customer care in order to provide support and guidance to users. In an age when government priorities encompass widening participation and inclusion of the socially disadvantaged within all our services, staff skills in these vital areas of engagement and customer care will be more necessary than ever before.

Establishing, fulfilling and revising user needs are essential ongoing tasks across the sector, especially so with the diversity of learners and customers being targeted by the service providers.

The Northern Ireland Best Practice Scheme, a government initiative to improve services across the public sector, has been relaunched. It stresses the importance of sharing and adapting key knowledge across organisations in order to improve the quality of services to our citizens. The Programme for Government 2008-11 reaffirms the commitment to 'drive improvements in our essential public services'.

Multi-agency/partnership working

The growth of collaborative business models in FE, initiatives related to widening participation in HE and the skills strategy document have highlighted the need for skills related to multi-agency and partnership working across all constituencies in Northern Ireland. Again, this is a guiding principle in the Northern Ireland Programme for Government 2008-11, with the call to 'work in partnership...across the public, private and voluntary sectors, to harness the ideas, energy and commitment of all the sectors'.

Recruitment and retention

Skills shortages and recruitment and retention difficulties were highlighted in all parts of the lifelong learning sector and reinforced through the Stage 3 consultation work in Northern Ireland.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

Skills related to ICT are a requirement for all parts of the lifelong learning sector, in particular within the LAIS constituency. Digitisation, remote access to services and database management all point to the need for LAIS staff to become highly proficient users of technology. In all sectors of education and training, but particularly in FE, HE and WBL, the use of ICT, and more particularly ILT, to deliver services is growing in importance. Technological change has brought with it higher expectations on the part of many users of information services as they anticipate that the latest and most complex technology will be available and used to deliver services.

These issues are explored further in Section 4 of this report in terms of understanding the wider implications of the skills issues across the lifelong learning sector.

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SOLUTIONS AND ACTIONS

LLUK initially focused Stage 3 consultation work on developing an accurate picture relating to skills issues for each constituency in Northern Ireland. As this work developed, potential solutions to the skills issues were identified by consultation attendees and a detailed study of all feedback was carried out in order to inform the development of potential solutions. An internal LLUK 'think tank' session was then used to discuss and refine the potential solutions which had been identified. The combined outcome of these activities was the development of a suite of ten solutions, which were reality checked in Northern Ireland through key employer groups and in consultations with employers, partners and stakeholders. These solutions form the basis of the action plans agreed with employers, partners and stakeholders to help tackle skills gaps and issues.

The collaborative solutions LLUK has developed with employers, stakeholders and partners are:

- **Explore the options for 'professionalising' all parts of the lifelong learning workforce** – LLUK is currently involved in a major area of activity working towards the development of UK wide National Occupational Standards (NOS) for learning delivery. LLUK is working across the four nations with key Government departments to consider a UK wide approach to developing standards for lecturers, teachers, tutors and trainers. This also encompasses higher education and teaching roles in libraries, archives and information services. Stage 3 consultations in Northern Ireland evidenced support for recognising professionalism within the work based learning (WBL) sector and for the possible creation of a formal accredited qualification based around the Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector (PTLLS) qualification which is being introduced in England.
- **Develop an integrated Continuing Professional Development framework and model for the lifelong learning sector where appropriate** – LLUK identifies an aspiration that the lifelong learning workforce in all 4 nations and across all constituencies has access to an integrated Continuing Professional Development (CPD) framework. Although a substantial amount of good practice exists in relation to CPD in parts of the sector, as part of the Stage 3 consultation process, employers and stakeholders in Northern Ireland identified and supported a need for a more consistent approach to the application of CPD across the whole of the sector. LLUK acknowledges that this activity should not duplicate existing good practice but aims to focus on working with partners to explore options for the development of CPD frameworks and build a definition of what a CPD framework and model could look like for the sector.
- **Develop a 'skills for learning professionals' qualifications framework** – Develop a 'skills for learning professionals' skills and qualifications framework to sit within the Sector Qualification Strategy (SQS) and act as an introduction to working in the lifelong learning sector. This would provide the structure for standards and qualifications in the sector. Identified areas for potential development through SSA Stages 4 & 5 consultation are Employer Engagement, Information Learning Technology, Learner Support/Customer Care and Multi-agency/Partnership working.
- **Promote collaborative working across the lifelong learning sector to recognise and disseminate good practice** – This solution looks at the option of developing improved partnerships across constituencies – and possibly nations – building on and disseminating the good practice already in existence. As previously noted, government in Northern Ireland is committed to fostering partnership working across all sectors. Good practice has already been identified in the Lifelong Learning Sector and examples are the Vocational Enhancement Programme jointly developed and delivered by FE/WBL and schools; plus the historical links between FE and HE in the provision of staff training and learning opportunities.

