



Evaluation of Success through Skills – Transforming Futures

Julianne Kieran and Lisa Murray, Analytical Services Division

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Acronyms

APEL - Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning

ASD – Analytical Services Division (DFE)

CAFRE – College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise

CITB – Construction Industry Training Board

DEL – Department for Employment and Learning

DETI – Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

DFC – Department for Communities

DFE – Department for the Economy

EU – European Union

fdf – Foundation Degree Forward

FE – Further Education

HE – Higher Education

HEI – Higher Education Institutions

IREP – Independent Review of Economic Policy

LFS – Labour Force Survey

LMI – Labour Market Information

NI – Northern Ireland

NIAES – Northern Ireland Adviser on Employment and Learning

NISRA – Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

NOS – National Occupation Standards

PfG – Programme for Government

PSA – Public Service Agreement

QEW - Qualifying the Existing Workforce

RoI – Republic of Ireland

STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

UK – United Kingdom

Glossary of Terms

Qualifications

The national qualification frameworks in the United Kingdom are qualifications frameworks that define and link the levels and credit values of different qualifications. For Northern Ireland, the framework is the Regulated Qualifications Framework for general and vocational qualifications regulated by the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment. Qualification levels are as follows:

- Level 8 – PhD (or equivalent)
- Level 7 – Masters (or equivalent)
- Level 6 – Degree (or equivalent)
- Level 5 – Higher National Diploma (or equivalent)
- Level 4 – Higher National Certificate (or equivalent)
- Level 3 – A Level (or equivalent)
- Level 2 – 5 GCSEs Grades A*-C (or equivalent)
- Level 1 – 5 GCSEs Grades D-G (or equivalent)
- Level 0 – No qualifications

Labour Market terms

Employment rate: the proportion of people aged 16 to 64 in work.

Unemployment rate: the proportion of economically active people aged 16+ who were unemployed.

Economically inactive rate: the proportion of people aged 16 to 64 who were not working and not seeking or available to work.

Economically active: those working or not working but seeking and available for work.

1. Executive Summary

1.1 Introduction and Background

This evaluation was completed by Analytical Services Division (ASD) on behalf of Skills Division, both Department for the Economy (DfE). The objective was to evaluate the current Skills Strategy of Northern Ireland (NI) to inform the development and implementation of the next skills strategy due to be launched in December 2020.

The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland - "Success through Skills – Transforming Futures" was published by the now defunct Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in 2011. The ten year strategy set out the vision, aims, skills challenges and actions needed to grow the NI economy for the period 2011 until 2020.

The purpose of the evaluation was to determine:

1. Was it a good strategy?
2. Did it deliver on the actions and meet its goals?
3. What are the lessons learned?

The evaluation:

- Considered how the economic and strategic context has evolved over the 10 year strategy period;
- Assessed whether the actions within the strategy and implementation plan were taken forward and delivered;
- Determined whether the strategic goals were met;
- Featured the views of stakeholders engaged; and
- Assessed whether the approach and methodology were appropriate.

The engagement process included senior internal personnel who worked closely on the development and implementation of the existing strategy, along with external stakeholders who were engaged during its development.

1.2 Strategic Context

It is evident that the Skills Strategy was very closely linked to the 2008-11 Programme for Government when it launched, with the themes of the Strategy the same as a number of the stated objectives under the Public Service Agreements. However, there is less evidence of the link between the Skills Strategy and its underlying strategies. There were some linkages, but these were often unclear and at times, this was nothing more than a reference. It is recognised that there was effort to bring the strategies together through 'Structured to Deliver Success', as a means to delivering the strategic goals. There was a clear link to the 2012 Economic Strategy and in particular, the need for a better skills base to move towards rebalancing the economy towards private sector led growth. This was particularly evident in the implementation plan.

1.3 Assessment against Actions

To achieve the four strategic goals put forward by the Skills Strategy, 17 actions were undertaken across five themes. The evaluation found that all actions were, at least initially, actioned. There were also clear linkages between the actions and how these would achieve the aim, vision, challenges and strategic goals in the majority of instances.

However, it was unclear how the stated actions alone would lead to the scale of upskilling that would be required to achieve the aspirational strategic goals that were set.

1.4 Stakeholder Engagement

In total, 21 key personnel involved in the design and/or implementation of the Skills Strategy were consulted. Ten of those consulted were internal personnel and 11 were external. Government, business and business groups, a sector skills/training council, the then Minister and his special advisor were all represented.

- **Alignment with government priorities** – the general consensus was that the Skills Strategy was well aligned to government priorities at the time of its launch and that its implementation was ambitious, aligning with the Economic Strategy and focussing on productivity and economic inactivity.
- **Stakeholder Engagement** – Across government, it was seen largely as a DEL strategy. Businesses were engaged but sometimes the same businesses were engaged. It was viewed that academia will always be engaged. Individuals were not targeted.
- **Vision, Challenges, Themes and Actions** – The vision was seen as still applicable going forward, but needed to be realistic and needed to include inclusive growth. In general, the challenges still existed and there needed to be a move to appropriate skills (e.g. vocational routes) and reinvigoration of leadership and management programmes. In addition, STEM imbalances need addressed and the question of how to activate the economically inactive was raised. In terms of actions, it was noted that they were right for their time, but there should have been additional action plans introduced during the Strategy (around 2015, most activity on the Skills Strategy appeared to cease).
- **Governance Arrangements** - Stakeholders generally felt that the Strategy did have good governance structures in place, with some mentioning the programme board that was in place, the quarterly monitoring of the Strategy's targets, the use of PRINCE2 techniques in programme management and mention of other sectoral groups then chaired by a Minister.
- **Successes and Failures** - The majority of stakeholders felt that there was definitely a lasting impact, with the introduction of Higher Level Apprenticeships, Assured Skills and the Skills Barometer the notable successes. Others mentioned the fact that there has been an uplift in skills levels over the decade. There was also a view that there is more awareness around STEM now. In terms of where consultees felt there could be improvement going forward, areas noted included: how skills impact upon productivity and how to measure this; how to re-engage the economically inactive; reduce STEM imbalances; improve perception of further education; and investment should focus on key economic sectors.

1.5 Assessment against Strategic Goals

The Skills Strategy put forward four strategic goals. The first three of these related to upskilling the workforce whilst the fourth related to increasing the proportion of those leaving Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with STEM-related graduate and post graduate level qualifications. Overall, the level of upskilling represents substantial progress for NI. Based on the latest available data, two of the four strategic goals have been achieved, one could be achieved and one is unlikely to be achieved when the Strategy ends in 2020. For those not met, it could be some time before they are fully met. Examining age groups of workers reveals those older are much more likely to possess no, or low, qualifications. It will be more difficult to achieve the same level of progress in the future, as older workers become more qualified over time.

1.6 Assessment of Approach

In terms of its approach, the Skills Strategy ticked a lot of boxes. It had an evidence-based approach, it said what it would do to meet its vision (through actions) and at the time, linked well into the wider government agenda. However, it was largely perceived from outside as a departmental document and did not appear to have the buy-in from other government departments that should be desired. There was clear intent to have a strategy that would engage with business; again however, this was not always perceived to have been done well.

1.7 Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, there is clear evidence that the Strategy had a lasting impact with the initiation of Assured Skills, the introduction of Higher Level Apprenticeships, along with other actions has meant that the skills landscape is profoundly different now than ten years ago. There was real intent during the early years of the Strategy's design and implementation, but nothing followed the initial implementation plan (that lasted until 2014), despite it being a 10 year strategy that had an end date of 2020. However, this may be due to the formation of DfE and resulting internal government restructuring.

The next strategy will have to ensure it is done in a joined up manner across government that delivers for the economy and society of NI. It will need to ensure it is able to respond to likely varying economic conditions throughout the next decade and ensure it has longevity. The evaluation puts forward a total of 13 recommendations, as detailed in the table below, to be considered in the future development and implementation of NI's next skills strategy.

Recommendations from Evaluation	
No.	Recommendation
1	The next skills strategy for NI should take a whole-of-government approach and should be published as an Executive publication, given the cross-cutting nature of skills. It should evolve alongside the Programme for Government (PfG) and adapt an outcome-based approach, whilst being flexible enough to adapt to any future iterations of the PfG during its lifetime.
2	The next strategy should feed into the draft Industrial Strategy (or any successor) and any future social strategy. To meet the needs of the economy, it should focus its efforts on those areas identified as priority sectors. For any new interventions for those furthest from the workforce, this should be for areas where there is likely to be demand for workers in the future. This will require collaboration with business and using evidence from research such as the Skills Barometer could help identify such areas.
3	More emphasis should be placed on the actions underpinning the skills strategy. An initial implementation plan should be published alongside the launch of the strategy to show its intent. A future strategy should consider a relevant time period to implement any actions. An effective way to do this would be to renew/refresh actions/action plan often (perhaps every 2-3 years) to keep actions relevant. This would allow the strategy to maintain flexibility in responding to users' needs and the needs of the economy, thus ensuring longevity.
4	The implementation plan(s) needs to be flexible to respond to varying economic needs. The skills needs of the economy will vary throughout the next ten year period, depending on economic conditions.
5	Performance should be measured at appropriate intervals and this should be done in a visible manner. ASD would suggest that this is published annually on the Executive's website. This should include measuring progress of actions and performance against any indicators, targets and outcomes.

6	<p>The next strategy should use best practice project management techniques. The Skills Strategy was project-managed well through best practice techniques i.e. PRINCE2 and Managing Successful Programmes. Projects should be evaluated and good records should be kept on the Northern Ireland Civil Service file management system.</p>
7	<p>The one area that requires immediate attention is government’s offering of management and leadership development programmes. Whilst InvestNI and CITB may be active in this area, their programmes are limited to their customers.</p>
8	<p>An appropriate infrastructure/mechanism should be established to identify real time review of the challenges and needs of businesses. A sectoral approach has been suggested as the best way for targeting specific needs of businesses. Previous Ministerial sectoral working groups worked well, especially for the ICT sector.</p>
9	<p>A future skills strategy should be cognisant of all the players involved in skills development. It should aim to portray all the activity that occurs in delivering any expected outcomes. This includes government (central and local), businesses, academia and individuals.</p>
10	<p>Existing activity should be reviewed before the introduction of new interventions. To avoid duplication and ensure initiatives meet the needs of users and businesses a future skills strategy should review existing activity before introducing new interventions, programmes, qualifications etc. New activity should have a specific purpose and should have an exit strategy. New and existing offerings should be communicated to all users (i.e. those in education, those in work and those furthest from the workforce), using appropriate channels.</p>
11	<p>More emphasis needs to be placed on appropriate skills, rather than higher skills. This includes ensuring the apprenticeship route is perceived to be as highly regarded as the traditional schooling route.</p>
12	<p>Creating a culture of lifelong learning is essential in a future strategy. It is important to encourage learning as a part of an individual’s life trajectory, ensuring pathways and flexibility on offerings.</p>
13	<p>The next strategy should consider its role in improving NI’s relative productivity and how it can measure the impact of skills improvements on productivity.</p>

2. Introduction

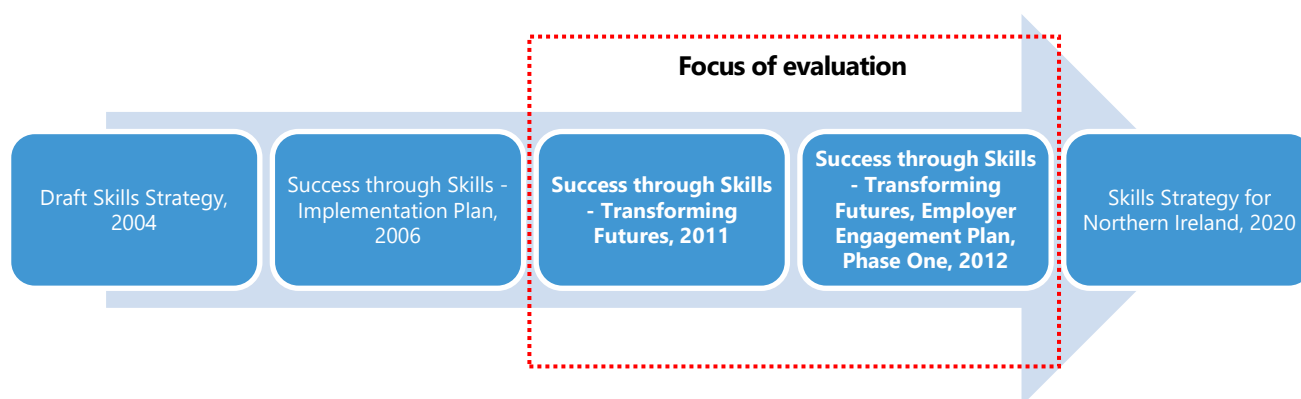
2.1 Introduction

Skills Division, Department for the Economy (DfE) has commissioned Analytical Services Division, DfE, to carry out an independent evaluation of Northern Ireland's (NI) existing skills strategy: 'Success through Skills – Transforming Futures'¹, hereafter referred to as 'Skills Strategy'. The Strategy is due to end, with the DfE committed to the publication of a new skills strategy by the end of 2020.

2.2 Background

The Skills Strategy was published in May 2011 by the now defunct Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). It set out the vision, aims, skills challenges and actions needed for the NI economy to grow. It set the strategic direction for a 10 year period highlighting four strategic goals. It was the second skills strategy for NI, following the publication of a draft Skills Strategy in 2004 and a subsequent implementation plan, 'Success through Skills' in 2006. This is illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 2.2: History of Skills Strategy's for Northern Ireland



'Success through Skills – Transforming Futures' was published by the then DEL Minister Stephen Farry in 2011. It was produced as a high level departmental document under its remit for employment and skills matters.

The current Skills Strategy built on the four themes of the 2006 implementation plan (understanding the demand for skills; improving the quality and relevance of education and training; improving productivity by increasing skill levels of the workforce; and tackling skills barriers to employment and employability), with an additional theme of engaging stakeholders.

It had a vision to support the economic aspiration (of the NI Executive) by ensuring that excellent leadership is provided from well qualified managers, supported by a highly skilled workforce. It had the stated aim: to enable people to access and progress up the skills ladder, in order to:

- Raise the skills level of the whole workforce;
- Raise productivity;

¹ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Success-through-Skills-Transforming-Futures.pdf>

- Increase levels of social inclusion by enhancing the employability of those currently excluded from the labour market; and
- Secure NI's future in a global marketplace.

It also contained four strategic goals as shown in the box.

Strategic Goal 1: Increase the proportion of those people in employment with Level 2 skills and above to 84-90% by 2020, from a baseline of 71.2% in 2008.

Strategic Goal 2: Increase the proportion of those people in employment with Level 3 skills and above to 68-76% by 2020, from a baseline of 55.6% in 2008.

Strategic Goal 3: Increase the proportion of those people in employment with Level 4-8 skills and above to 44-52% by 2020, from a baseline of 33.2% in 2008.

