

Review of Level 4 and 5 Provision and Higher Education in Further Education

Overview

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Background

- Higher Education in Further Education is the delivery of higher education courses through the further education sector. Further Education Colleges have been delivering higher education courses in Northern Ireland since the 1980s. Most of the higher education delivered in the colleges is at levels 4 and 5 on the relevant frameworks though there is also a small amount of provision at level 6 and above. Frameworks define and link the levels and credit values of different qualifications. The current frameworks for Northern Ireland are:
 - The Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) for general and vocational qualifications regulated by Ofqual in England and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in Northern Ireland;¹ and
 - The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (FHEQ) for qualifications awarded by bodies across the United Kingdom with degree-awarding powers.²
- Higher Education in Further Education makes a distinctive contribution to the overall provision of higher education in Northern Ireland and aligns with the economic and inclusive growth vision outlined in 'A 10X Economy'.³ From an economic and skills perspective, Higher Education in Further Education offers local and niche provision for employers with a particular focus on levels 4 and 5. From a social perspective, Higher Education in Further Education increases opportunities for learners, especially from those facing barriers to accessing education, to engage in higher education or for those who are more focussed on building skills through practical application.
- Higher Education in Further Education is not just to provide opportunities for young people to progress into and through Higher Education. A key consideration is that Higher Education in Further Education and level 4 and 5 qualifications have long been

¹ [Qualifications Frameworks | CCEA](#)

² [Qualifications Frameworks \(qaa.ac.uk\)](#)

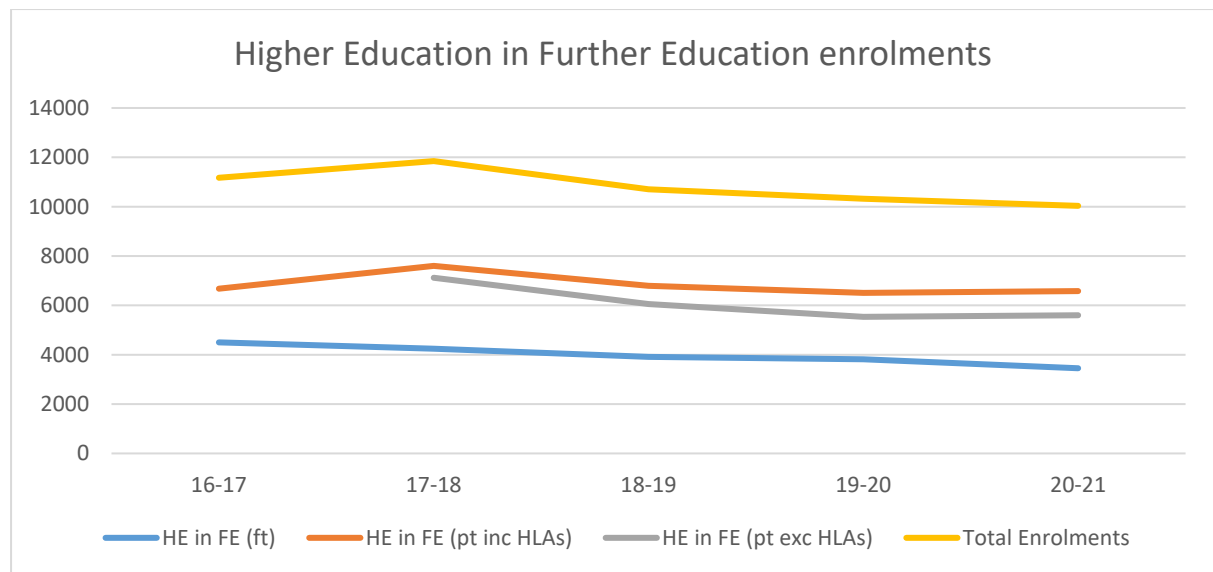
³ [A 10x Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

important for those looking to re-train and re-skill – something that will be increasingly important given changes in the economy. This is recognised by the Skills Strategy’s focus on lifelong learning. Level 4 and 5 qualifications may also become more important in a qualifications landscape that could become increasingly focussed on modularisation and delivering greater flexibility in the way people train and learn.