- **Support lifelong learning employers in the move towards more learner-centred/demand-led learning and training opportunities** – A culture change is taking place in the planning and delivery of education and training. Much of this is being driven by the Leitch Review of Skills. This culture change will have a huge impact on staff in the lifelong learning sector in terms of how learning is delivered, how courses are funded and in many other aspects of their work. There is a need for a programme of support to assist lifelong learning employers to make this transition in Northern Ireland and to develop and nurture skills relating to employer engagement. The Northern Ireland Skills Strategy: *Success Through Skills* emphasises the need for employees in all sectors of lifelong learning to engage with business, commerce and industry to identify skills shortage areas and needs. An enhanced set of skills will be required by staff in our constituencies to allow this to happen. This is especially important in the further education sector, where the FE Means Business reforms are positioning the Sector to move towards a demand-led rather than supply-driven business model.
- **Develop sector-wide career pathways** – This area of activity is based on the creation of a framework outlining career pathways in the lifelong learning sector. Within the Lifelong Learning sector in Northern Ireland career pathways tend to be individual within each constituency and strand. There has been no real recognition of the lifelong learning sector, as defined by LLUK, as an holistic sector with entry and progression routes for defined career development opportunities. There is a need to map career pathways across the whole lifelong learning sector and not just within its constituent parts.
- **Develop a knowledge bank for IAG professionals and others to support new entrants and existing staff in the sector** – Stage 3 consultation work in Northern Ireland identified a lack of strategic careers guidance across the lifelong learning sector that is affecting entry to the sector and movement within it. It is critical that LLUK works with the sector and its partners to develop a knowledge bank of support for its own Information Advice and Guidance professionals and those outside it in order to attract new entrants. The DEL consultation document: *Preparing for Success, a Careers Education Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy for Northern Ireland (2007)* emphasised the need for all staff across the lifelong learning footprint to acquire or enhance their skills in this crucial area.
- **Recruitment programmes to address specific shortages in the lifelong learning sector** – Targeted recruitment programmes are needed to encourage people to move across the lifelong learning sector or to consider it as a career choice. Across the lifelong learning sector there is a demand for a variety of recruitment programmes to encourage a range of people to consider the sector as an attractive career option.
- **Develop a UK-wide leadership and management strategy** – There is a plethora of provision in leadership and management across the sector but there is no overall cohesive approach to leadership and management training and take up. There are certainly areas of good practice but there is no overall clear picture. As with the other 3 nations, in Northern Ireland there are numerous initiatives and bodies working on the issue of leadership and management in lifelong learning and LLUK wishes to work with partners sector-wide to ensure the availability of a framework of appropriate leadership and management training programmes.

Work has already begun on the leadership and management standards in Northern Ireland and across the UK.
- **Develop the business case and resources to support the use of technology in the sector, particularly relating to ICT and Information Learning Technology (ILT)** – New technology is transforming the way learning is delivered across the UK. It is essential that the lifelong learning workforce is equipped to keep up with the pace of change presented by technology in terms of supporting users in using ICT, learning delivery through technology and up-skilling staff in the use of technology.

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