



## **Committee for the Economy**

### **The Skills Strategy and Economic Output Micro Inquiry Special Report**

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# Contents

Powers and Membership	3
Introduction	5
Aim	6
Context	6
Summary of Themes	9
Annex A	24

## **Powers and Membership**

### **Powers**

The Committee for the Economy is a Statutory Departmental Committee established in accordance with paragraphs 8 and 9 of Strand One, of the Belfast Agreement, and under Assembly Standing Order No 48. The Committee has a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role with respect to the Department for the Economy, and has a role in the initiation of legislation. The Committee has nine members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of five.

The Committee has power to:

- consider and advise on Departmental budgets and Annual Plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
- approve relevant secondary legislation and take the Committee Stage of relevant primary legislation;
- call for persons and papers;
- initiate inquiries and make reports; and
- consider and advise on matters brought to the Committee by the Minister for the Economy.

### **Membership**

The Committee has nine members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

- Dr Caoímhe Archibald MLA (Chairperson)
- Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
- Mr Stewart Dickson MLA
- Mr Gordon Dunne MBE MLA
- Mr Paul Givan\* MLA
- Mr John O'Dowd MLA
- Mr Christopher Stalford MLA

- Mr John Stewart MLA
- Ms Claire Sugden MLA

(\*Paul Givan replaced Gary Middleton on the Committee on 08/02/21)

## Introduction

Under Standing Order 46(7), the Committee has the power to make a special report on any *“matters which the committee may think fit to bring to the notice of the Assembly”*.

The Committee for the Economy recently carried out a Micro Inquiry to seek views from a wide range of industry, specialist skills, public sector, academics, trades unions and third sector stakeholders on what they see as the key skills framework needed to meet the demands of employers and the local economy in the longer-term. The Department for the Economy will soon publish its Skills Strategy and the views stakeholders have expressed will help to inform the Committee consideration of the Strategy.

The Committee asked two questions as the basis for stakeholder discussion at a Micro Inquiry event on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2021:

- 1. What changes to institutional design, collaboration and delivery of skills are required to ensure that our workforce (including the unemployed, underemployed, people with disabilities and economically inactive) can move into well paid work, which meets the skills demands of local companies now and going forward?**
- 2. What measures are required to support continuous skills development across all age groups and abilities, and to ensure access to lifelong learning opportunities that will improve lifetime earnings, pension contributions and increase productivity?**

At the virtual roundtable discussion event on 28<sup>th</sup> January, these were discussed at seven separate ‘tables’, with Committee members joining a feedback session where they heard from a rapporteur from each ‘table’. Other stakeholders unable to attend the discussion provided responses to the questions in writing and these have been reflected in this report.

A list of attendees is included at **Annex A**.

## Aim

The Committee's aim in carrying out this 'Micro Inquiry' was to engage with key stakeholders to seek their views, and to develop a themes-based report in order to stimulate debate on how the Skills Strategy can assist in developing our economy and supporting life-long learning for all our people. This report is intended to promote focused discussion on what the forthcoming Skills Strategy should look like.

The following Special Report is a summary of the themes, which emerged in response to the two questions asked.

## Context

The Department for the Economy is currently working on bringing forward a Skills Strategy for consultation. The Committee is keen to contribute proactively to the development of the Strategy by advising the Minister and her Department on what key themes and specific detail the Strategy should cover.

There are many different issues connected with closing skills deficits identified, as well as ensuring that our people and communities are equipped with the skills and capabilities that will bring them satisfying, well-paid, worthwhile work, with support and pathways for continued professional and other development throughout their working lives.