Strategic Goal 4: To increase the proportion of those qualifying from Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions with graduate and post graduate level courses in STEM subjects (with an emphasis on physical and biological sciences, mathematical and computer science, engineering and technology) by 25 - 30% in 2020 from a baseline of 18% in 2008.

In order to achieve its strategic goals, the strategy noted a number of challenges it needed to address. These included:

1. The need for higher-level skills;
2. The need to up-skill;
3. The need to address subject imbalances;
4. The need to increase management and leadership skills; and
5. The need to attract skilled labour.

In total, 17 actions were identified under five themes as follows:

Theme 1: Understanding the demand for skills

Action 1. Simplification of the demand side advisory infrastructure

Action 2. Harnessing labour market information

Theme 2: Improving the quality and relevance of education and training

Action 3. Placements and scholarships

Action 4. 'Assured Skills' pilot

Action 5. Skills delivery model for Matrix

Theme 3: Improving productivity by increasing the skill levels of the workforce

Action 6. Expansion of Foundation Degrees

Action 7. 'Skills Solutions' Service

Action 8. Accreditation of prior experiential learning

Action 9. Increase skills in certain subject areas to reduce sectoral imbalances

Action 10. Integrated framework for management and leadership provision

Action 11. Skills utilisation

Action 12. Recognise more training by companies

Action 13. Attracting skilled people to Northern Ireland

Theme 4: Tackling the skills barriers to employment and employability

Action 14. Assist individuals to address skills barriers to work and enable them to stay in work and progress up the skills ladder

Action 15. Employability skills

Theme 5: Engaging stakeholders

Action 16. Marketing

Action 17. Skills collaboration

Following on from the publication of the Skills Strategy, an implementation plan was published in 2012 titled: *'Success through Skills – Transforming Futures Employer Engagement Plan'*. Its structure was set around the NI Economic Strategy (2012) rebalancing and rebuilding themes. It named 14 projects being undertaken that would contribute to the rebalancing of the economy and four projects that would deliver against the rebuilding of the economy (after the economic downturn). Many of these were the same as the actions listed above, but some were additional. These actions are examined in greater detail in section 5.

'Success through Skills – Structured to Deliver Success' was also published as an implementation structure demonstrating how all the underlying skills-related strategies dovetailed to deliver on the overarching Strategy. It underwent three iterations, the last of which was published online in 2015.

2.3 Purpose

The purpose of this evaluation is to determine:

1. Was it a good strategy?
2. Did it deliver on the actions and meet its goals?
3. What are the lessons learned?

To do this, a three-stage approach has been developed as illustrated in figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1: Methodology



This evaluation report will:

- Firstly, consider how the economic and strategic context has evolved over the 10 year strategy period;
- Assess whether the actions within the strategy and implementation plan were taken forward and delivered;
- Determine whether the strategic goals were met;
- Feature the views of stakeholders engaged; and
- Assess whether the approach and methodology were appropriate.

Using the information gathered, it will answer the questions set out in the terms of reference (see Annex A) and make key conclusions, before putting forward a list of recommendations for the future development of a skills strategy.

3. Economic and Strategic Context

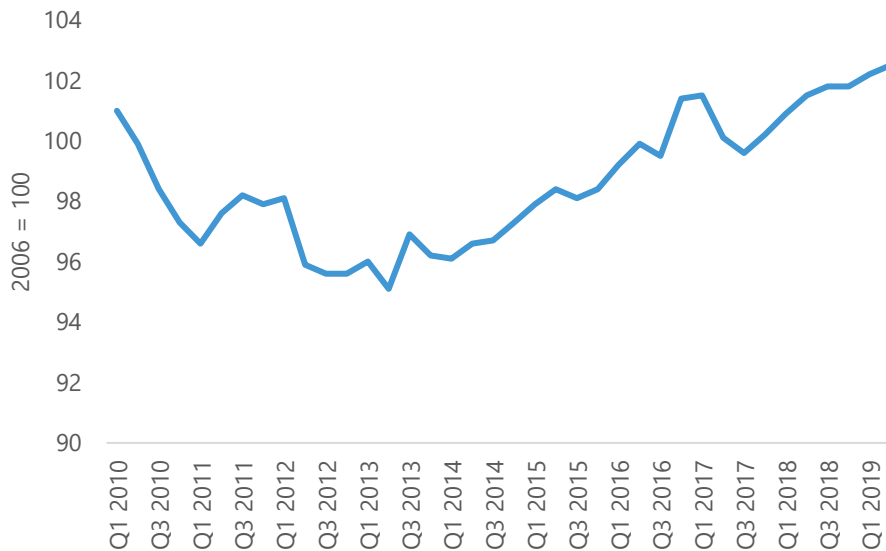
3.1 Introduction

This section aims to set the strategic context in which the existing Skills Strategy was developed and subsequently published in 2011. In addition, it sets out how the strategic context has evolved and what this will mean for the future development of a new strategy.

3.2 Economic Context

The economy is very different at the end of the 2010s compared with when the Skills Strategy was developed and launched. The NI economy was still in the midst of an economic downturn when the Skills Strategy launched. Output reached a low point in the second quarter of 2013 according to data from the NI Composite Economic Index. Since then, output has risen in the majority of quarters. This is illustrated in figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: Economic Activity in NI

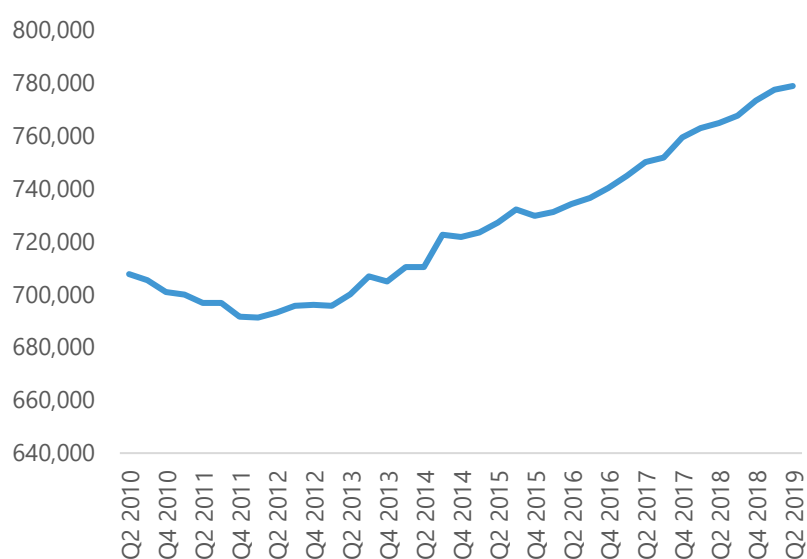


Source: NI Composite Economic Index, NISRA

Whilst output is recovering, it remains 4% below its previous peak (Q2 2007). This compares with both UK and Rol, which have recently reached new highs and have grown by 12% and 75% respectively over the past six years.

The story with jobs is different, with employee jobs surpassing their previous peak and at their highest tally on record (reaching 779,000 in Q2 2019). This is shown in figure 3.2 overleaf.

Figure 3.2: Employee jobs in NI



Source: Quarterly Employment Survey, NISRA

Other labour market indicators have also become increasingly positive over the decade. NI's employment rate was 72.2% in Q2 2019, a 5.9 percentage point increase since Q2 2010. This was driven by growth in employment of 93,000 over the period, exceeding the growth in working age population over the period. However, this remains below the UK rate of 76.1%. The unemployment rate in NI was 3.1% in Q2 2019, down from 6.6% in Q2 2010. This is below the equivalent UK rate (3.9%) and the RoI (5.3%) rate for September 2019. NI's inactivity rate for Q2 2019 was 25.5%, a 3.4 percentage point decrease since Q2 2010, but remains well above the current UK rate of 20.7%. Table 3.1 below compares labour market performance at Q2 2010 with Q2 2019 for both NI and the UK.

Table 3.1: Summary table of labour market performance, NI vs UK

		Q2 2010	Q2 2019	Change
Unemployment Rate				
	NI	6.6%	3.1%	-3.5pps
	UK	7.9%	3.9%	-4.0pps
Employment Rate				
	NI	66.3%	72.2%	+5.9pps
	UK	70.4%	76.1%	+5.7pps
Economic Inactivity Rate				
	NI	28.9%	25.5%	-3.4pps
	UK	23.5%	20.7%	-2.8pps

Source: Labour Force Survey, NISRA and ONS

3.3 2011 Strategic Context

NI Programme for Government

In 2011, the NI Executive was working in the context of the Programme for Government (PfG) 2008-11 with its top stated priority to grow a dynamic, innovative economy. It had 23 Public Service Agreement's (PSA's) with the now

defunct Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), the lead department for two of these and a partner in 10 others.

DEL had lead responsibility for PSA 2: *Skills for Prosperity* with the aim to *'Ensure our people have the right skills to deliver economic prosperity now and in the future and increase skills and career choices in STEM subjects'*. Under this PSA, there were four identified objectives as follows:

1. Understand the current demand for skills and assess the future skills needs of the NI economy and businesses at a local and regional level;
2. Improve the skills level of the workforce;
3. Improve the quality and relevance of education to the economy; and
4. Increase the skills and career choices in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects.

DEL also had lead responsibility for PSA 3: *Increasing Employment* with the aim *'Subject to economic conditions, increase employment levels and reduce economic inactivity by addressing the barriers to employment and providing effective careers advice at all levels'*. The objectives stated under PSA were as follows:

1. Tackle the skills barriers to employment and employability;
2. Deliver a high quality employment service, providing support for employers and helping people return to work;
3. Increase employment opportunities by attracting high quality inward investment and supporting domestic investment; and
4. Promote business growth.

On both of these PSAs, the Department of Education and the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (now defunct) were also partners.

The PfG 2008-11 set a number of challenging skills targets for NI. These include a focus on up-skilling the workforce at level 2 and above, level 3 and above and an expansion of enrolments in subject areas related to STEM.

2012 Economic Strategy

The NI Executive published an economic strategy in 2012, setting out how it planned to grow a prosperous local economy over the short, medium and long term to 2030, with its economic vision as follows:

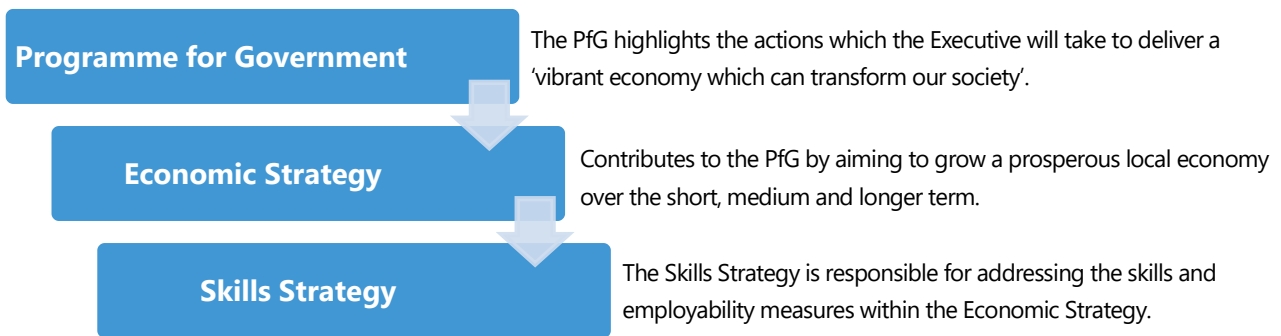
'An economy characterised by a sustainable and growing private sector, where a greater number of firms compete in global markets and there is a growing employment and prosperity for all'.

It planned to rebalance towards private sector growth through several measures, including improving the skills and employability of the entire workforce, so that people can progress up the skills ladder, thereby delivering higher productivity and increased social inclusion. Measures under this included:

- Increase to 70% the proportion of young people leaving school having achieved at least 5 GCSEs at A*-C (or equivalent) including English and Maths by 2020;
- Deliver 210,000 qualifications at Levels 2, 3, 4 and above by 2015, through higher education, further education, essential skills and training;
- Increase skills in subject areas important to the NI economy such as STEM (implement the actions within the STEM Strategy) and sales and marketing; and
- Improve support to companies and increase the number of people gaining skills in management and leadership.

The relationship between the Skills Strategy, the Economic Strategy and the PfG is illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 3.1: Relationship between PfG, Economic Strategy and Skills Strategy



Many of the PSAs' objectives that DEL led in the PfG 2008-11 closely aligned with the Skills Strategy. This is illustrated in table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Mapping of PfG 2008-11 to Success through Skills – Transforming Futures

PfG 2008-11	Success through Skills – Transforming Futures
Objective: Increase the level of skills to aid productivity improvements in manufacturing and tradable services.	Theme: Improving productivity by increasing the skills levels of the workforce. Stated Aim: To enable people to access and progress up the skills ladder, in order to raise productivity.
Objective: Understand the current demand for skills and assess the future skills needs of the Northern Ireland economy and businesses at a local and regional level.	Theme: Understanding the demand for skills.
Objective: Improve the skills level of the workforce.	Theme: Improving productivity by increasing the skills levels of the workforce. Stated Aim: To enable people to access and progress up the skills ladder, in order to raise the skills level of the whole workforce. Three strategic goals about upskilling.
Objective: Improve the quality and relevance of education to the economy.	Theme: improving the quality and relevance of education and training.
Objective: Increase skills and career choices in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects.	Strategic Goal: increase proportion of qualifiers from HEIs with STEM subjects. Theme: Improving productivity by increasing the skills levels of the workforce.
Objective: Tackle the skills barriers to employment and employability.	Theme: Tackling the skills barriers to employment and employability. Stated Aim: to enable people to access and progress up the skills ladder, in order to increase levels of social inclusion by enhancing the employability of those currently excluded from the labour market.