4. Strong provision and uptake of level 4 and 5 qualifications is therefore important to the delivery not just of the Skills Strategy but to our wider economic objectives set out in our 10X vision.

Review of Level 4 and 5 Provision and Higher Education in Further Education

5. The Department commenced a review of level 4 and 5 provision and Higher Education in Further Education in November 2020. The review was set up primarily in response to declining enrolments in Higher Education in Further Education provision, with current trends showing that the number of higher education enrolments at the Further Education Colleges has been declining over the past five years.⁴ Declining enrolment trends present a clear strategic challenge in light of the skills needs of the economy and forecast under-supply at levels 4 and 5.



Source: Consolidated Data Return

6. There are other reasons why the review was necessary. There has been an increased focus by the Department for Education in England on technical and vocational education in recent years. A series of consultation and reform programmes are underway regarding post-16 and post-18 education and funding, Higher Technical Education and lifelong learning. Some of the drivers for these reforms are similar in terms of forecast skills shortages. There is also a desire to improve vocational skills

⁴ [Further education sector activity in Northern Ireland: 2016/17 to 2020/21 | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/further-education-sector-activity-in-northern-ireland-2016-17-to-2020-21)

and competencies to address productivity and social mobility issues which has resulted in a greater emphasis on level 4 and 5 programmes. Quality, visibility, increased provision and uptake are the main reform aims.⁵ The reform programme in England results in potential risks and opportunities for Northern Ireland and so adds to the reasons to review existing policy relating to level 4 and 5 and Higher Education in Further Education.

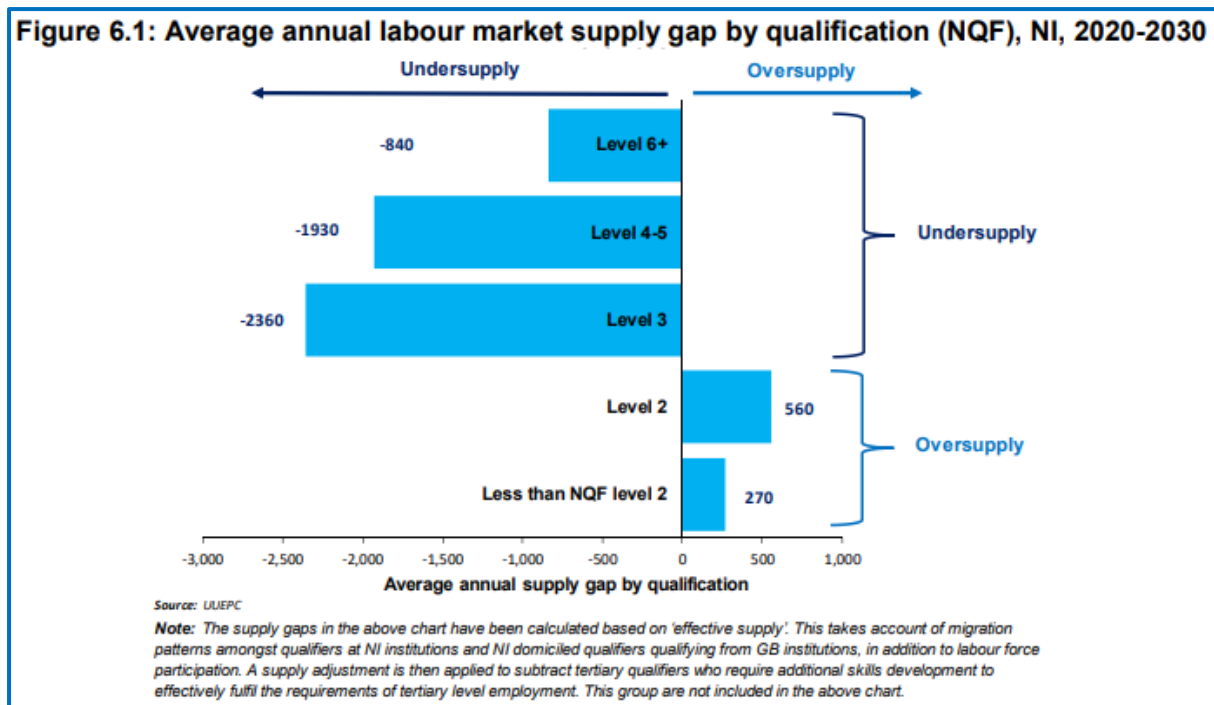
7. The overarching aim of the review is to achieve a level 4 and 5 and Higher Education in Further Education sector that can meet the needs of the economy through provision that is:
 - Unique.
 - Responsive to employer and skills needs.
 - Complementary and aligned with other provision available locally and at other levels.
 - Able to provide opportunities for those facing particular barriers and unlikely to attend university to participate in higher education.