NI continues to experience high rates of economic inactivity, with a labour productivity rate 17% below the UK average and, despite improvements, the economy is still characterised by several large, 'low value-added' sectors. Last year's Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings<sup>1</sup> revealed that NI now has the second lowest weekly earnings (£529) of 12 UK regions. Approximately a fifth of all jobs in NI were classified as 'low-paid' - the highest proportion of any of the 12 regions. **This presents a double challenge of low-pay and in-work poverty.**

The Department's new Skills Strategy will be a key driver of economic output, particularly as we emerge from the Covid-19 crisis, and has the potential to make a

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<sup>1</sup> NISRA, 3 November 2020

vital contribution to the economic recovery and enable us to build resilience into the economy going forward. The Strategy's design must support individuals, communities and industries to adapt to the demands of the global economy, as well as meet the changing needs of the local economy. **The Committee has heard calls from many stakeholders for the delivery of a Skills Strategy to address skills gaps, promote entrepreneurship, increase productivity and reduce unemployment.**

The Minister has established an Economic Advisory Group. One of its primary aims will be to assess future skills, re-skilling and upskilling needs in the context of the new Skills Strategy. Our economy will transform in the coming years as a result of our departure from the EU, as well as trends such as rapidly advancing technology and our ageing society.

We need a skills delivery framework that can help workers of all ages, employers and communities to adapt to these changes, and one that helps build an economy that delivers for everyone. We live in a time of transition: the twin green and digital 'revolutions' are reshaping the way we live, work and interact.

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated digital transition. As teleworking, working from home and distance learning have become a reality, the limitations of our current digital preparedness is exposed. The pandemic has highlighted the digital skills gap that already existed and new inequalities are emerging as many people do not have the required level of digital skills or are in workplaces or schools lagging behind in digitalisation, or suffer from digital poverty and lack of connectivity.

Much of the responsibility for addressing the skills gap to date has been placed on educational institutions, training providers and employers. There is a particular interest in facilitating inclusive learning for people with disabilities and mental health problems. Therefore, **inclusivity and 'Skills for All'** will be an important goal for the Strategy and it must address the needs of all cohorts.

The OECD Skills Strategy Project has recently carried out an assessment and provided recommendations on skills performance in NI from an international perspective<sup>2</sup>. It has identified four priority areas, as follows:

- Reducing skills imbalances;
- Creating a culture of lifelong learning;
- Transforming workplaces to make better use of skills; and
- Strengthening the governance of skills policies.

In its recent report, the Open College Network NI<sup>3</sup> notes that, in 2017 NI was around the OECD average for educational attainment. It had a slightly higher proportion of people at the low qualification level (21.4% compared to 21.1%) and a slightly lower proportion at the medium and high qualification levels (41.6% compared to 42.8% and 36.1% compared to 36.5% respectively).

By 2030, however, its projections show NI's relative qualification profile will reduce substantially compared to the OECD average and may have the fourth highest proportion of low qualified people out of 16 OECD comparators. In comparison, the Republic of Ireland would be joint first for the proportion of people with high qualifications and have the joint lowest proportion with low qualifications. It also draws attention to the fact that **over a third (34%) of adults in NI say they have not taken part in learning since leaving full-time education**, which is much higher than in England, Scotland and Wales.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/oecd-skills-strategy-northern-irelandassessment-and-recommendations>

<sup>3</sup> A higher skills ambition for Northern Ireland, commissioned by the Open College Network NI, January 2021



## Summary of Themes

This report sets out the key themes stakeholders feel are necessary in order to develop the skills needed to boost our local economy and to compete internationally. There are **six main themes** arising from the stakeholder discussion event and written inputs:

1. Supporting our people to greater employability;
2. Defining the role of academic institutions, community learning and awarding qualifications;
3. The response to Covid-19/economic recovery;
4. Inclusive Learning and Workplaces;
5. Lifelong learning and the path to leadership; and
6. Collaboration and Co-operation across Government departments.

### **1. Supporting our people to greater employability**

The needs of the workplace are changing at such a fast pace that the linear model of education to employment, to long-term career is no longer relevant. Change is accelerating - particularly as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic - necessitating more flexible partnerships, quicker responses, different modes of delivery and new combinations of skills and experience.

Digital skills are becoming more important, with the majority of jobs requiring a certain level of expertise. Nearly everything we do these days involves a level of digital skill. Furthermore, this is only going to become more prevalent as technology continues to advance, integrate with our lives and be part and parcel of our everyday work lives.