Departmental Corporate Plan

DEL's Corporate Plan 2008-11 aligned itself closely to the priorities outlined in the PfG. Its vision was:

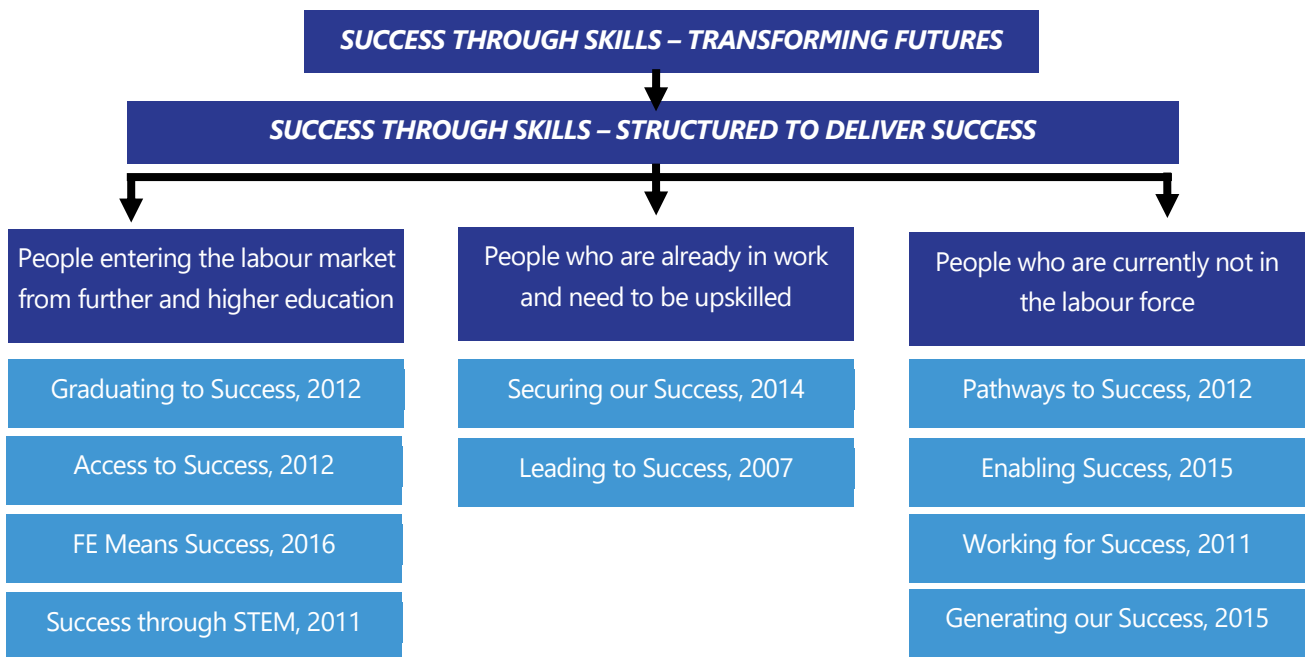
"to develop a dynamic, innovative and sustainable economy where everyone achieves their full potential."

It sought to deliver this through the realisation of its aim which was to promote learning and skills, to prepare people for work and support the economy.

Other skills related strategies

DfE and its predecessor DEL published numerous strategies that together needed to be implemented in order to meet the goals of the overarching strategy. These were brought together under an overarching implementation plan known as 'Success through Skills: Structured to Deliver Success' and were in relation to the delivery of Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE), training, the Careers Service and the Employment Service. There were three iterations of Structured to Deliver Success, the last of which was published in 2015. How the strategies dovetailed together to meet the goals of the Skills Strategy is illustrated in figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2: DEL/DfE Skills Strategies



Each of the strategies underpinning the Skills Strategy is discussed below.

People entering the labour market from further and higher education

Graduating to Success set out a long term vision for a vibrant and modern higher education sector of international calibre, which through excellence in teaching and research contributes to the development of a modern, sustainable, knowledge-based economy and which supports a confident and shared society. It linked to the overall Skills Strategy by including the two relevant strategic goals from 'Success through Skills – Transforming Futures'.

Access to Success is the strategy for widening participation in higher education. It seeks to ensure that talented individuals are given every opportunity to benefit from the higher education that is right for them.

FE Means Success is the NI strategy for further education. It provides the future direction for further education and sets out the new policy commitments to ensure delivery. It makes some mention of the overarching Skills Strategy, primarily the need to upskill those in employment to meet the strategic goals.

Success through STEM was a strategy to take forward work to equip NI's workforce with the STEM skills necessary to support the needs of business in NI. It made reference to the need to increase enrolments in STEM subjects, which connects to an action in '*Success through Skills: Transforming Futures*'; that is, to increase skills in certain subject areas.

People who are already in work and need upskilled

Securing our Success sets out the future direction of apprenticeships in Northern Ireland, setting out the policy commitments and an implementation plan to ensure their delivery.

Leading to Success was a leadership strategy to ensure that managerial performance is improved with a focus upon more effective people management practices. This closely aligned with the vision of the overarching Skills Strategy.

People who are currently not in the labour force

Pathways to Success is the strategy for addressing the needs of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Enabling Success is the economic inactivity strategy for NI.

Working for Success was published in 2011 and was the strategy for the Employment Service. Key activities from the strategy included the Steps 2 Success programme, job matching service for employers, an enhanced frontline service for clients returning to employment and development of a youth employment scheme.

Generating our Success was published in 2015. It outlines the future direction for youth training in Northern Ireland and sets out the new policy commitments and an implementation plan to ensure their delivery.

Other cross cutting strategies published over the period include Preparing for Success; Disability Employment and Skills Strategy; and Success through Excellence Quality Improvement.

3.4 2019 Strategic Context

Amalgamation of Departments

The DfE was established in May 2016 with the amalgamation of two Departments; namely, the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the majority of the DEL (excluding employment service). Its responsibilities include²:

- Wider economic policy, including specific areas like energy, tourism and telecoms;
- The operation of a range of employment and skills programmes;

² <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/about-dfe>

- Oversight and funding of the further and higher education sectors;
- Various aspects of employment law; and
- The management and operation of various European Union (EU) funding programmes.

NI Programme for Government

Since the publication of the Skills Strategy, the high level strategic context of the NI government has changed. The 2016-21 PfG is working in a draft state, with an outcome-based approach that is intended to address the big issues facing society and to make a difference to the things that matter most to people. The overall purpose is:

“improving wellbeing for all – by tackling disadvantage, and driving economic growth.”

There are 14 outcomes and 42 associated indicators. Outcomes 1, 5 and 6 are the most relevant in the context of developing a new skills strategy for NI. These are:

- Outcome 1 – We prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy;
- Outcome 5 – We are an innovative, creative society, where people can fulfil their potential; and
- Outcome 6 – We have more people working in better jobs.

Indicator 14 ‘*Improve the skills of the population*’ uses the same measures as the Skills Strategy strategic goals to gauge effectiveness.

New Decade, New Approach

New Decade, New Approach was published in January 2020, as part of a deal to restore devolution in Northern Ireland. One of the immediate priorities includes:

“The Executive will invest strategically in ensuring that NI has the right mix of skills for a thriving economy.”

Another stated priority is:

“In support of both economic and educational objectives, the Executive will develop an enhanced approach to careers advice, curriculum, training and apprenticeships to enhance employability and support economic growth.”

It is stated that a new Programme for Government will be published by April 2020, comprising the framework of 12 outcomes of societal wellbeing from the NICS Outcome Delivery Plan and a Priorities Plan, consisting of actions for delivery during the remainder of 2019/20.

Economy 2030 – A consultation on an industrial strategy for Northern Ireland

Economy 2030, the successor to the Economic Strategy, set out a vision to be a *globally competitive economy that works for everyone*. It proposed a framework for growth that included five pillars for growth, with one directly related to skills, i.e., enhancing education, skills and employability. Under this pillar, it has the following priorities:

- An education system that provides our young people with the skills for life and work;
- Access to timely, relevant and comprehensive careers advice;
- Help for those furthest away from work;

- A high quality, efficient and responsive system for delivering professional and technical skills;
- A pipeline of graduates who have the skills, knowledge and capabilities to excel; and
- A strong and relevant supply of skills for economic growth.

3.5 Summary

The economic landscape has changed considerably since the launch of the Skills Strategy. The launch was during a period of economic downturn. The subsequent recovery has brought jobs to their highest tally on record and economic output approaching where it once was at its peak.

It is evident that the Skills Strategy was very closely linked to the 2008-11 PfG when it launched, with the themes of the Strategy the same as a number of the stated objectives under the PSAs. However, there is less evidence of the link between the Skills Strategy and its underlying strategies. There were some linkages, but these were often unclear and at times, this was nothing more than a passing reference. However, there was some effort to bring these together through 'Structured to Deliver Success' as a means to delivering the goals. The implementation plan of the Skills Strategy was clearly linked to the 2012 Economic Strategy and in particular, the need for a better skills base to move towards rebalancing the economy towards private sector led growth.

With the movement towards an outcome-based approach by the NI Executive in its latest draft PfG, the next skills strategy should seek to tie closely with those outcomes most associated with it, as well as identifying the relevant indicators and measures (as outlined in section 2.3). However, with the latest iteration of the PfG due for renewal in 2021, consideration should be given as to what approach will be likely to adopted and how outcomes, indicators and measures may change to ensure the next skills strategy remains relevant, even in future iterations of the PfG.

4. Assessment against Actions

4.1 Introduction

The Skills Strategy set out 17 actions under five themes. Sixteen of these were included in the subsequent implementation plan titled: *'Employer Engagement Plan – Phase One'*. The implementation plan also included details on five additional projects. ASD also found evidence of a further three projects which were not included in the Strategy or implementation plan. It was clear that the actions alone would not achieve goals with the Strategy recognising:

"The outputs from the Department's existing provision (further education, higher education, Training for Success, apprenticeships and essential skills) will continue to make the largest contribution to the attainment of the four strategic goals..."

It continued:

..."However, much more needs to be done, in addition to the Department's existing provision, if Northern Ireland is to achieve the Strategic Goals articulated in this Strategy."

This section examines each action in turn identifying whether there is evidence that these were actioned and whether they continue today. This has been completed through searching internal file records and through the consultation exercise. Highlight/progress reports found through searching internal file records are included in Annex D. Costings are provided on each of the actions, based on an internal draft of the implementation plan provided to ASD. No costings are provided on action 13, as this was not included within the draft implementation plan seen by ASD.

4.2 Actions against themes

The first theme identified in the Skills Strategy was understanding the demand for skills. Assessment of whether the actions were delivered are assessed in tables that follow.

Theme 1: Understanding the demand for skills

Action 1: Simplification of the Department's demand side advisory infrastructure

The Department will work to simplify the current skills advisory infrastructure so that employers are able to more effectively articulate their current and future demand for skills to the Department.'

Additional Background	At the time of the Skills Strategy, the existing advisory infrastructure was made up of the Skills Expert Group, six Workforce Development Fora, the NI Adviser on Employment and Skills (NIAES) and 24 sector skills councils (originally 25).
Steps taken to achieve action	<p>A meeting was held between officials and the then Minister in February 2012 and it was agreed that the problem was not so much the infrastructure/mechanism by which DEL determined skill needs and fed this to the supply side but rather the confusion employers had in relation to how they should engage with the supply side to have these skill needs met.</p> <p>The NIAES published a report: "Improving the Effectiveness of the Employment and Skills Advisory Infrastructure which advised on ways to simplify and improve the effectiveness of the employment and skills infrastructure in NI.</p> <p>In the meeting, it was noted that a wider project was required to simplify how employers engage with Government, including through Invest NI, to access provision which meets their training needs. This was to start by considering DEL provision. A communications plan was to be developed to promote the infrastructure to employers and other stakeholders. Some communication activity did take place.</p> <p>A paper recommended that a communications strategy produced to publicise the Department's "offer" to employers. However, this has been overtaken by the development of an overall Communications Strategy for the Department, which includes this as a strand of work and which will be taken forward through that vehicle, so no further work is required on this as a specific project area.</p>
Feedback from consultation	Nobody in the consultations mentioned this specific project.
Cost	None
Was it achieved?	Not Achieved. There is evidence that a Communications Strategy was to be developed and that divisions were asked for input. However, no evidence of a Communications Strategy ever being published has been found.

Theme 1: Understanding the demand for skills

Action 2: Harnessing labour market information

The Department will examine ways in which to ensure that existing high quality labour market information, including current and future employer demand and future trends, is widely available in a way which is meaningful, to career advisers, career teachers, parents, the unemployed, job changers and school leavers.'

Steps taken to achieve action	<p>This action was taken forward and work included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Access to the labour market information (LMI) online learning module (including approved Business Case & licensing agreement);• LMI half-day awareness workshop delivered to Careers Managers;• LMI awareness workshop provision at the Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association conference;• LMI Sources desktop guide developed;• Careers web portal content updated to increase accessibility to LMI; and• Careers service LMI presentations updated.
Feedback from consultation	<p>The skills barometer was mentioned as a success.</p>
Cost	<p>£20,000</p>
Was it achieved?	<p>Achieved. This work continued to evolve and through an action in the Apprenticeship Strategy, the Skills Barometer was published. The Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre has since published several iterations of a 'Skills Barometer', which is then used in an infographic that is provided at careers fairs and given to careers advisors. The latest refresh was published in summer 2019 and is available here:</p> <p>https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-skills-barometer-2019-update</p>

The second theme identified in the Skills Strategy was improving the quality and relevance of education and training. Assessment of whether each action was delivered is assessed in tables that follow.

Theme 2: Improving the quality and relevance of education and training

Action 3: Placements and scholarships

'The Northern Ireland Employment and Skills Adviser will advise the Department on ways in which to encourage employers to offer appropriate work placements and particularly in STEM subjects, scholarships for students from universities and colleges.'

Additional Background	The long term aim of the project was to work with employer representatives and employer groups such as the STEM business sub group, to ultimately increase the number of placements and scholarships particularly in economically relevant subjects, for people studying in Further Education and Higher Education in Northern Ireland. No target numbers were provided in the documentation seen by ASD.
Steps taken to achieve action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A scoping study was completed. • A programme was established to increase work placements for students in IT and engineering. • A number of placements were increased through working with employers.
Feedback from consultation	It was noted that placements and scholarships are important and an area for improvement, but none explicitly stated that this was achieved.
Cost	None
Was it achieved?	Achieved, but through consultation, it has been identified as an area that government needs to address further

Theme 2: Improving the quality and relevance of education and training

Action 4: Assured Skills pilot

'As part of the incentive to attract new investments and expansions in Northern Ireland, the Department and Invest Northern Ireland will take forward a pilot to offer assured provision of a skilled workforce tailored to the specific needs of companies based on a successful model of support in North Carolina. If successful, in Northern Ireland the model will be implemented through the Further and Higher Education sectors.'

Additional Background	Assured Skills is a demand-led pre-employment training programme, designed to upskill the NI workforce to meet the skills needed for industry to grow, with over 80% of participants gaining employment since inception in 2011. A case study is presented in Annex D.
Steps taken to achieve action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot taken forward by DEL and InvestNI. • Several new foreign direct investment and expanding companies took part.
Feedback from consultation	Consultees largely felt that the Assured Skills programme was a major success of the Strategy. One consultee was critical of its success and made a suggestion that there was a need to get the subject mix right at undergraduate level.

Cost	£3m per annum
Was it achieved?	Achieved – now a mainstream programme. The Assured Skills programme has since become a permanent offering. Since its inception, 1,600 people have been trained and 10,000 jobs have been promoted.

Theme 2: Improving the quality and relevance of education and training

Action 5: Skills delivery model for Matrix

'In response to the Matrix report, the Department will support the further and higher education sectors to develop a skills model to support the implementation of Matrix.'

Additional Background	<p>The key aim of this project was to develop and refine an infrastructure system which will assist in identifying market opportunities, the industries of the future and to assess the implications of key technologies on industry sectors. A key aspect of this was to establish a long term skills pipeline to ensure an appropriate supply of skills for any emerging sectors. Key deliverables were expected:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of NI's current mechanisms to identify emerging skill needs; • Analysis of issues with the current system; • Examples of best practice; and • Outline structure on how a new model will operate.
Steps taken to achieve action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A report titled: 'Delivering Skills for Emerging Sectors' was produced. • A model was established that would operate via the Foresight group and act as the main conduit in conducting horizon scanning exercises to identify future market opportunities, the emergence of new sectors and to assess the impact of new technologies within the NI economy. A key aspect of this was to ensure a long term skills pipeline was in place to ensure an appropriate supply of skills for any emerging sectors.
Feedback from consultation	No consultees specifically mentioned this action.
Cost	£300,000
Was it achieved?	Achieved.