8. To achieve the above aims, eight work strands were identified and taken forward:
 - A. To define the level 4 and 5 and Higher Education in Further Education proposition
 - B. Level 4 and 5 qualifications
 - C. Foundation Degree policy
 - D. Alignment with other Departmental initiatives i.e. Higher Level Apprenticeships
 - E. Pathways and progression
 - F. Funding and Maximum Student Numbers
 - G. Level 4 and 5 provision at Higher Education Institutions and level 6 provision at Further Education Colleges
 - H. Retention and achievement at level 4 and above.

Skills context

9. The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, Skills for a 10X Economy, sets out 'Addressing Skills Imbalances, Driving Economic Growth' as an overarching objective, at the heart of what the Skills Strategy aims to achieve. Within the evidence and programme of activity outlined to meet strategic skills goals, the Skills Strategy points to the Skills Barometer forecast shortages of level 4 and 5 qualifications.

⁵ [Higher technical qualifications \(HTQs\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)



Source: Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2021 (High economic growth scenario)

10. The extract above from the Skills Barometer 2021 forecasts that the largest supply gaps are likely to emerge in the mid-tier skills levels (levels 3-5) and, at higher education level, the largest supply gaps are at levels 4 and 5. The Skills Barometer notes the under-supply is linked primarily to a supply issue with level 4 and 5 qualifications representing only 7% of the overall supply of labour from the education system.⁶ Both the Skills Strategy and Skills Barometer recognise that there are a number of areas of policy that contribute to mid-tier skills levels and a number of recommendations are raised in the Skills Strategy in response.
11. At levels 4 and 5, key policy drivers relate to apprenticeships and Higher Education in Further Education. Skills Strategy recommendation 14 states 'A review of level 4 and 5 'Higher Education in Further Education' education will conclude in spring 2022. Recommendations and actions arising from the review will be incorporated in the implementation of the Skills Strategy.'

Approach

12. The review was taken forward with a series of 'Task and Finish Groups' established to take forward work under each strand, overseen by a Project Board and supported by a Strategic Advisory Group. These groups have drawn on both internal expertise from the Department and from external partners – including Further Education Colleges, University Colleges, Universities and National Union of Students and Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI). We are grateful to everyone who has participated and provided their expertise and experience.

⁶ [Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2021 \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](https://economy-ni.gov.uk)

13. We have discussed the emerging findings of the review with a range of groups including the Skills Council, Strategic Advisory Forum and Careers Advisory Forum who have given us a range of views, including from employers. In addition, we are grateful for the engagement of the Youth Forum and Secondary Students Union of Northern Ireland. A number of key recommendations from the review will be subject to public consultation, as set out below.

Review recommendations

Strand A - To define the level 4 and 5 and Higher Education in Further Education proposition

14. This Task and Finish Group was tasked with the following:

- Purpose – to agree the overarching future purpose of level 4 and 5 provision and Higher Education in Further Education within the overall higher education framework within Northern Ireland.
- Principles – to agree a set of principles, within the context of the overall purpose agreed above, that can be used to guide future delivery and policy decisions, serving the best interests of the economy and learners.
- Unique Selling Points (USP) – to draw out the distinctive features, appeal and benefits of entering a level 4 and 5 and/or Higher Education in Further Education pathway.