The development of transferable or often what are called 'soft' skills, is highly valued by employers and they want a range of transferable skills alongside academic and technical knowledge. These include creativity, adaptability, problem-solving and communication skills. Stakeholders also called for our young people to be given a better understanding of the context of the working world with which they will engage. This could include a greater degree of knowledge about sustainability, both in terms of workplaces and careers, and the wider community.

Employers also recognise they have a role to play in the promotion of development within the workplace, and considering how they offer flexible learning options, as well as retraining opportunities, to employees. They also have a desire to develop training and development and succession plans for employees where the size of the company allows, along with ensuring worker's rights are at the forefront.

Employers have noted a mismatch of skills and are struggling to find what they need within the workforce available to them. For example, manufacturing businesses find that some vocational courses do not match industry needs, as in the case of welding, which constitutes a small part of a wider qualification and therefore the employer needs to step in and provide additional training.

Employers consider that potential employees are not always aware of opportunities in certain industries, and there was an appetite to promote these to attract a wider candidate pool.

The UK Government has recently announced a **Life Skills Guarantee**, offering almost 400 fully-funded courses to adults, ranging from engineering to healthcare to conservation. They will be available to adults without a full qualification at Level 3 (A-level equivalent) from April 2021 to help them gain in-demand skills and open up further job opportunities. The offer is backed by £95 million from the £2.5 billion National Skills Fund. This could be replicated and apportioned here.

Government interventions and training support tends to focus on big business and not on Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs), and micro businesses, which are the backbone of our economy. Our SMEs feel that training support and skills programmes are not for them and are not accessible and they also need access to government funding to provide training. The perception is that current academies and schemes are for big business only. Stakeholders believe that there needs to be a central hub where businesses, particularly SMEs and micro businesses, can go to evaluate and receive support in relation to their training needs both in terms of skills for current employees and planning for the future.

## **2. Defining the Role of Academic Institutions, Community Learning and Awarding Qualifications**

There is no doubt that schools face a difficult balance between encouraging high expectations and providing realistic opportunities and goals. As young people prepare to leave school they are faced with making important decisions about their career early on. When it comes to A-Levels, stakeholders queried whether specialising in three or four subjects could narrow choices for the future, in comparison with a Baccalaureate-style diploma covering a wider variety of subjects. This might also include greater contextualisation of the world they live in and the world of work, and could include themes such as sustainability and community engagement and focus.

Stakeholders felt that some primary schools, particularly those in areas of deprivation had huge hurdles to overcome, even insofar as ensuring satisfactory attendance levels in some cases. This has led to repetitive cycles of inter-generational under-achievement, which has blighted some communities and held back economic development in those areas. Therefore, a priority for the Skills Strategy must be to identify ways in which families and communities can be supported to help their children learn and succeed in school, realising their potential and opening up wider options for them.

Stakeholders suggested that further education colleges and sixth forms within some schools are competing for the same students wishing to pursue technical and professional qualifications, creating a duplication of effort and resources, as well as highlighting that government funding should be invested in a strategic approach to the provision of these skills across the Executive, rather than the current, clearly siloed, approach. Again, the scope for a broader base for learning was also suggested, with greater partnerships between schools and colleges and the wider local community and community institutions.

Careers advice is offered in schools, but often not by a dedicated expert from the Department's Careers Service, leading to recommendations that may suit the needs of the school, rather than those of the individual pupil. At the age of 14, there is a lot of emphasis on skills and developing as a person, but stakeholders felt that students

entering formal learning (GCSEs, BTECs) were not receiving that extra service, leading to a massive gap in careers advice when it is most critical. It would be more appropriate for a more independent body, such as the Careers Service, to provide this advice, not only to children and young people, but adults too. A comparison was drawn with the policy in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) which arranges work placements for children aged 14 so they have a better idea of what they might like to train to do earlier on. Careers advice throughout life is also something which needs to be developed.