The third theme identified within the Skills Strategy was improving productivity by increasing the skills levels of the workforce. Assessment of whether each action was delivered is assessed in the tables that follow.

Theme 3: Improving productivity by increasing the skill levels of the workforce

Action 6: Expansion of foundation degrees

'The Department, working closely with industry, will continue to expand Foundation Degrees in key skill priority areas. The qualifications will integrate academic and work-related learning. The Department will work with the universities to align the qualifications they offer to the needs of employers.'

Additional Background	<p>This action required:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Development of employer, demand-led foundation degrees; 2. A streamlined framework/process to speed up the validation of Foundation Degrees; 3. A publicity and promotion strategy aimed at raising the awareness of Foundation Degree qualifications; and 4. Implementation of an effective process for the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) to facilitate entry.
Steps taken to achieve action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundation Degree Forward (fdf) brought forward work to support the development, delivery and promotion of Foundation Degrees in NI for the period May 2007 to March 2011. fdf NI provided a 'final exit report' to DEL in June 2011, which provided a summary of their work and achievements and outlined suggestions for the continued development of foundation degrees following their closure. ASD has found no evidence of work towards actions 1 and 2 continuing past that of fdf. • It was publicised and promoted as part of the implementation plan of higher education. It was project 20 and had a primary aim of increasing and improving buy-in to foundation degrees. The key mechanism to achieve this was through a promotional campaign, which ran across a variety of media from January 2013 to March 2015. • In terms of the implementation of an effective process, it was deemed desirable to have a common system that would encourage constructive use of APEL to meet the needs, in particular, of mature students who had been in employment for some time and could bring their experience to bear upon a higher education experience. To this end, in 2010, the Department convened a working group to develop an APEL process, which would meet the needs of both institutions and potential students. The working group produced the University and College APEL Guidelines that drew upon good practice within the sector and across the UK. These guidelines were endorsed by the whole sector. The scheme is limited to Foundation Degree entry only. Current evidence available suggests that APEL is not consistently used across the sector for Foundation Degrees and some HE providers may no longer be bought into the scheme.
Feedback from consultation	<p>A view shared was that foundation degrees were expanded, but employers preferred Higher National Diplomas/Higher National Certificates. There may have been greater availability of courses, but this complicated the market more. It was also viewed that APEL was put in place, but again the view was that it did not work.</p>
Cost	<p>£80,000</p>
Was it achieved?	<p>Achieved. However, ASD found no evidence that actions 1 and 2 were carried out beyond the work of fdf.</p>

Theme 3: Improving productivity by increasing the skill levels of the workforce

Action 7: 'Skills Solutions' Service

'Through the Skills Solutions service, the Department will introduce a single point of contact for employers so that they can more easily identify and access the support they need from the Department.'

Additional Background	This has evolved into the Skills Focus programme, the aim of which is to provide tailored skills provision to SMEs to help meet business needs and increase the skills levels of the existing workforce to level 2 and above qualifications. Further Education colleges have taken on some of the advisory role.
Steps taken to achieve action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In 2010, the Department launched a pilot of the Skills Solutions service. Consisting of a team of trained skills advisers, the service worked with small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) to provide them with advice on existing skills provision from the Department. ● Building on the pilot phase, the Department was to expand the skills brokerage provision to provide a regionally based service. ● The goals for this project were exceeded with the advisers making 1,190 contacts from April 2011 until September 2012 (from a target of 600). The Skills Solutions service was stood down and Skills Focus was later introduced.
Feedback from consultation	Programme has evolved. Further Education colleges were doing a lot of the contact, so the Department's role changed.
Cost	£3 million per annum.
Was it achieved?	Achieved. However, no longer active.

Theme 3: Improving productivity by increasing the skill levels of the workforce

Action 8: Accreditation of prior experiential learning

'The Department will examine ways in which to accredit the existing skills of experienced workers and take forward a number of sectoral pilots to inform future policy in this area.'

Steps taken to achieve action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Department commissioned independent research by RSM McClureWatters, which examined the feasibility and desire to accredit the existing skills of experienced workers. At a macro level, the research found a range of issues likely to affect the demand for this programme and ultimately, the desire from employers to accredit the existing skills of their workers. Based on the findings of the report, the Department considered it unfeasible to undertake a large scale national accreditation programme to recognise an individual's prior learning. ● The Department worked with the Construction Industry Training Board NI (CITB NI) on a project called 'Qualifying the Existing Workforce' (QEW). The QEW Project was launched as a pilot in June 2012 and aimed to qualify 500 unqualified, experienced employed construction workers to NVQ Level 2. The project has met its expectations during the 2 year period, as 500 unqualified construction workers gained a NVQ Level 2.
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Feedback from consultation	One respondent shared their view that Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning did not work. Another mentioned that the consultants found it unfeasible, so the Department did not take this work forward.
Cost	£100,000
Was it achieved?	Achieved. However, this work did not progress further.

Theme 3: Improving productivity by increasing the skill levels of the workforce

Action 9: Increase skills in certain subject areas

The Department for Employment and Learning will work with the Northern Ireland Employment and Skills Adviser to determine the priority qualification areas that will inform policy developments in relation to funding in further education, as well as customised projects. The Department for Employment and Learning will implement the actions within the Government STEM Strategy that are its responsibility.

Steps taken to achieve action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A report titled: 'Identification of Priority Skill areas' was published by the Office of the NIAES. • Correspondence on the NICS filing system reveals that work continued on this with a circular produced highlighting the sectors that were given priority status for rebalancing and rebuilding the economy. • A submission to the then Minister outlined the sectors that were considered a priority based on the NIAES report. It also added hospitality in support of tourism.
Feedback from consultation	Many of those consulted shared that they felt STEM was given priority.
Cost	None
Was it achieved?	Achieved.

Theme 3: Improving productivity by increasing the skill levels of the workforce

Action 10: Integrated framework for management and leadership provision

In collaboration with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Invest Northern Ireland, the Department will develop an integrated framework for management and leadership to improve support and advice to companies. In light of changes made during 2009-10 the Department will introduce a new policy for management and leadership which will examine ways to encourage more employers, especially SMEs and micro businesses, to consider management and leadership training and development and how they could better utilise the skills of their workforce.

Additional Background	The objectives of this project were, in collaboration with DETI and Invest NI, to develop online diagnostic tools for management and leadership, with the aim of providing a more holistic, customer focussed, service in the delivery of advice and support.
Steps taken to achieve action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was a soft launch of an online diagnostic tool in January 2013 (https://www.investni.com/news/ministers-launch-free-online-business-performance-tools.html).

Feedback from consultation	This was to match what InvestNI were offering on management and leadership training. There was programme spending of circa £2m per annum, sometimes at 100% subvention (fell to 50%). Work on a new management and leadership strategy started in 2014/15. The draft report was not signed off and so never became official policy.
Cost	None
Was it achieved?	Achieved. However, DFE no longer offers leadership and management courses.

Theme 3: Improving productivity by increasing the skill levels of the workforce

Action 11: Skills utilisation

'The Department will work with local businesses, in particular SMEs, to encourage them to better utilise the skills of their workforce.'

Additional Background	The objectives of this project were to carry out initial desk top research and work with the UK Commission for Employment and Skills and other Devolved Administrations to identify best practice on the integration of skills utilisation into business practices. The project will also identify what next steps are required.
Steps taken to achieve action	According to a highlight report: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A report was produced (not seen by ASD). • Liaison with the UKCES to determine how NI could link with and benefit from their new high performance working plain English campaign.
Feedback from consultation	A view shared was that qualifications did not necessarily translate to whether a person was utilising their skills. Another shared that it was an issue for women and for rural parts of NI.
Cost	None
Was it achieved?	Achieved. However, no evidence that this work continued.

Theme 3: Improving productivity by increasing the skill levels of the workforce

Action 12: Recognise more training by companies

'The aim of the programme is to support employers to identify if existing Qualifications and Credit Framework qualifications or units would meet their training needs. If no such qualification or unit exists, employers can then apply, through the normal accreditation process to have their training recognised through the development of a new qualification or unit.'

Additional Background	The Department was to bring together a number of strands of existing activity to provide a coordinated system for the provision of support to employers to increase use of National Occupational Standards (NOS) and regulated qualifications as part of their employee training programmes.
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Steps taken to achieve action	According to a highlight report: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A DVD promoting examples of employers who have had their in-house training mapped against NOS and recognised on the Qualifications and Credit Framework was produced and was to form the basis of further promotional awareness-raising with NI employers.
Feedback from consultation	None stated.
Cost	£50,000
Was it achieved?	Achieved.

Theme 3: Improving productivity by increasing the skill levels of the workforce

Action 13: Attracting skilled people to NI

'As the economy recovers, the Department will give consideration to a demand led focused campaign which will encourage skilled people (including non-domiciled Northern Ireland people) to consider Northern Ireland as a place to live and work. This will supplement the skills training at the higher levels through universities and colleges.'

Steps taken to achieve action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 'C'Mon Over' campaign launched in 2007 and was aimed to encourage people from outside NI, with appropriate skills, to consider NI as a place to both live and work. It comprised a number of key elements: Facebook; online; advertising; networking and events. The campaign was demand-led and activity in the area more or less ceased as part of the economic downturn. • Further work was undertaken by the ICT sector under its collaborative network 'IT360'. It worked with EURES in trying to attract skilled IT workers to jobs in NI.
Feedback from consultation	Businesses feel there needs to be more done by government in this area in the future.
Cost	Unknown
Was it achieved?	Not achieved (as was not actioned by the Department), but was taken forward by the business sector.

The fourth theme aimed to tackle the skills barriers to employment and employability. Assessment of whether each action was delivered is assessed in tables that follow.

Theme 4: Tackling the skills barriers to employment and employability

Action 14: Assist individuals to address skills barriers to work and enable them to stay in work and progress up the skills ladders

'The Department will put in place a system, building on the Personal Adviser and Careers Adviser Services, to enable those moving into work from the unemployment register to avail of the opportunity to be trained and gain qualifications so that they not only retain employment but also move up the skills ladder.'

Additional Background	<p>This project was to introduce a new model for vocational qualifications undertaken as part of Steps to Work. This would be aligned to the Qualifications and Credit Framework and involve restructuring the 26 week qualification strand.</p> <p>This is now Steps to Success and responsibility is with the Employment Service in the Department for Communities (DFC).</p>
Steps taken to achieve action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● New model operational from October 2011.
Feedback from consultation	<p>Feedback for this programme was positive, but some mentioned that the Employment Service moving to DFC created an unnecessary barrier within government.</p>
Cost	<p>£1 million.</p>
Was it achieved?	<p>Achieved.</p>

Theme 4: Tackling the skills barriers to employment and employability

Action 15: Employability skills

'Responding to employers' concerns in relation to the employability skills of those people wishing to enter the workforce, the Department will consider how it can build on the existing activity in this area.'

Steps taken to achieve action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Research regarding employer concerns completed. ● Research was carried out on the provision of employability skills in existing programmes. ● A definition was agreed and a policy statement was issued.
Feedback from consultation	<p>Many of those consulted stated that the lack of employability skills amongst those entering the workforce was a growing issue and some even viewed it as more important than qualifications.</p>
Cost	<p>£50,000</p>
Was it achieved?	<p>Achieved.</p>

The fifth theme identified was engaging the stakeholders. Assessment of whether each action was delivered is assessed in tables that follow.

Theme 5: Engaging stakeholders

Action 16: Marketing

'The Department will work with industry, in particular local SMEs and microbusinesses and other stakeholders to highlight the provision it offers and the benefits of this provision.'

Additional Background	Communications were to be taken forward as part of the Departmental Communications Strategy.
Steps taken to achieve action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To scope out the communication requirements for each project contained within the strategy – Completed May 2012 ● To scope out the key stakeholders to be communicated with across all the projects – Completed October 2012 ● To review existing communication channels and research existing levels of awareness – Completed March 2012 ● To develop a communications plan – Completed November 2012
Feedback from consultation	One stakeholder shared a view that engaging was not marketing and is a two way process.
Cost	£20,000
Was it achieved?	Achieved although the communications plan was never implemented as a standalone plan.

Theme 5: Engaging stakeholders

Action 17: Skills collaboration

'Where there are critical skills shortages in sectors of economic importance, the Department will encourage employers to work in collaboration with the relevant Sector Skills Council to put in place innovative interventions to address this need. This work will build on identified best practice models of collaboration with employers in Northern Ireland, such as the Future Skills Actions Groups'.

Additional Background	<p>The business case proposed:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. establishing a STEM scholarship scheme for undergraduate students; 2. developing and supporting skills competitions to encourage employer engagement and greater success for Northern Ireland at the UK, European and WorldSkills levels; and 3. supporting employer-led proposals to fulfil the overall aims and objectives of the fund. <p>For STEM scholarships, there is some evidence that this was to be piloted by Queens University Belfast in 2014 in ICT courses.</p>
Steps taken to achieve action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A fund was active until March 2015 covering skills competitions and employer-led projects.

Feedback from consultation	Working groups were successful (some viewed these as needed going forward).
Cost	£1 million
Was it achieved?	Partly Achieved. No evidence a STEM scholarship scheme was implemented.

In summary, all actions listed in the strategy itself were carried out. However, in many cases, there was no or little evidence that these projects continued to be implemented past their initial phase. From an internal document seen by ASD, these expected to cost almost £8 million in total to implement.

In addition to those listed within the Skills Strategy, additional actions were included within the implementation plan. No costings of these have been provided. These are shown in Table 4.1 and are numbered for ease of reference.

Table 4.1: Additional actions from Employer Engagement Plan

Action	Steps taken to achieve	Achieved
Action 18: Benchmarking Skills outcomes	An externally commissioned research project was completed by Oxford Economics which benchmarked NI's skills performance against 26 competitor countries across 23 indicators. It ranked NI as 23 rd .	Achieved
Action 19: Undertaking a review of Adult Training	The review of Adult Training, including apprenticeships concluded in April 2012. The Minister used the findings of national and international research and the specific recommendation of the Steering Group to formulate his decision on the future policy and funding arrangements. He decided to continue the restoration of the existing 50% funding contribution for adult apprenticeships in the economically important sectors which will rebalance the economy and to protect 100% public funding for apprenticeships in the youth cohort (aged 16-24).	Achieved
Action 20: Introducing a Higher Level Apprenticeship Pilot	The Minister launched the pilot at the Enniskillen campus of the South West College on the 29th November 2012. Higher Level Apprenticeships is now a mainstream programme of the Department and continues to be expanded.	Achieved
Action 21: Embedding employer engagement in provision for those going back to work	DEL established a dedicated Employer Engagement Unit within the Employment Service. DEL worked with Invest NI through the Jobs Fund Initiative in support of their target to create 4,000 jobs.	Achieved
Action 22: Alternative Dispute Resolution	DEL issued a report on the outcome of the SME-focussed research.	Achieved

Those projects with costs of £5,000 or more should have individual evaluations completed. However, ASD has not been able to locate most of these (an evaluation of the Assured Skills programme has been provided) and therefore cannot assess whether these were collectively value for money – this does not mean these were not carried out. It is beyond the remit of the terms of reference for this evaluation to fully evaluate each of these projects – rather, what is being assessed here is whether these actions were delivered and contributed more widely to the vision, aims, challenges, strategic goals and vision of the Skills Strategy. Table 4.2 indicates whether each action was directly relevant to the vision, aim, challenges and strategic goals of the overarching strategy.