Level 4 and 5 and Higher Education in Further Education Purpose

- a. The overarching purpose of Level 4 and 5 Provision and Higher Education in Further Education is to support a globally competitive, regionally balanced economy where more individuals and businesses can reach their potential.

Purpose 1: to meet the current and future needs of employers:

- Professional qualifications relating to a specific occupation or career including licence to practice/standard industry requirement for a particular occupation
- Upskilling and development of existing employees
- Strengthening future workforce requirements through the provision of Higher Level Apprenticeships

Purpose 2: to meet the needs of learners

- To provide suitable pathways in Northern Ireland to Higher Education qualifications
- To widen participation in Higher Education, particularly in creating suitable opportunities for those facing barriers to education, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds
- Use of intermediate higher level qualifications to support progression to employment
- Career transitioning or reskilling
- Personal Development or interest

- b. The Purposes identified by the group lead to the following recommendations:

Level 4 and 5 and Higher Education in Further Education Principles

The following suite of Principles were recommended by the Task and Finish Group for adoption:

- i. Further Education Colleges should continue to provide a broad range of high quality higher education pathways, particularly focusing on identified local need, key strategic clusters and the intermediate HE needs of employers and learners.
 - ii. Level 4 and 5 provision and Higher Education in Further Education should primarily be professional and technical and linked to the economic and skills needs of local and regional business and industry.
 - iii. Higher Education in Further Education provision should be agile and responsive to best meet local and niche higher level qualification needs.
 - iv. Level 4 and 5 and Higher Education in Further Education provision should promote and support widening participation and lifelong learning.
 - v. Further Education Colleges should offer higher education progression pathways locally for learners at Level 2-3.
 - vi. Value for money, quality, avoidance of duplication and complementarity of provision should always be considered when taking forward any new level 4 and 5 and Higher Education in Further Education provision. Further Education Colleges should collaborate across the sector and with a range of stakeholders, including universities where relevant, in the design and delivery of provision.
- c. Consideration of the Unique Selling Points resulted in a number of further recommendations as detailed below.

Unique Selling Points relevant to employers

Qualifications designed for industry with industry, meeting local need and contributing to a regionally balanced economy:

- Niche, unique, agile and responsive provision to meet the needs of industry and employers
- Collaborative network of colleges to meet regional need, improve regional balance and to achieve value for money in provision of local needs
- Lecturers with relevant and practical industry experience
- Continuous investment in new facilities and emerging technologies to underpin the practical skills which will help to drive Northern Ireland's economic ambition

Unique Selling Points relevant to learners

Supportive learning environment:

- Small class sizes
- Quality student support services
- Professional and independent careers advice and guidance aligned to emerging and forecast labour market demand

- High quality pastoral care and personalised support
- Flexible delivery models to suit learners and employers

Enhances employability and career prospects

- Qualifications co-designed with employers, including industry recognised and tailored qualifications
- On the job, hands on and work based learning
- Lecturers with 'real' and relevant industry experience

Local and accessible

- Higher education options at the heart of communities
- Offering progression opportunities through the college and in partnership with universities
- Provision delivered locally offering progression opportunities for adult returners thus supporting lifelong learning

Cost effective option to obtain a higher level/higher education qualification

- No living costs & minimal travel costs associated with local provision and competitive or lower fees when compared with alternatives

Progression pathways into and through higher education at Colleges and universities

- Qualifications developed by colleges and validated through university partnerships
- Articulation to higher education in university

Sense of community and belonging

- Seamless transitioning from school to Further Education College – learning takes place in smaller class groups and settings similar to that experienced in schools
- Delivery models adopted to suit different learning styles

The purpose, principles and unique selling points have influenced the approach taken to addressing other work strands, as noted below, and will influence communication going forward.