In relation to university degrees, many stakeholders pointed out that much more value is placed on getting a university place rather than opting for a vocational qualification with work experience; and that university is not always the right place for all those who apply. Learning styles differ for different individuals and it is important for young people to have a solid understanding of the pathways open to them. For some schools, it is the securing of a university place that is important, not whether it is the best path for that individual. For example, there are more students with teaching qualifications than jobs available, and people taking degrees in subjects that may not help them access suitable employment in their chosen field. Better co-ordination across the learning sector could mitigate these issues, as could expanded engagement between the universities and local communities. There is a suggestion that it is important for the universities to provide civic leadership, and to work with the wider public sector to ensure that higher learning is engaged with local communities and the workplace. Universities and, indeed, schools and colleges can, and should, be hubs for co-design and co-creation of public policy alongside government at all levels, local communities and groups, as well as individuals.

To this end, they urged that teachers and parents receive much more information on the options available for young people across a range of careers and pathways to these. There should be more education about the range of pathways available and focus on routes to employment. This requires the education of young people and parents about options as a way of changing the cultural mind-set here that leans toward a university degree as the only, or a superior, option.

Stakeholders noted that there are many graduates in jobs not requiring high-level qualifications, therefore reducing the number of roles available for other people who are qualified to do it, and adding to the downward pressure on our levels of productivity.

For those wishing to enrol at university, access to funding was cited as the biggest barrier, particularly for those who are unemployed, underemployed, have a disability, are economically inactive, or have caring responsibilities. There is a pressing need to look for ways to fund universities that are sustainable and inclusive and where attendance is determined by ability and not just the ability to pay. Suggestions to achieve this included universities having a much greater role in the development of our communities and society and playing a significantly bigger part in the creation of “societal wealth”, beyond just the creation of job opportunities.

The discussion also revealed that part-time students in general have less access to student financial support than full-time students. The experience in Wales, where part-time students are now able to benefit from maintenance support, indicates this can significantly reduce the barriers that adult learners face in participating in higher education.

Higher education may be viewed as expensive and a luxury for families on lower incomes. People in lower-paid, lower-skilled job roles are often not afforded study breaks, meaning they are in a “vicious circle” and prevented from further study and improving their skillset. Universities and other public learning institutions could set an example by paying the ‘living wage’ for example.

Universities and colleges are a model for high achievement, and stakeholders showed a real willingness for focused collaboration and innovation between colleges, universities, industry, Invest NI and professional bodies, to address the current mismatch of skills, as businesses cannot always find people with the skills they need. Joint learning both academically and within industry is generally seen as the best solution to improve student employment and employability, and for the development of soft skills. There needs to be better alignment between industry, communities, and education/skills providers to achieve this.

Industry-based stakeholders pointed out that qualifications can, and should, be co-designed with industry, and trade unions and community groups, to help people move into better-paid jobs and more stable, rewarding careers. There were also comments about awarding bodies and the desire to use local bodies who have more insight into the local needs of the economy. Qualifications need to be able to be studied at a time, place, and delivery mode (whether part-time or full-time) which suits the learner. There is some merit in presenting options for modules in bite-sized pieces that people can work towards over a number of weeks or years, and at a time that suits them and their employer.

Community-based learning has, in many cases, been absorbed by the further education colleges, becoming formal qualifications and, therefore, not always engaging with those who need it most. The culture of learning now appears to emphasise the need for testing, and for a qualification at the end, rather than learning for life, fulfilment and career progression.

Stakeholders advocate that there should always be a community-based pathway to skills provision, helping motivate individuals to get on the skills ladder in an environment that is familiar and comfortable to them. The culture of attending evening classes, and organisations offering informal learning in the community, has lost core-funding and many organisations and courses have been forced to look for alternative funding or apply fees. The loss of these services means people are not getting the first step up on the ladder, resulting in the step to, or back to, formal education remaining daunting. There is a significant 'public estate' that is familiar to people, such as local libraries, which would lend themselves to becoming hubs for community-based learning.

The European Social Fund provided funding for community learning and there is no concrete information on what will replace it in light of EU exit, with the future funding landscape and the Shared Prosperity Fund in particular not defined as yet.