Table 4.2: Actions and their direct contribution to the Skills Strategy vision, aim, challenges and strategic goals

	Relevant to Vision	Relevant to Aim	Relevant to Addressing Challenges	Relevant to Strategic Goals 1-3 (upskilling)	Relevant to Strategic Goal 4 (STEM)	Notes
Action 1 - Simplification of the demand side advisory infrastructure						Indirectly as it would make it easier for businesses to understand the skills offering provided by the department and Invest NI.
Action 2 - Harnessing labour market information						Indirectly – as this would provide the evidence to address the challenges.
Action 3 - Placements and scholarships			✓		✓	Directly – supports placements in STEM subjects (strategic goal 4) and reduces subject imbalances (challenge)
Action 4 - 'Assured Skills' pilot	✓		✓			Directly – supports vision of a highly skilled workforce by providing businesses with skills they require as well as addressing a number of issues, most notably, the need to address subject imbalances.
Action 5 - Skills delivery model for MATRIX	✓	✓	✓		✓	Directly – supports vision (highly skilled workforce), supports aim (securing NI's future in a global marketplace), and supports challenges (higher level skills and addressing subject imbalances).
Action 6 - Expansion of Foundation Degrees	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Directly – supports vision (highly skilled workforce), supports aim (progress up skills ladder to raise the skills level of the whole workforce), challenges (up-skill, higher-level skills, subject imbalances), strategic goal 3 and strategic goal 4 (foundation degree would be level 4/5 qualification and action stated this to be in economically relevant subjects).

	Relevant to Vision	Relevant to Aim	Relevant to Addressing Challenges	Relevant to Strategic Goals 1-3 (upskilling)	Relevant to Strategic Goal 4 (STEM)	Notes
Action 7 – ‘Skills Solutions’ Service	✓	✓	✓	✓		Directly – supports vision (highly skilled workforce), supports aim (progress up skills ladder to raise the skills level of the whole workforce) and challenges (up-skill, higher-level skills).
Action 8 - Accreditation of prior experiential learning	✓	✓	✓	✓		Directly – supports vision (highly skilled workforce), supports aim (progress up skills ladder to raise the skills level of the whole workforce) and challenges (up-skill, higher-level skills).
Action 9 - Increase skills in certain subject areas to reduce sectoral imbalances	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Directly – supports vision (highly skilled workforce), supports aim (progress up skills ladder to raise the skills level of the whole workforce), challenges (up-skill, higher-level skills, subject imbalances) and all strategic goals.
Action 10 - Integrated framework for management and leadership provision	✓		✓			Directly – supports vision and challenges.
Action 11 - Skills utilisation		✓				Directly – supports aim (productivity).
Action 12 - Recognise more training by companies		✓	✓	✓		Directly – supports aim, challenges and strategic goals 1-3.
Action 13 - Attracting skilled people to NI	✓		✓	✓		Directly – supports aim, challenges and strategic goals 1-3 (attracting highly qualified people to work in NI).

	Relevant to Vision	Relevant to Aim	Relevant to Addressing Challenges	Relevant to Strategic Goals 1-3 (upskilling)	Relevant to Strategic Goal 4 (STEM)	Notes
Action 14 - Assist individuals to address skills barriers to work and enable them to stay in work and progress up the skills ladders		✓	✓	✓		Directly – supports aim, challenges and strategic goals 1-3.
Action 15 - Employability skills		✓				Directly – supports aim (increase levels of social inclusion by enhancing employability).
Action 16 - Marketing						Indirectly – communicating offerings by Department to increase awareness.
Action 17 - Skills collaboration			✓		✓	Directly – supports challenge (subject imbalance) and strategic goal 4.
Action 18 - Benchmarking Skills outcomes						Indirectly - supports aim (securing NI's future in a global marketplace).
Action 19 - Undertaking a review of Adult Training		✓	✓	✓	✓	Directly – supports aim (raise skills levels), challenges (subject imbalances (up-skill, higher-level skills) and strategic goals 1-4.
Action 20 - Introducing a Higher Level Apprenticeship Pilot	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Directly – supports all (higher level skills, upskilling, subject imbalances).
Action 21 - Embedding employer engagement in provision for those going back to work		✓				Directly – supports aim (increase levels of social inclusion by enhancing employability).
Action 22 - Alternative Dispute Resolution			✓		✓	Directly – addressing STEM and subject imbalances.

4.3 Summary

Whilst there were clear linkages between the actions and how these would achieve the aim, vision, challenges and strategic goals in the majority of instances, it was unclear how the stated actions would lead to the scale of upskilling that would be required to achieve the ambitious strategic goals that were set. For example, there is an estimated 140,000 more people in employment in the second quarter of 2019, compared with the start of 2010. The Assured Skills programme, Skills Solutions and Higher Level Apprenticeships are the biggest offerings outside of the traditional Further Education and HEIs, but these were only pilot programmes at the time and unlikely to achieve the scale needed to make the difference that has been made. However, the Strategy recognised this, stating:

"The outputs from the Department's existing provision (further education, higher education, Training for Success, apprenticeships and essential skills) will continue to make the largest contribution to the attainment of the four strategic goals..."

In all likelihood, a combination of existing provision, other programmes (such as the European Social Fund), businesses and individuals themselves engaging in education and training and the natural progression of time (new entrants to employment being higher skilled than those leaving employment) that lead to the goals being met or progressed. However, this should not take away what has been achieved; especially given the fiscal climate in which the NI government operated over the decade.

5. Analytical Review of Strategic Goals

5.1 Introduction

This section provides an analytical approach to measuring progress against the strategic goals set in the Skills Strategy. It assesses the level of upskilling that would be required to meet any goals not met, or not likely to be met by strategy end. It also provides comparisons with performance in the UK as a whole to illustrate the wider context.

The strategic goals were based on an aspirational scenario set out in research by Oxford Economics, in association with FGS Consulting³. Within the Skills Strategy it was noted:

“...these aspirational goals are only realistically achievable if the economy recovers as predicted by the Oxford Economics model, appropriate levels of financial resources are made available, stakeholders contribute fully and that achievements in the school sector are realised.”

5.2 Progress towards the Strategic Goals

The Skills Strategy set four strategic goals. A baseline of 2008 was set, with a target date of 2020. Whilst full year 2020 data will not be made available until late 2021, it is possible to track the progress to date using quarterly data. Progress up to the second quarter of 2019 along with a UK comparison is recorded in table 5.1.

Table 5.1: Progress against strategic goals to Q2 2019

	Baseline 2008	Target 2020	NI Actual	UK Baseline ⁴	UK Actual
Strategic Goal 1 Level 2+	71.2%	84%	80.7%	71.2%	80.8%
Strategic Goal 2 Level 3+	55.5 ⁵ %	68%	66.8%	55.2%	66.3%
Strategic Goal 3 Level 4+	33.0 ⁶ %	44%	44.8%	33.8%	45.3%
Strategic Goal 4 Narrow STEM	18%	22.5%	23.2%	-	-

Source: Labour Force Survey (Q2 2019); and Higher Education Qualifications (2017/18 results), NISRA

Strategic Goal 1: Increase the proportion of those people in employment with Level 2 skills and above to 84-90% by 2020, from a baseline of 71.2% in 2008.

As can be seen in table 5.1, the first strategic goal is not likely to be met by 2020. However, significant progress towards achieving this goal has been made over the period as illustrated in Figure 5.1.

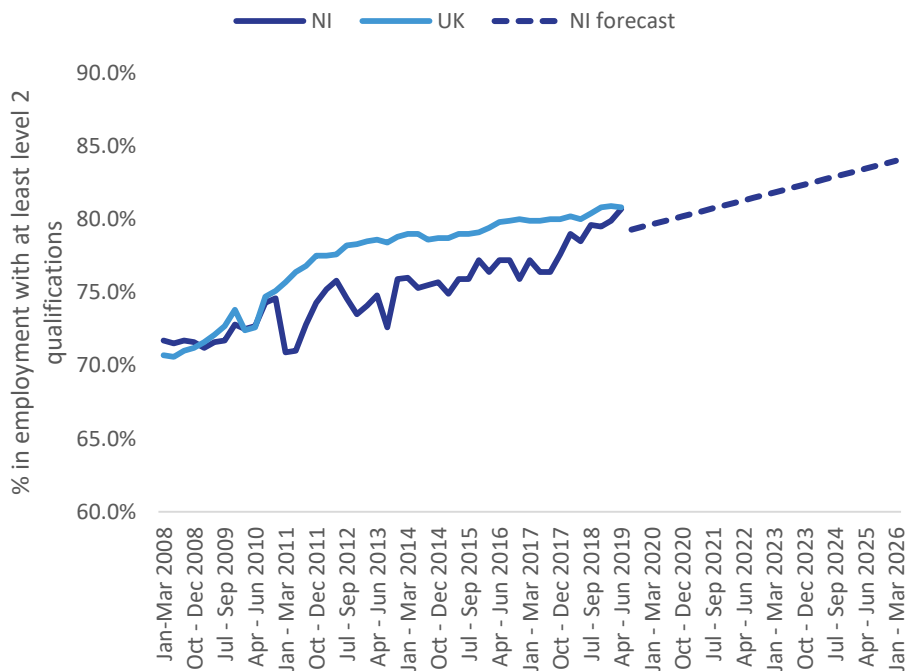
³ [Forecasting Future Skills Needs in Northern Ireland.](#)

⁴ Full 2008 data unknown for UK so Q1 2008 data used.

⁵ Official figures from Northern Ireland’s Statistics and Research Agency show the baseline has been revised from 55.6% to 55.5%.

⁶ Official figures from Northern Ireland’s Statistics and Research Agency show the baseline has been revised from 33.2% to 33.0%.

Figure 5.1: Progress against Strategic Goal 1



Source: Labour Force Survey, NISRA, Q2 2019 results

Whilst employment has increased by an estimated 76,000 since 2008, there are now around 130,000 more people in employment with at least Level 2 qualifications compared with the start of 2008. This suggests that over the period workers have upskilled and/or new workers entering employment have been more highly qualified, compared with those leaving employment.

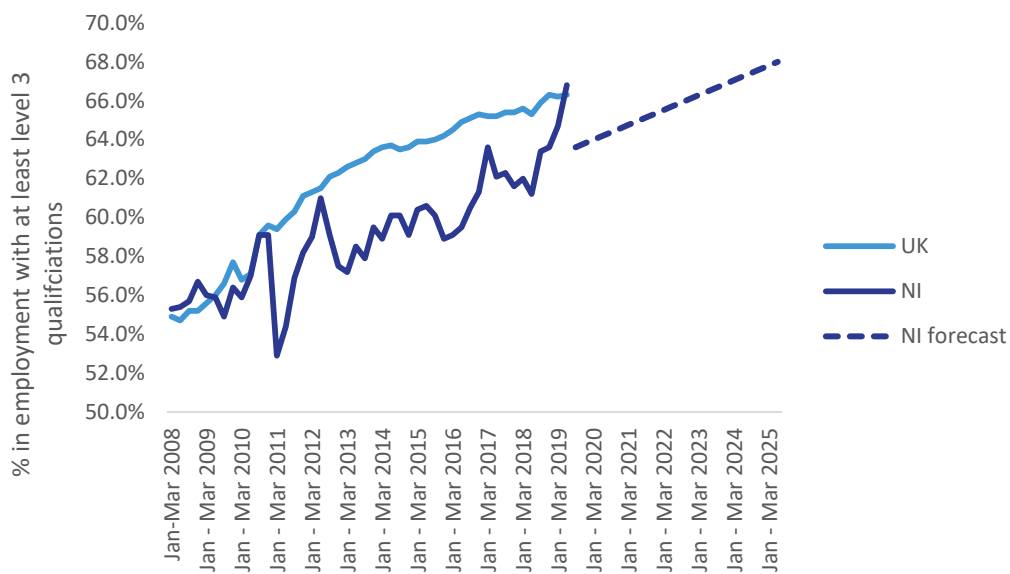
However, to achieve this strategic goal, a further 28,000 workers would need to upskill to at least Level 2 (if the number of people in employment remained the same). This would require 17% of all those in employment with qualifications below Level 2 to upskill, or for new workers to be more highly qualified than those leaving employment. NI’s performance is broadly in line with the UK’s on this strategic goal.

If the same trend continued as witnessed over the whole period, NI would not meet this strategic goal until the start of 2026.

Strategic Goal 2: Increase the proportion of those people in employment with Level 3 skills and above to 68-76% by 2020, from a baseline of 55.5% in 2008.

As can be seen in table 5.1, strategic goal 2 has not yet been met, but could be attained by 2020 if the trend in previous years is maintained. Progress since 2008 is shown in figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2: Progress against Strategic Goal 2



Source: Labour Force Survey, NISRA, Q2 2019 results

Whilst substantial progress has been made against strategic goal 2, much of this has been achieved in the past four years. Compared to the 2008 baseline, there are now an estimated 140,000 more people in employment with at least Level 3 qualifications, but almost 100,000 of that has been achieved since the end of 2015. As before, this implies evidence of either substantial upskilling, or those new entries to employment being more qualified than those leaving employment or most likely a mix of both.

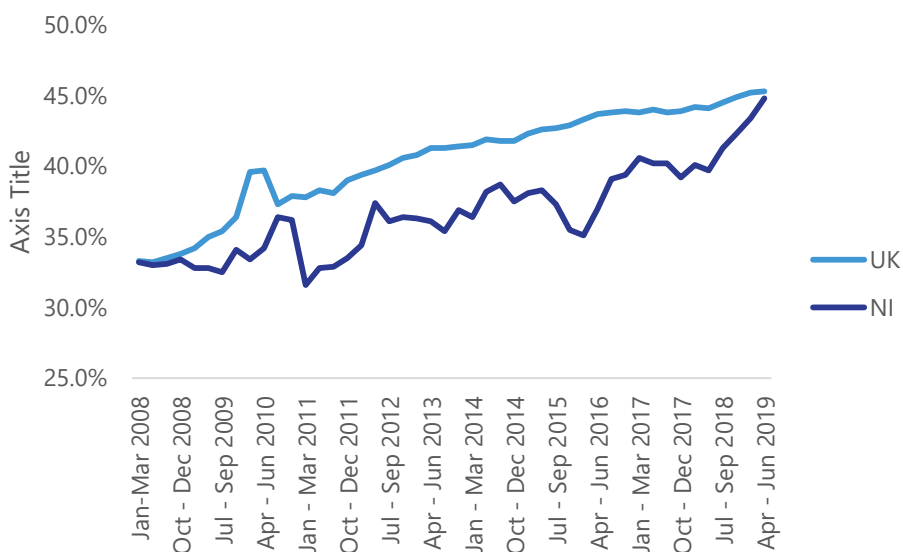
To achieve the 68% target, a further 10,000 people currently in employment would need to upskill to at least Level 3 qualifications (if the number of people in employment remained the same). This would require 3.6% of those currently in employment with qualifications lower than Level 3 to upskill, or those new to employment having higher qualifications than those leaving. On this goal, NI marginally outperforms the UK.