Branding

15. The Task and Finish Group also noted that an exercise should be commissioned to examine and gauge relevant (e.g. employers, learners, parents) perceptions of level 4 and 5 provision and Higher Education in Further Education. This should subsequently be used to inform a review of the qualification offering, with a view to refinement and simplification where possible, as part of the wider work being taken forward by the Department in relation to the future of qualifications. This work has been completed and a report by Stranmillis University College published.⁷ It highlights both the positive feedback from those undertaking these courses and the limited knowledge that many potential students have about these qualifications. We will continue to look for

⁷ [Purdy, N. Gibson, K., Orr, K., Tsang, K. \(2022\) Perceptions of Level 4 & 5 Qualifications in Northern Ireland - Stranmillis University College | A College of Queen's University Belfast](#)

opportunities to build this evidence base, particularly through further engagement with employers.

16. The Task and Finish Group recommended that a branding exercise should be commissioned for level 4 and 5 provision and Higher Education in Further Education. The focus of this exercise should be on the development of a specific umbrella term and brand for the level 4+ provision delivered by the Further Education sector. Stakeholder engagement and market testing should be part of this exercise. Once developed and agreed, the brand should be incorporated into the further education sector Communication Plan going forward. Engagement should also take place with the Careers Service to explore the use of Cascaid Tools and other measures for promoting the brand directly to school pupils, teachers and careers advisors.
17. Work is currently underway to develop a communications campaign, in partnership with a range of organisations, that will deliver these aims. The delivery of such a campaign is subject to the availability of funding. Further engagement will also take place with the careers service.

Destination and Outcomes Evidence

18. In relation to level 4 and 5 and Higher Education in Further Education, the Task and Finish Group supported the draft Skills Strategy recommendation that 'The Department for the Economy will review how it collects information on the destination and outcomes for Further Education College leavers, to improve evidence on long-term outcomes for further education qualifiers'. They suggested that barriers to information gathering and analysis should be considered during the review. This should be taken forward with consideration given to the longer term Longitudinal Education Outcomes initiative to ensure no duplication in effort and that surveys and questionnaires for learners are streamlined and minimised to the extent that is possible. The Task and Finish Group also recommended that information collected should include learner reasons for selecting qualifications and pathways as this will enable better measurement and tracking of learner outcomes.

Further Research and Analysis of Level 4 and 5 Under-Supply

19. The Task and Finish Group also suggested further research into the under-supply at levels 4 and 5 should be undertaken to gain an understanding of the specific jobs/employers/locations experiencing under-supply. Further analysis may then also need to be undertaken through development of skills assessments of key priority clusters, in tandem with business leaders.

Strand B - Level 4 and 5 qualifications

20. In order to inform the review, the Department engaged with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment to undertake research and provide advice in relation to level 4 and 5 qualifications and vocational education at level 4+. The objective of the project was primarily to gain an overview of the range of level 4 and 5 and vocational education qualifications at level 4+ currently offered and available in Northern Ireland and to understand the risks to these qualifications going forward.

21. This work provided the review with information on the types of providers and centres obtaining certifications for level 4 and level 5 qualifications in Northern Ireland throughout 2018/19 and provided statistical detail on the type of providers, range of sector areas and volume of certifications of level 4 and level 5 The Regulated Qualifications Framework qualifications.
22. Each awarding organisation issuing certificates to centres or learners undertaking assessments in Northern Ireland must provide statistical data. From this data the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment outlined the type of providers issuing certificates at level 4 and 5, including Further Education Colleges, Health and Social Care Trusts, and Community Organisations. They also provided information on the certification subject and qualification type offered by each type of provider. By far the largest market share of the level 4 and 5 certificates were the Further Education Colleges with over 60% followed by private training organisations and music and dance centres.