### **3. The Response to Covid-19/ Economic Recovery**

This theme was at the forefront of the discussion and mirrored a similar conversation during the previous discussion event for the Micro Inquiry on Macro Economic Recovery, run by the Committee in November 2020.

There is a growing concern about an existing ‘skills gap’, which is the gulf between the skills workers possess today and the skills businesses say they need. There is a worrying deficit of workers with skills in the science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects. The result for too many of our workers with low, or no, qualifications, is lower wages, lower productivity, less employability, less rewarding career pathways, and unemployment. Additionally, there are patterns of repeated low-paid, insecure employment, as well as cycles of worklessness across the generations, within deprived families and communities.

Investment in education and upskilling is essential, and this must be as accessible to all as possible. The Department, through the new Skills Strategy, must create an environment that leads to an organic, vibrant and inclusive educational culture delivering for the needs of learners and employers. This can only be achieved through Executive action across relevant departments.

Having a workforce that is flexible, agile, motivated, satisfied, properly rewarded and skilled to help local businesses prosper and lead local communities, is essential to any economic recovery model. The recent increase in unemployment has had a knock-on impact for our city and town centres and transport sector, especially seen in hospitality, transport and office occupancy. Rebuilding the economy following the Covid pandemic must have at its core engagement with local communities to be truly transformative and empower people to build back better.

There is a particular skills deficit in trades and vocational, or professional/technical, roles. This is a long-term concern and more collaboration between colleges and industry could improve employability of students. The apprenticeships model also needs more investment, and to be made more accessible to people of all ages, where

appropriate. At graduate level, there are too many students graduating in the arts and teaching. Further encouragement to study STEM subjects is required.

The skills deficit has led to low levels of productivity and lack of innovation within our economy. Government must invest in skills and focus on people of all ages across the workforce. In the wake of Covid-19, more people will now have to retrain and upskill to enhance their prospects of finding suitable employment.

Social Enterprise has a vital role to play in giving disadvantaged people opportunities to access rewarding work and inspiring them to demand a job with purpose. Not only does it generate activity within the economy, there are countless examples of providing people with the support and training to succeed and reach their potential. Social enterprise has played a significant part in rebuilding and regenerating local communities and fostering inclusivity, as well as bringing development to a hyper-local level and balancing out prosperity. Social Enterprise can provide a model for training and employment that is more accessible to those alienated from learning by their school experience, or the type of learning model used not suiting them. Social Enterprise also has strong community roots and can be a catalyst for community-led/supported economic development. This sector also has a strong track record in being inclusive and supporting a wider range of abilities and needs than many traditional learning and development sectors.

Stakeholders see the negative issues of unemployment, underemployment, low-paid work, lack of career satisfaction and development, and lack of skills as an opportunity for change. With an increase in unemployment forecast, there is an opportunity for people to start a business and, therefore, we must have a strategy to encourage and support start-ups and entrepreneurship. The development of indigenous and community-based businesses with higher-earning capacities, is key to the wider and more inclusive development of our economy and, with that, the capacity to invest more in the fabric of our society and communities through growing our tax base; as well as focusing on environmental policies, such as reaching the net zero carbon goal set out in Energy Strategy.



#### 4. Inclusive Learning and Workplaces

Stakeholders advocate that diversity, inclusion and accessibility to learning, training, and upskilling within the workplace, should be a priority. For example, placing an age limit on Level 3 apprenticeships, and colleges being discouraged from delivering Level 6, which disadvantages lifelong learning in more rural communities, should be reviewed.

To allow more women to return to work, stakeholders urged revisiting the Childcare Strategy, as it plays an important role in giving parents the opportunity to work or to avail of training. It was also noted that it is difficult for those undertaking apprenticeships to access adequate funding for childcare arrangements.

It has become apparent that we do not place appropriate value on the skills of those in sectors who look after our most vulnerable, for example, early years childcare and the care of older people. We need sectoral agreement between government, employers and unions in given sectoral areas, for example childcare, to update and agree standards so that employees are continually reskilled and maximise their personal development.