If the trend observed since the start of 2008 continued, this goal would not be met until mid-2025. However, on closer inspection, you can see that growth has been faster in recent years and if this continued, the target would be met sooner.

Strategic Goal 3: Increase the proportion of those people in employment with Level 4-8 skills and above to 44-52% by 2020, from a baseline of 33.0% in 2008.

As shown in table 5.1, strategic goal 3 has been met. Progress is shown in figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3: Progress against Strategic Goal 3



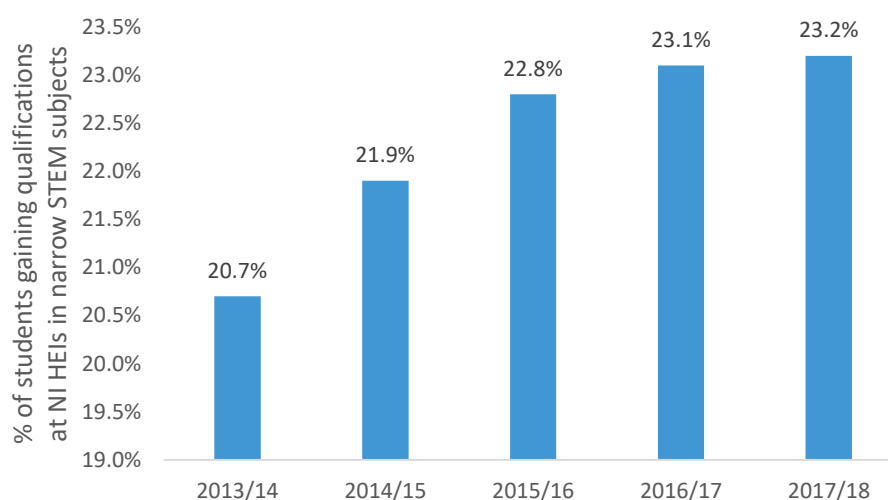
Source: Labour Force Survey, NISRA, Q2 2019 results

The number of people in employment with at least Level 4 qualifications has increased by almost half since 2008, with 125,000 more people in employment possessing at least a Level 4 qualification in Q2 2019, compared with the beginning of 2008. Again, much of this progress has occurred since the end of 2015. Despite its progress, NI remains behind the UK overall, which has 45.3% of people in employment with at least Level 4 qualifications.

Strategic Goal 4: To increase the proportion of those qualifying from NI HEIs with graduate and post graduate level courses in STEM subjects (with an emphasis on physical and biological sciences, mathematical and computer science, engineering and technology) by 25 - 30% in 2020 from a baseline of 18% in 2008.

In 2017/18, 23.2% of students at NI HEIs gained a qualification in a narrow STEM subject. Assuming this level remains the same or increases, NI will achieve this goal. Recent progress is shown in figure 5.4.

Figure 5.4: Proportion of students qualifying from NI HEIs with Narrow STEM subjects



Source: NI Higher Education Qualifications, NISRA

5.3 Other considerations

Bespoke data requested from NISRA reveals that on average, younger people in work are more qualified compared with those that are older. This is illustrated in the table below.

Table 5.2: Qualifications of those in employment by age, Q3 2019

	Level 5+	Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1	No qualifications	Total
Age 16-34	12%	36%	24%	15%	8%	5%	304,000
Age 35-49	14%	35%	20%	14%	10%	6%	297,000
Age 50+	10%	27%	18%	13%	13%	18%	260,000

Source: Labour Force Survey, NISRA, Q3 2019

As can be seen in table 5.2 above, 18% of those aged 50 and over in work hold no qualifications compared with 5% for those aged 16 to 34 and 6% for those aged 35 to 49. The qualifications of those in employment will undoubtedly improve as those older workers move into retirement and younger workers replace them.

It will be easy to observe “upskilling” of those in employment, whilst those closer to retirement possess lower qualifications. However, as time goes on and a steady state emerges e.g. 70% or so of school leavers obtaining five GCSEs, including English and Maths and 50% of young people participating in university education, it will become more difficult to observe. Government will need to consider how it targets those underachievers or those who leave education early in the future. It could be that Government tries to shift the qualifications achieved at further education colleges to higher level activity, although it should ensure there are pathways to those higher levels.

5.4 Summary

This section considered progress made towards the set strategic goals over the lifetime of the Strategy. As at Q2 2019, two strategic goals have been met, one will potentially be met and one is unlikely to be met. It is clear that a significant proportion of the workforce has upskilled, or that new workers are more highly qualified than those leaving employment or a mix of both. To meet its first strategic goal to have at least 84% of people in employment with at least level 2 qualifications, NI would need to upskill 28,000 of the existing people in employment.

Overall, the level of upskilling represents substantial progress. Not only were these goals based on an aspirational scenario, but the decade was one that faced public sector funding constraints which had a negative impact on what training could be offered to those in work. This included the ceasing of leadership and management training, the office closure of the NI Adviser on Employment and Skills (NIAES), ending of all age apprenticeships and limited capacity of the FE sector to deliver Skills Focus. The strategy itself had stated that the goals would only be achieved if appropriate levels of financial resources were made available.

Separately, the first three strategic goals do not tell us whether the upskilling that has taken place was economically relevant. In addition, the fourth strategic goal does not tell us the number of people actually qualifying in STEM subjects, just the proportion. It could be that the number of other subjects has fallen.

Whilst substantial progress has been made and the gap between NI and the UK has closed, 8.7% of those in employment still have no qualifications compared with 5.0% for the UK as a whole (source: NISRA).

6. Qualitative Assessment

6.1 Introduction

This section provides the views of those consulted with responses grouped together across the following headings:

- Alignment with government priorities;
- Stakeholder engagement;
- Views on Vision, Challenges, Actions and Strategic Goals;
- Governance Arrangements; and
- Successes and Failures.

In total, 21 key personnel involved in the design and/or implementation of the Skills Strategy were consulted. Eighteen were completed face-to-face, two were completed through phone calls and one person responded through email correspondence.

Ten of those consulted were internal personnel and 11 were external. Government, business and business groups, a sector skills/training council, the then Minister and his special advisor were all represented. A full list of those consulted is included in Annex B. The questions used in the consultation process are included in Annex C.

6.2 Alignment with Government Priorities

The overall general consensus of stakeholders was that the Strategy was well aligned to government priorities at the time of its launch and that its implementation was ambitious, aligning with the Economic Strategy and focussing on productivity and economic inactivity. A number of other views were expressed as follows:

- The issue was not necessarily about not focussing on the right things, it was whether sufficient funding was available. There was a view that everyone knew NI should invest in skills, but that skills were perhaps often the first area to face funding cuts;
- There was not enough focus on management and leadership in the implementation (despite it being a core focus of the Strategy);
- It was largely viewed as a Departmental Strategy and there was not wider buy-in from other government departments; and
- Government expectations were sometimes in contradiction to the needs of businesses e.g. a company that requires mostly level 6 and above workers is unlikely to be able to take on someone who is economically inactive.

The general consensus was that the next skills strategy should be developed on an outcomes-based approach and should fully align with the draft PfG. A number of consultees, however, raised the need for consideration on how long it would take to measure an outcome and the need to measure actions and indicators as these also matter. There was also a view that just measuring the outcome means you could be missing out on measuring the steps that it took to get there. There was a query on the definition of a 'better job' i.e. there is a need to ensure what it means and that it can be measured. There were some concerns that NI cannot continue being successful at attracting inward investors, without ensuring that there is sufficient supply to meet potential demand.

It was raised that there should be a clear hierarchy of strategy/policy. The PfG should be at the top, with the economic/industrial and social strategy sitting underneath. The skills strategy should sit under these and there should be a web of interactions. 'Brick walls' should be dismantled and there should be more joined up thinking between the 14-19 project; apprenticeships; vocational education and so on. It was noted that there should be a partnership approach in the new strategy's implementation.

6.3 Stakeholder Engagement

Consultees were asked whether they felt the Strategy had appropriate buy in from across government, business, academia and individuals. Views on each of these are grouped together below.

Government: Most stakeholders believed government largely regarded the Skills Strategy as belonging solely to DEL. The consensus was that there was engagement but it was not joined up and sometimes challenging. There needed to be better collaboration, especially with the 14-19 project, as the systemic problems here have not been addressed. It was stated numerous times that sometimes government did not make difficult decisions that needed to be made. There was a view that DEL did not engage well with Invest NI before 2007 but it has improved since then. A 'protocol' developed between DEL and InvestNI in 2007 was adhered to. The importance of the then Minister's intervention was recognised, as the best outcomes were achieved when he led the sectoral groups.

During the implementation it was stated that the Department often quoted the Skills Strategy, but it was not quoted back i.e. it was not something others were bought into.

There was also a view that when the Strategy was signed off by the Executive, it was largely a rubber stamp exercise and it took no collective ownership. In addition, the Economic sub-group viewed the Strategy as a paper-driven exercise and did not delve into the detail of the Strategy.

Business: Views were that there was good engagement, but sometimes the same businesses were represented. The issue that small businesses were not sufficiently consulted was raised. Business consultees stated that they understand the importance of skills and that skills are the 'lifblood of what they do'. Whilst there were roadshows to secure the buy-in of employers, they sometimes found the system difficult to navigate the processes. A view shared was that business would be more interested in informal qualifications and there might be a fear factor when investing in skills.

It was mentioned that sometimes businesses are brought in to consult with, but never hear back on the outcomes from the consultation process; business need to be taken on the journey with regular updates on outcomes. A consultee mentioned that a Skills Commissioner role was a good idea and it should be reintroduced (in a different form, as the UK Commissioner for Employment and Skills' role ceased; it would channel the focus on skills in the right areas. It was also mentioned that co-production between government and business would be beneficial.

Academia: There was a view that academia will always understand the need for skills and will be engaged in skills development. The FE colleges would have been involved in different groups set up at the time. It was noted that academia will respond best to funding flows.

Individuals: The consensus was that individuals were not targeted, but the new strategy will need to do so through creating a culture of lifelong learning. There needs to be engagement with citizens through various communication means such as articles, press releases, specialist issues, ministerial addresses and there needed to be comprehensive communication that citizens understand that can be used at events such as the annual Skills Conference.

6.4 Views on Vision, Challenges, Themes and Actions

Vision

Most viewed the vision as still acceptable today. However a number of consultees thought it needed to be realistic and reflect the constrained financial climate that government is likely to operate in over the next decade, the need for NI's relatively lower productivity to be addressed and what this meant for skills. It was mentioned that funding needed to be aligned with the vision.

Several consultees mentioned the need to reword the vision to include inclusive growth and an economy that grows for everyone. A few consultees also mentioned the need for the vision to be shortened and for it to include a strapline. It was also mentioned that there needed to be a balance between qualifications and skills and the business standard of five GCSEs does not tell an employer anything about the individual.

Challenges

Two consultees expressed a view that despite large scale upskilling taking place over the past decade, the challenges remain the same and have probably increased.

Other general points made, but not specifically in relation to any of the five challenges, included: "need to talk about inclusion"; "A decade ago, attracting any job to NI was seen as a positive. Now we need to ensure we are attracting the right types of jobs"; "funnelling people into HE and FE and expecting them to come out with employable skills isn't working"; "we could withdraw support for things that aren't as valuable and there should be a focus on what will give maximum value for money in terms of courses"; "we need to potentially change the dynamics as when we look at the evidence we can see that in the FE colleges performance in the least deprived is not being delivered"; "the challenges of Lifelong Learning should also be included"; and "The feeling is that there needs to be an Independent broker, which will give the company what is best for them (individual needs to be at the centre to ensure they have a knowledge of the full suite of programmes on offer). An example cited is 'Skills Scotland' which is an independent broker and has no vested interest".

Specific views under each of the challenges are listed below:

The need for higher-level skills:

- The need for higher skills still exists and the Skills Barometer is a key tool for informing us on this.
- We also need to have the correct jobs for the higher level skills.

The need to up-skill

- (Expressed multiple times) - Level 3/4 gap is important as is a move to technical qualifications. There is a strong focus on HE, when the real need is on vocational education and training and there is a need for recalibrating.
- Upskilling will be more important in years to come due to automation and a tighter labour market, with emphasis put on improving leadership and management skills.
- The labour market is different now with rise of the gig economy. Addressing upskilling needs of these workers and the self-employed will be challenging.
- The school curriculum should be broadened – there should be an enriched curriculum, for example, to include ICT in every subject.

- The way that upskilling is carried out should be looked at. Not just mainstream skills but skills like communication, languages especially for the upcoming demand for the Tourism sector.
- Focus on employability skills is needed rather than qualifications
- Need to create a culture of lifelong learning.
- Need to challenge businesses on how they utilise skills.
- New strategy needs to be able to change quicker to keep pace with global challenges.

The need to address subject imbalances

- (Expressed multiple times) - Subject imbalance at level 6 and above is a critical challenge, especially with the skills shortage involving STEM subjects.
- The Skills Barometer must be at the core regarding subject imbalances, with the Employer Skills Survey also very valuable.
- (Expressed multiple times) - Children make choices on what they are good at, not what they could potentially get a job in.
- Need to stop putting people in courses that have no job at the end.

The need to increase management and leadership skills

- Government is standing back – DEL had programmes focussed on this but they have stopped. It was mentioned that both Invest NI and CITB continue to offer management and leadership programmes.
- Upskilling will be more important in years to come due to automation and a tighter labour market with emphasis put on improving leadership and management skills.
- McKinsey work (referring to Management Matters in NI and ROI report) important in this regard. There are good top managers but a long tail of poor managers that needs to be addressed.

The need to attract skilled labour

- In order to attract skilled labour the strategy must be more focussed on attracting those who are economically inactive (and who want to work) and also attracting those outside NI to work here/past NI residents who left to work outside of NI and NI students to stay in NI instead of moving to GB.
- There is a need to attract all labour and not just skilled labour. This challenge needs re-thought due to the current political situation.
- One consultee suggested Invest NI should set up an “Easy to Land”, scheme making NI a choice for high level experienced mobile labour and said we should be attracting 200 mid-career experienced programmers here.
- (Expressed multiple times) - Attracting skilled labour will be difficult in light of Brexit.
- It is not just for the skills strategy to be responsible for attracting people to NI – there is a wider government piece.

Overall, the most mentioned points were around addressing STEM gaps, the need to attract labour from abroad and the importance of employability skills.

Themes

Common views that were expressed under each of the themes are below.

Understanding the demand for Skills

Most viewed this as achieved. The main areas mentioned by consultees are included below.

1. The Skills Barometer was mentioned mostly here. Most believed it to be a strong success but that it needed to continue to be developed with companies in sectors needing different types of workers. It was also queried whether government is actually using it and whether other government departments were bought in. A consultee stated that funding should be based on its results. Another view was that it should be supplemented with other sources, such as live vacancy data.
2. There needs to be better alignment between industry and the education system.
3. It was noted that this theme is essential, as without the evidence base, *"the strategy would be built on sand..."*
4. A few consultees mentioned the in-built bias that government listens and does more for big business and sometimes smaller businesses did not get their voice represented.

Improving the quality and relevance of education and training

On balance, most felt this was partially achieved. The biggest challenge noted was the relevance of curriculum to NI's economic needs and how responsive the system was. Other responses are summarised below.

1. There was misalignment between what the education system sees as success and what success is for the economy.
2. There was a view that often civil servants actively create new offerings without properly reviewing existing provision and this leads to confusion for users.
3. There should be more employer engagement and more emphasis put on the benefits of apprenticeships.
4. There are too many courses on offer.
5. Too many leave compulsory education without 5 GCSEs including English and Maths.
6. Fell down on the long term unemployed and those hardest to reach.
7. Assured Skills uptake indicates there is an issue around relevance and is an expensive corrective policy that is highly successful, but reflects a mismatch.
8. One view was that business experience was more important than grades.

Improving productivity by increasing the skills levels of the workforce

General consensus was that this was not achieved but was appropriate, as there has been no real increase in productivity.

It was mentioned several times that there needed to be a better understanding of how skills impacted on productivity and how this could actually be measured and it needed to be clear what exactly the role of the strategy is in securing productivity gains. One consultee noted that NI was *"...good at employing people, but not making things"*.

Tackling the skills barriers to employment and employability

Consultees largely felt this had not been addressed and that barriers still exist, especially for those who are inactive and the mental health issue has worsened. Other main viewpoints are expressed below:

- Employers need to be more flexible;

- Political situation has worsened issue;
- No progress on employability skills – just rebadging to transversal;
- 14-19 project important here for future; and
- DfC is seen as where people go and DfE is seen as where businesses go, which creates issues in tackling problems in this area.

Engaging stakeholders

It was mostly noted that this was done reasonably well, but there were gaps.

1. It was queried whether marketing (as action under theme stated) was actually engaging.
2. Stephen Farry's period in charge was good.
3. Larger businesses had a bigger voice than small businesses.
4. It was done better under DEL than it is now under DfE.
5. Government communicates through websites - this needs to be widened to ensure that it is through many different platforms.
6. There should be a skills ambassador to do this in the future.

Actions

Most agreed that the actions were right at the time. It was indicated that the merger of the two Departments and a focus on apprenticeship reform meant much of delivery stopped in 2015/16. It was also noted that some of the underlying strategies still have not been implemented (referring specifically to new Traineeships to replace Training for Success). Additional actions that stakeholders thought would be worth considering or expanding upon in the next strategy include:

- Elements of 'C'Mon Over' should be reintroduced.
- More investment is needed in management and leadership.
- Better alignment between education and the needs of industry.
- More work is needed on migration and what this means for skills needs in NI.
- Barriers for those economically inactive need removed (mental health mentioned).
- Incentivise students to stay here and work in NI.
- Need to review maximum student numbers in HEIs.
- Need to challenge funding to higher education – alignment should be to economically relevant subjects.
- Education system is not providing people with the right skills e.g. positive attitude, critical thinking, problem solving and project based learning.
- Need to be explicit on the professional and technical learning as an equally valid pathway.
- There should be more investment from the private sector into skills programmes.
- Lack of budget is an issue.
- Placements and scholarships are important.
- New strategy is not just for DfE and needs to take account of City Deals, Industrial Strategy in NI and the UK.
- Should be a steering group, with all the key players involved and working on how each part contributes to the strategy.

6.5 Governance Arrangements

Governance

Stakeholders generally felt that the Strategy did have good governance structures in place, with some mentioning the programme board that, the quarterly monitoring of the Strategy's targets, the use of PRINCE2 techniques in programme management and mention of other sectoral groups then chaired by a Minister.

For the next strategy, comments were made as follows:

- The Department should focus on bringing the key people together on a regular basis and ensure it is kept small.
- Needs a more collaborative approach across government.
- There is a need to look below the headline figures e.g. STEM needs to look at the gender imbalance.

Implementation

The general feeling amongst stakeholders consulted was that the Skills Strategy was implemented well at the beginning but monitoring arrangements did deteriorate once the Strategy was moved to the Department for the Economy. It was also mentioned that it did not have a strategic vision, with HE, FE and apprenticeships all having separate strategies. External stakeholders felt they were engaged well during the development, but did not feel like they were brought on the journey through its implementation.

6.6 Successes and Failures

Lasting Impact

The majority of stakeholders felt that there was definitely a lasting impact of the Strategy, with the introduction of Higher Level Apprenticeships, Assured Skills and the Skills Barometer the notable successes. It was felt the profile of skills as a result of the Strategy has been raised internally and externally, with skills seen as one of the most important issues for businesses (and still is). Others mentioned the fact that there has been an uplift in skills levels over the decade. There was also a view that there is more awareness around STEM now.

Externally, one consultee stated that it was a '*game changer*'. However, there was reference that more needs done in certain areas. It was suggested FDI firms should be made to invest in the supply; there needed to be a focus on productivity; and there should be properly directed initiatives. It was mentioned that having access to a digital account such as in England, as a result of paying into the apprenticeship levy, should be prioritised.

Stand out successes

A number of familiar areas were noted as successes. These included:

1. Working groups and Minister involvement (in e.g. the ICT working group);
2. Skills Barometer;
3. Focus on STEM;
4. Higher Level Apprenticeships;
5. Assured Skills;
6. Put skills on the agenda – skills as a selling point for FDI; and
7. Further Education now has a higher standing.

Areas for Improvement

There were a number of areas that stakeholders felt could be improved. These included:

1. Interventions did not align with strategic goals – need to be more realistic in the future;
2. Radical measures to retain students should be introduced;
3. Careers advice should be re-evaluated;
4. Productivity (more clearly defining what the role of the Skills Strategy is for improving productivity) and the promotion of leadership and management skills;
5. There is still a lot of room for improvement in re-engaging the economically inactive;
6. More work must be done to tackle the subject imbalance, perhaps by increased funding;
7. Must find way to create a joined-up government piece;
8. Opportunity is massive now that DfE has been created;
9. Need to also consider workforce planning;
10. Still misconception around Further Education reputation;
11. Inform young people of the courses that offer best economic opportunities;
12. Strategy was too broad and tried to do too much;
13. Needs to interface with social strategy;
14. Universities could do more to reduce imbalances;
15. Curriculum needs to better fit with needs of the economy (was referring to IT courses);
16. Interaction between long term investments should focus on key economic sectors; and
17. Message to parents that apprenticeships and higher level apprenticeships are ok. Culture needs to change.

6.7 Other views

Some views did not fit within the categories above. Views that were continually brought up by those consulted included:

1. Sectoral working groups chaired by a Minister (or Permanent Secretary in the absence of a Minister) should be reintroduced;
2. There was noted frustration that England have introduced an apprenticeship levy that NI companies are now paying, but have no viability to spend through a digital account like their English counterparts;
3. The implementation is more important than the strategy itself;
4. A need for the next strategy to be a living document and have the ability to respond to the wider needs of society and the economy on an ongoing basis;
5. The next strategy needs to have a joined up approach across government departments;
6. The next strategy needs to be properly financed. Whilst people will agree that skills and training are important, it is often one of the first areas to face cuts;
7. The need for people to know the different progression routes;
8. The need to address critical shortages faced by local IT sectors, which is having an impact on expansion plans for NI;
9. Assured Skills should have an exit strategy – it is needed because of the mismatch, but government should be working to fix the underlying issue;
10. Some of those externally consulted felt that Invest NI had too much power; and
11. Questioned whether you could move those who do not achieve the 2.1 standard from university to a 2.1 with additional classes/training so they were not forgotten.

6.8 Summary

A wealth of information was gathered through the consultation exercise with a summary across each of the headings provided below:

- **Alignment with government priorities** – the general consensus was that the Skills Strategy was well aligned to government priorities at the time of its launch and that its implementation was ambitious, aligning with the Economic Strategy and focussing on productivity and economic inactivity.
- **Stakeholder Engagement** – Across government, it was seen largely as a DEL strategy. Businesses were engaged but sometimes the same businesses were engaged. It was viewed that academia will always be engaged. Individuals were not targeted.
- **Vision, Challenges, Themes and Actions** – The vision was seen as still applicable going into the future, but needed to be realistic and needed to include inclusive growth. In general, the challenges still existed and there needed to be a move to appropriate skills (e.g. vocational routes) and reinvigoration of leadership and management programmes. In addition, STEM imbalances need addressed and the question of how to activate the economically inactive was raised. In terms of actions, it was noted that they were right for their time but there should have been additional action plans introduced during the Strategy (around 2015, most activity on the Skills Strategy appeared to cease).
- **Governance Arrangements** - Stakeholders generally felt that the Strategy did have good governance structures in place, with some mentioning the programme board, the quarterly monitoring of the Strategy's targets, the use of PRINCE2 techniques in programme management and mention of other sectoral groups then chaired by a Minister.
- **Successes and Failures** - The majority of stakeholders felt that there was definitely a lasting impact, with the introduction of Higher Level Apprenticeships, Assured Skills and the Skills Barometer the notable successes. Others mentioned the fact that there has been an uplift in skills levels over the decade. There was also a view that there is more awareness around STEM now. In terms of where consultees felt there could be improvement going forward, areas noted included: how skills impact upon productivity and how to measure this; how to re-engage the economically inactive; reduce STEM imbalances; improve perception of further education; and investment should focus on key economic sectors.

7. Assessment of Approach & Monitoring

7.1 Introduction

This section assesses the approach, the programme management and monitoring of the Skills Strategy and its implementation across a number of criteria.

7.2 Assessment of Approach

There are a number of different aspects to the approach used in the strategy that are considered here. These are as follows:

- Did it have a sound evidence base?
- Did it have appropriate strategic links to wider government agenda?
- Did the Strategy have appropriate government buy in?
- Were the targets appropriate?
- Were stakeholders engaged appropriately?
- Should actions be enclosed in the Strategy?

ASD has made an assessment of each of these questions in turn.

Did it have a sound evidence base?

The Strategy did have a sound evidence base. *'A Practical Guide to Policy Making in Northern Ireland'* states that evidence should be from a wide range of sources. The Skills Strategy primarily used research by Oxford Economics as its evidence base, but also referred to research by McKinsey & Company and by Leitch.

Did it have appropriate strategic links to wider government agenda?

Section 3 demonstrated that many of the public service agreement objectives from the 2008-11 PfG closely aligned with the strategy's themes, strategic goals and aim. However, over the ten year period, these linkages have broken as the Skills Strategy has stood still, whilst the PfG has evolved twice since (2011-15 and 2016-21), reducing relevance today. However, the strategic goals do still remain a measure of the indicator 'improve the skills profile of the population' within the 2016-21 draft PfG.

Did the Strategy have appropriate government buy in?

The first noteworthy point to make is that the Strategy was published as a departmental strategy by DEL. Given the significant role other government departments have to play in the development of skills and in particular the then Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Department of Social Development, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and others, an Executive strategy approach could have secured better buy in and shared responsibility more widely.

Were the targets appropriate?

The strategic goals were based on sound evidence from Oxford Economics, as part of a research project jointly undertaken by the then DEL, DETI and Department of Finance and Personnel. Given that two of the goals are achieved, one might be achieved by 2020 and one is unlikely to be met, it shows that they were realistic, even over a ten year period.

However, the first three strategic goals only measured progress on qualification levels of those employed. The latest data from NISRA reveals that in Q4 2019, it was estimated that 28% of those economically inactive aged 16 to 64 have no qualifications. It is important that those outside of employment are included within any future skills strategy.

The levels of qualifications also does not tell us how those skills are being used, if at all, and if they are contributing to productivity growth.

Were stakeholders engaged appropriately?

There was a clear emphasis on stakeholder engagement and their role. The word "stakeholder" was mentioned 20 times throughout the document, such was its significance. It was one of its five themes. Despite this emphasis at the start of the Strategy, most Sector Skills Councils have now become defunct, alongside the closure of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills and there are no structures existing for employers to communicate critical skills shortages. It was also mentioned during the consultation phase that engagement is not marketing and the action on marketing under engagement is incorrect, as it should be a two-way process, not just government talking. It was also mentioned that thought should be given as to whether the next strategy should be carried out by government; rather, it should be co-produced between government and business.

Should actions be enclosed in the strategy?

Evidence from the consultation phase would suggest the implementation of the strategy is more important than the strategy itself. It does not matter whether the actions/projects are included within the strategy itself or separately published, but it should be done at the same time, or soon after the strategy launch.

7.3 Programme Management

This subsection examines whether the actions (projects) were monitored. Evidence from searching the NI Civil Service file system shows that there was a plan on how the implementation of the Strategy would be managed. It used the principles of Managing Successful Programmes and was through a Board that would meet four times a year. The Board consisted of:

1. Deputy Secretary (Senior Responsible Officer)
2. Director – Skills and Industry (Programme Director)
3. Assistant Director – Skills and Industry (Programme Manager)
4. Director – Further Education
5. Director – Employment Services
6. Head of Analytical Services

Each project sat under the Board. There was a Board for some of the projects, but on a project-to-project basis, with correspondence found by ASD stating that a one-size-fits-all approach would be too constraining.

Each of the projects used best practice techniques (PRINCE2) and had a project initiation document, highlight reports, and, when completed, closure forms were completed. These were found for most projects. There were monthly project manager meetings and bi-laterals between programme managers and project leads. However, post project evaluations were not found on the NICS filing system.

7.4 Assessment of Monitoring and Longevity

Monitoring

Whilst no paper evidence has been found, ASD has been made aware that assessments of progress were requested by the then Minister and were periodically carried out. The strategic goals were also indirectly measured through the draft PfG, including the strategic goals, as a way of measuring its indicator 'improve the skills profile of the population'.

Whilst the momentum to monitor strategy performance appears to have waned over time, it appears that there were no formal monitoring arrangements put in place. A number of NI government strategies reveal different means to monitor performance as follows:

1. NI Programme for Government – evidenced by outcome delivery plan⁷;
2. Economic Strategy (2012) – evidenced by Annual monitoring reports⁸; and
3. Higher Education Strategies – evidenced by e-zines.

Longevity

It was clear that the Strategy had an intent to begin with, but its initial implementation plan was the only one ever to be produced and this had an end date of 2014. This is despite the Skills Strategy being a ten year strategy. This is not to say nothing was done after 2014, but new projects will have happened under other guises. Some of the actions will have continued and become part of normal business, such as the Higher Level Apprenticeships and Assured Skills programmes.