People cannot afford to lose out on benefits if they decide they want to access learning. There should be a separate funding stream for this, particularly those who have caring responsibilities. They need additional incentives.

Some stakeholders felt that the term 'Apprenticeships' has become outdated and also would only be associated with younger people, leading to a discussion on changing the terminology and the opportunities for apprenticeship programmes at all levels rather than solely at entry level to industry.

Stakeholders representing organisations employing people with disabilities, drew on their experience of how it is important to talk about ability, not disability, and the approach to both life and work, based on a person's ability to contribute. Everyone has abilities and talents that can be put to use in productive ways, and has something important to offer employers.

Therefore, it is critical that learning, skills development and routes to employment are tailored for cohorts of people to allow them to contribute to rebuilding the economy. Critical to this is making people feel welcome, that they are a part of this and the process is designed with them in mind, with the appropriate institutional support mechanisms in place.

Inclusion is what's needed to give diversity real impact, and drive towards a world of work where all employees are empowered to thrive. And, whilst diversity and inclusion often go hand-in-hand, inclusion is fundamentally about individual experience and allowing everyone at work to contribute and feel a part of an organisation. To be inclusive, barriers to work need to be broken down to allow people to be supported to work, for example, affordable childcare, guaranteed financial reward, providing appropriate training and progression plans and the option for flexible working to meet the demands of caring responsibilities.

## 5. Lifelong Learning and the Path to Leadership

Until recent times, learning and education has been associated with formal, institutional education at school, college, university, etc. We are told from an early age, that we should, *“get a good education”*.

While formal education, and the resulting qualifications, are important and set a good foundation for the future, continuing to learn and develop skills may maximise our potential to find better, more satisfying jobs, earn more and, perhaps, become more successful in a chosen career.

Lifelong learning is about creating and maintaining a positive attitude to learning both for personal and professional development. It requires motivation and is often rewarded with better opportunities and an improved quality of life. It should span from primary school learning and support people as they progress in their career.

Stakeholders made that point that NEETs (those who are not in education, employment or training) generally have not been able to engage satisfactorily with the education system. When they reach the age of 16+ they can often struggle to engage with learning of any kind, as they lack motivation and confidence. The result often is they end up in a cycle of worklessness, or low paid work, and find it difficult to acquire new skills and progress to more satisfying work that offers more of a development path. It can be difficult to transition to a workplace after a knock to the confidence, therefore, people need specific support and funding to support them.

Barriers such as numeracy, literacy and digital literacy still exist. Skills levels here are lower for adults than many other OECD countries, and these basic foundation stones prevent adults from engaging with lifelong learning.

The fact that we have a high ratio of people with low level qualifications is still a concern and a specific strategy for this cohort of people is needed to offer the support and guidance they need to progress.

The discussion unfolded a lack of understanding of what lifelong learning actually entails. It therefore would merit an awareness campaign to demonstrate that learning and skills development doesn't stop once you leave school or college. It is, and should be, open to everyone, at all stages.

It would be appropriate to develop an overall NI Strategy for Lifelong Learning, again this needs to be long term, flexible and funded adequately and support people upskilling or learning online.

Incentivising SMEs and micro businesses to invest in skills development for their staff would address a key weakness in our economy. This needs to be beyond just apprenticeships, which primarily are used as an entrance tool into an industry, rather than something that creates a lifelong learning culture in an organisation. Creating opportunities for on the job training could make a real impact.

As people progress in their careers, there is a skills deficit in the area of management and leadership. Greater investment in training to develop junior members of staff into middle managers and future leaders would be really beneficial, including courses in management, leadership and enterprise skills.

As mentioned before, employers are looking for staff with transversal skills such as confidence and communication. Developing these also benefits mental health and family life. To get this right, a cultural change and the provision of incentives for employers to invest in the skills of their employees is needed. There are no more 'jobs for life', particularly at a time when the economy has been so impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, meaning the need for people to retrain and reskill has never been greater.