A case study is presented in Annex D on how the higher education strategies for NI have remained relevant over the strategy period, studying its approach and monitoring since 2012. This was chosen as a case study because it has seemingly remained active since its launch, with an e-zine reporting on its performance last published in May 2019.

7.5 Summary

In terms of its approach, the Skills Strategy ticked a lot of boxes. It had an evidence-based approach, it said what it would do to meet its vision (through actions) and at the time linked well into the wider government agenda. However, it was largely perceived from outside as a Departmental document and did not appear to have the buy-in from other government departments that should be desired. There was clear intent to have a strategy that would engage with business; again however, this was not always perceived to have been done well.

The two biggest issues were that firstly, there was no clear visibility on how the Strategy was performing – perhaps internally this was done, but it was not communicated to a wider external audience. A suggestion for any future strategy would be to do this through an annual monitoring report published on the Executive website. Secondly, the implementation plan ended in 2014, and no second implementation followed.

⁷ <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/outcomes-delivery-plan-201819>

⁸ <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/topics/work-executive/economic-strategy>

8. Summary and Recommendations

8.1 Introduction

Based on the findings of the previous sections, this section provides responses to the evaluation questions set out in the terms of reference. It will then provide a list of recommendations that should be considered when designing and implementing the next skills strategy for NI. It will conclude with a summary of the key findings.

8.2 Evaluation Questions

The evaluation questions set out in the terms of reference were as follows:

- *Was the strategy a valid approach?*
- *To what extent were the strategic goals achieved?*
- *What external/internal factors impinged on the delivery of the actions?*
- *What is the appropriate strategic direction for the future?*
- *Is there a need for a future delivery plan and milestones?*
- *What lessons can be learned from what was and was not achieved?*
- *Were there any actions that were not included / not achieved but worth considering for inclusion in the next skills strategy?*

Each of these questions will be answered in turn.

Was the strategy a valid approach?

Overall, the strategy did what would be expected. It engaged with stakeholders in its development, it aligned with governmental priorities and linked well with research when setting out its vision, challenges, strategic goals, etc. It set out actions and built on this with an implementation plan that included timeframes.

There were a number of areas that could have been improved:

1. Longevity – after the initial phase of implementation (that ran until 2014 end), there was no new implementation plan. This may be a result of other factors, such as underlying strategies taking centre stage, or the focus on skills being lost with the creation of DfE.
2. Role as an overarching Strategy – the underlying skills strategies (as set out in section 2) barely referred to the overarching Skills Strategy. There needs to be a clear structure of how the strategies all interact with each other in the future.
3. No monitoring reports were published publically – there was no clear visibility of what was being delivered in the Strategy and how it was progressing towards its targets. A future strategy should provide greater visibility to the public and its users.

To what extent were the strategic goals achieved?

The Strategy does not end until 2020 with full 2020 results for the strategic goals not available until the end of 2021. However, using quarterly data can provide an indication if these are on track. Progress on each is noted below:

- Strategic goal 1: This is unlikely to be achieved. Despite an estimated 130,000 more people in employment now holding at least a level 2 qualification compared with 2008 (baseline), a further 28,000 would be needed to upskill to reach the target (if the number of people in employment remained the same). Whilst NI performs similarly to the UK on this indicator, NI has proportionally more with no qualifications.
- Strategic goal 2: Likely to be achieved, if current trend of upskilling continues. To achieve the 68% target, a further 10,000 people in employment would need to upskill to at least level 3 qualifications (if the number of people in employment remained the same).
- Strategic goal 3: Achieved. The number of people in employment with at least level 4 qualifications has increased by almost half since 2008, with 125,000 more people in employment possessing at least a level 4 qualification in Q2 2019, compared with the beginning of 2008.
- Strategic goal 4: Achieved. In 2017/18, 23.2% of students at NI HEIs gained a qualification in a narrow STEM subject. Assuming this level remains the same or increases, NI will achieve this goal.

What external/internal factors impinged on the delivery of the actions?

The delivery of any actions that result from a strategy will always be dependent on the buy-in from those it serves, as well as the capacity, both staffing and financial, and ability of the organisation.

In terms of buy-in, the actions fell mostly on the then DEL and its successor DfE to implement. Whilst this meant DEL had control over its implementation, it probably led to the perception that it was a DEL strategy with a lack of ownership outside of DEL. Getting better buy-in and actions that cut across departments and giving up some of the control of the strategy could result in better outcomes for NI's economy and society.

From the records seen by ASD, each project had a designated project manager who reported to a Board. This would suggest that there was dedicated resourcing to deliver on the actions/projects set out in the Strategy. There were no issues raised on the capability of staff to deliver against the actions plan during the consultation phase. However, there were some who noted concern around the fast pace of computer programming, how NI's delivery organisations responded and if this was done quickly enough to meet employer needs.

Some of the projects will be more or less successful depending on the economic landscape within which NI operates. The 10 year period was mostly positive and led to some of the noted successes. For example, Assured Skills and Higher Level Apprenticeships will prove popular in times when skills are in higher demand. The opposite is probably true for the action 13 which was not carried forward to the implementation plan. When asked why this was, ASD was informed that the unfavourable economic conditions (as seen at the start of the decade) meant it would be unpopular to attract labour back to NI when unemployment was high. However, some work on this was taken forward through the IT360 project that worked with EURES.

Financial constraints did not impact upon the ability for the projects to be carried out in the initial years of the Strategy. However, during the consultative process it was made clear that due to financial constraints, management and leadership programmes were sacrificed in order to reduce costs as part of the then wider government agenda to reduce costs. It was also noted that there would have been much more money to pilot new interventions in times gone by, but this availability appears to have vanished.

What is the appropriate strategic direction for the future?

This should be based on a range of evidence, through research and the engagement process. The next strategy should also use this as a foundation. ASD is aware of this already happening with noteworthy research already commissioned including:

- OECD - Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland;
- Landfall Strategy Group (Dr David Skilling) – The Strategic Interaction of Skills and Innovation Policy in Northern Ireland: an international small economy perspective;
- Ulster University Economic Policy Centre – 2019 Skills Barometer Update;
- Employer Skills Survey; and
- Ulster University Economic Policy Centre – Automation.

This is on top of the vast amount of research that is available in the public domain.

Is there a need for a future delivery plan and milestones?

The next skills strategy should ensure there is a web of interactions between itself and other government departments. It should be trying to achieve the same things as others and ultimately, the PfG should monitor closely what it is doing and whether actions/projects will likely lead to the final outcome. It should be clear what it wants to do over the strategy period and should focus on the longevity of the strategy and set short-term, mid-term and longer term ambitions/ goals. It should ensure its progress is communicated publically to ensure visibility.

What lessons can be learned from what was and was not achieved?

The one area that could be immediately improved on is the provision of management and leadership training. The strategy cited management 29 separate times and leadership 19 times. It was within its vision and noted as a challenge. However, DfE no longer has leadership and management training at all. Whilst Invest NI does offer some, it is not on the scale that previously existed within DfE and is only to its client companies.

The need for more than one implementation plan over the lifetime of the strategy is also needed, or an implementation plan that can last over the lifetime and be a living document that is flexible to whatever changing needs there may be.

One last area is that despite the strategic goals being mostly likely to be met by the Strategy end, the challenges listed remain evidenced through results from the Skills Barometer, i.e., NI's relatively low productivity and engagement with firms that require high numbers of software development professionals citing a lack of skills available. A future strategy must learn how it could really address the issues it faces and reach the desired outcomes.

Were there any actions that were not included or not achieved but worth considering for inclusion in the next skills strategy?

The only action within the Skills Strategy that was never actioned by the Department was: 'Attracting Skilled People to NI' (was taken forward by industry). From speaking to stakeholders, this was because there was relatively high unemployment when the Skills Strategy was launched and that the priority needed to be on reducing unemployment in NI. There were mixed views on the need to do this in the future, from strong views expressed that critical shortages

particularly faced by IT companies needed to be addressed, to those that felt there needed to be a focus on re-engaging those furthest from the labour market. Those furthest from the labour market are, however unlikely to be able to fill shortages at higher skills levels (with those economically inactive generally possessing lower levels of qualifications), and so there may still be a case to attract people to NI with the appropriate skills. It should also be noted that some of those consulted felt that this would be difficult in the context of EU exit when EU workers have been leaving more recently.

8.3 Conclusion and considerations

There was undoubtedly a lasting impact of the strategy. The initiation of Assured Skills, the introduction of Higher Level Apprenticeships along with other actions has meant that the skills landscape is profoundly different now than ten years ago. There was real intent during the early years of the Strategy's design and implementation, but nothing followed the initial implementation plan (that lasted until 2014), despite it being a 10 year strategy that had an end date of 2020. However, this may be due to the formation of DfE and resulting internal government restructuring.

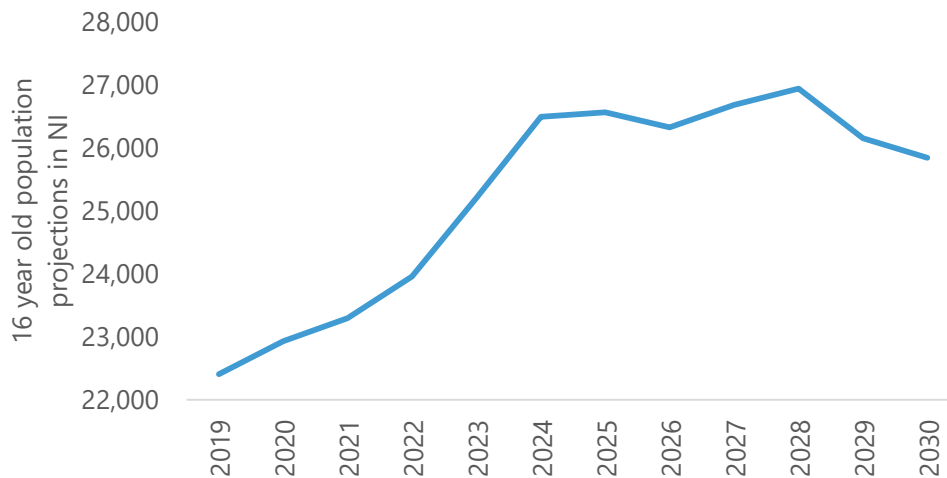
Great progress was made in realising the goals, although it could be some time before these are met in full. Analysis by age shows older workers, on average, possess lower or no qualifications compared with their younger counterparts. It will be easy for gains to be made whilst this is the case. In the future, as a steady state emerges, this may become more difficult and government may wish to focus on the proportion of qualifications that are at a higher level at further education colleges to see meaningful change.

Going forward, the next strategy will need to ensure it is a joined up government strategy that delivers for the economy and society of NI. It will need to ensure it is able to respond to likely varying economic conditions throughout the next decade and ensure it has longevity, with the current economic outlook relatively muted for the coming years with growth of around 1% predicted.

Under a policy success (i.e. high growth) scenario, the Skills Barometer estimates that over the decade to 2028, 85,000 new jobs will be created. It estimates that NI will not supply enough people with Level 3 to Level 5 qualifications and whilst we will have enough qualifications to Level 6, there will be an imbalance in the subjects studied by people with not enough doing STEM subjects. Only one in ten vacancies for education leavers will be accessible for people with qualifications below Level 2. The next Skills Strategy will need to consider how it can ensure more people progress up the skills ladder beyond Level 2 and how it can address the skills mismatch at degree level.

DfE will also need to consider how it can deliver more for adults whilst continuing to deliver for those leaving compulsory education (currently 87% of school leavers go on to study in FE, HE or one of DfE's programmes). This will need to be done in the context of a likely rise in school leavers over the next decade as illustrated by the projected rise in the 16 year old population in figure 8.1 overleaf.

Figure 8.1: NI Population projections of 16 year olds to 2030



Source: NISRA Population Projections

8.4 List of Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report, a list of recommendations are provided as follows:

Recommendations from Evaluation	
No.	Recommendation
1	The next skills strategy for NI should take a whole-of-government approach and should be published as an Executive publication, given the cross-cutting nature of skills. It should evolve alongside the Programme for Government (PfG) and adapt an outcome-based approach, whilst being flexible enough to adapt to any future iterations of the PfG during its lifetime.
2	The next strategy should feed into the draft Industrial Strategy (or any successor) and any future social strategy. To meet the needs of the economy, it should focus its efforts on those areas identified as priority sectors. For any new interventions for those furthest from the workforce, this should be for areas where there is likely to be demand for workers in the future. This will require collaboration with business and using evidence from research such as the Skills Barometer could help identify such areas.
3	More emphasis should be placed on the actions underpinning the skills strategy. An initial implementation plan should be published alongside the launch of the strategy to show its intent. A future strategy should consider a relevant time period to implement any actions. An effective way to do this would be to renew/refresh actions/action plan often (perhaps every 2-3 years) to keep actions relevant. This would allow the strategy to maintain flexibility in responding to users' needs and the needs of the economy, thus ensuring longevity.
4	The implementation plan(s) needs to be flexible to respond to varying economic needs. The skills needs of the economy will vary throughout the next ten year period, depending on economic conditions.
5	Performance should be measured at appropriate intervals and this should be done in a visible manner. ASD would suggest that this is published annually on the Executive's website. This should include measuring progress of actions and performance against any indicators, targets and outcomes.

6	<p>The next strategy should use best practice project management techniques. The Skills Strategy was project-managed well through best practice techniques i.e. PRINCE2 and Managing Successful Programmes. Projects should be evaluated and good records should be kept on the Northern Ireland Civil Service file management system.</p>
7	<p>The one area that requires immediate attention is government's offering of management and leadership development programmes. Whilst InvestNI and CITB may be active in this area, their programmes are limited to their customers.</p>
8	<p>An appropriate infrastructure/mechanism should be established to identify real time review of the challenges and needs of businesses. A sectoral approach has been suggested as the best way for targeting specific needs of businesses. Previous Ministerial sectoral working groups worked well, especially for the ICT sector.</p>
9	<p>A future skills strategy should be cognisant of all the players involved in skills development. It should aim to portray all the activity that occurs in delivering any expected outcomes. This includes government (central and local), businesses, academia and individuals.</p>
10	<p>Existing activity should be reviewed before the introduction of new interventions. To avoid duplication and ensure initiatives meet the needs of users and businesses a future skills strategy should review existing activity before introducing new interventions, programmes, qualifications etc. New activity should have a specific purpose and should have an exit strategy. New and existing offerings should be communicated to all users (i.e. those in education, those in work and those furthest from the workforce), using appropriate channels.</p>
11	<p>More emphasis needs to be placed on appropriate skills, rather than higher skills. This includes ensuring the apprenticeship route is perceived to be as highly regarded as the traditional schooling route.</p>
12	<p>Creating a culture of lifelong learning is essential in a future strategy. It is important to encourage learning as a part of an individual's life trajectory, ensuring pathways and flexibility on offerings.</p>
13	<p>The next strategy should consider its role in improving NI's relative productivity and how it can measure the impact of skills improvements on productivity.</p>

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