Covid-19 has had a huge impact on how employers view the world of work. With more people working from home in future, lifelong learning needs to be able to deliver more online content. The old evening classes structure at the local college is not entirely relevant to the way people learn, however it does present opportunities for people to get together to discuss learning.

Many of those who have been furloughed or made redundant are older people. Age NI has commissioned a large survey on older people working in NI. It found that a quarter would like to stay on at work beyond retirement age and a further quarter need to continue with work for financial reasons. With this shift in employment trends, it is promoting the need for flexible working arrangements in the workplace, opportunities for reskilling and highlighting how older people are also caring for others at home. It has developed an 'Age at Work' project, jointly led by Age NI and Business in the Community Northern Ireland to support older workers to remain/return to work in order to help them have enough income, stay connected and have a fuller working life. One of the key outputs is a 'Mid Career Review' to support people aged 50 plus to increase their confidence, skills and opportunities to remain in or return to work.

## 6. Collaboration and Co-operation across Government departments

It is vitally important that there is collaboration across government, now more than ever. This means joining up and working together, making the delivery of services much better for users by sharing and improving things together. Departments and agencies could achieve more, for less money, by working together and joining up with external partners to work towards common objectives.

The 'Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework' published in January 2021 lists 'Skills and Attainment' as a key priority area with the intention of addressing underachievement alongside skills shortages, aligning further and higher education to labour market demand, supporting vocational training and apprenticeships, as well as qualifications and further and higher education and continuing professional development.

Stakeholders felt it was right that learning and skills should be a core element of the Programme for Government (PfG) to operationalise the 'fulfilling potential' outcome as this would enable learning to move further up the policy agenda.

In light of this, stakeholders discussed the potential for the upcoming 14-19 and 20-24 strategies, and how they currently appear to operate in silos. The issue is that responsibilities are split across departments and if there are different leaders/ministers with different agendas it can cause bottlenecks. This is an issue seen right across Government, there are many strategies and policies in development but a lack of emphasis on the most important ingredient which is putting the necessary procedures in place accomplish broader goals.

There is an opportunity now to set a strategy that caters for people to learn, "*from 7 to 70 years*", with tactical plans covering all parts of the ecosystem produced for each stage in personal learning and development and career progression.

Employers emphasised that speed of delivery and agility is missing in Government delivery. The disconnect between private and public sectors with the public sector

seeming to be often slow in responding to societal and economic changes, leading to government policies breaking down as they do not keep up with the speed of change. They accepted there is strong education achievement in terms of schools, further and higher education, but it is the speed with which they can change and adapt that is key, as well as a lack of engagement at a community level. Employers are actively looking at what they can do to influence that themselves, for example, scholarships, in-house training etc. They emphasised the need to have more vision in terms of skills development.

There is currently a perfect storm of Covid-19, EU exit, climate change and the digital revolution. This presents an opportunity to use the Programme for Government to craft a new approach to skills and to harness wider social engagement on skills.

There is a need for more strategic planning in terms of skills, particularly around Foreign Direct Investment plans and matching skills to meet demand both for present and future needs, alongside the ongoing conversation with our indigenous and community-based businesses in terms of skills requirements.

### Stakeholder Organisations

Age NI

Apprenticeships NI

Catalyst

CIPD

CITB

Construction Employers Federation NI

Department of Education

Department for Communities

Department for the Economy

DTNI

Enterprise NI

Federation of Small Businesses

FinTech Envoy

Forum for Adult Learning NI

Forum of Awarding Bodies

Further Education Colleges

Hotels Federation NI

Invest NI

Irish Congress of Trade Unions

Institute of Physics

JHE Solutions

Manufacturing NI

MEGA

Mid Ulster Skills Forum

NI Chamber

NI Food & Drink Association

NI Tourism Alliance

NICVA

NIE Networks



NILGA  
Now Group  
NUSUSI  
Open College Network  
Open University  
People1st  
Pivotal  
Queen's University of Belfast  
Renewable NI  
Retail NI  
Social Enterprise  
Tourism NI  
Ulster University  
Universities and Colleges Union  
Women in Business  
Women'sTEC