The work also highlighted issues for consideration including:

- ***The need for expanded provision to meet the changing needs of the economy***

There are examples of good practice involving Further Education Colleges partnering with local employers to design and implement alternative qualifications like tailored Foundation Degrees as well as collaborating with a local awarding organisations to create new level 4-5 qualifications when necessary. Building on this practice will augment the supply of qualifications to the Northern Ireland market

- ***The risk to the existing supply of level 4+ qualifications***

As part of the reforms in England many level 2 and 3 qualifications have been defunded. This has created some consequences for the provision of qualifications in Northern Ireland where there is a heavy reliance on awarding organisations focussed on the English market. There is some risk created by the roll out of the English Higher Technical Qualifications reforms which could impact the supply of level 4-5 qualifications. However, unlike at other levels we understand there is no intent from the Department for Education in England to de-fund any qualifications and the risk to Northern Ireland would in any case be significantly mitigated by our reliance on locally developed Foundation Degrees at this level.

- ***Work to implement the new Skills Strategy for NI should consider how to enable further partnerships to develop level 4+ qualifications in order to bridge any gaps that may arise in this provision***

Brand awareness of level 4+ qualifications is weak. There is a huge and diverse range of level 4+ qualifications provided for part-time and full-time study through Further Education Colleges and other training providers. The landscape for prospective learners and employers is diverse and not easily navigated.

- ***Stronger brand and brand awareness is required for Level 4+ qualifications.***

The diversity of qualifications on offer in Further Education Colleges has resulted in complexity, confusion and no clear level 4-5 'brand'. The brand image for level 4 and 5 qualifications in Further Education Colleges is weak and qualifications are often perceived as less prestigious than university degrees. There is an apparent need for stronger marketing to reinforce the benefit of Higher Education in Further Education.

Strand C – Foundation Degree Policy

23. The Task and Finish Group in this area undertook to set out the current policy position, review available information and engage with relevant stakeholders. This led to a number of recommendations on the future development of Foundation Degree (FD) policy. The group also considered policy which focusses provision of level 4 and 5 qualifications at Further Education Colleges and level 6 provision at Higher Education Institutions, originally this had been planned as a separate work strand. The work of the Task and Finish Group has led to a proposed public consultation which will:

- Set out options for future policy on qualifications at level 4 and 5, taking account of other findings across the review. This will set out options from continuing to have Foundation Degrees as the preferred qualification with no change; to continuing with Foundation Degrees as the preferred qualification but subject to reform and change to make them more flexible and better meet needs; to having no preferred qualification and allowing providers open choice; to adopting a similar approach to England with an overarching brand (such as Higher Technical Qualifications) linked to some quality criteria; or having a different preferred qualification (Higher National Certificate /Higher National Diplomas or a new suite of qualifications).
- The public consultation should also seek views on the current policy of Foundation Degrees continuing to be developed with Northern Ireland based universities wherever possible.
- The consultation will seek views on whether the current articulation framework should change and whether more flexibility should be introduced in terms of the level of higher education that the colleges can deliver

Public consultation on this policy will also seek views on work under a number of other work strands, including the principles and purpose described in strand A and the recommendations on funding of qualifications in strand F. In addition, while not for public consultation, this Task and Finish Group noted the potential merit in a dual approach to Foundation Degree applications involving direct application to the college and via The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). This is currently being explored further with both The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and colleges.

Strand D - Alignment with other Departmental initiatives

24. The Task and Finish Group analysed other departmental initiatives that may affect level 4 and 5 provision such as Higher Level Apprenticeships (HLAs) and the setting of University Maximum Student Numbers (MaSN) to determine if these had an impact on recruitment to level 4 and 5. Consideration of various factors concluded that since level 4 and 5 provision has been in decline for a number of years that none of the Departmental initiatives could be considered to be a major contributing factor. Recognition was given to some factors that affected level 4 and 5 provision but these were either short term or more cyclical in nature.
25. The recommendations from this Task and Finish Group include that the Department should continue prior engagement and a collaborative approach when planning the introduction of new initiatives that may have a direct or indirect impact on level 4 and 5. This will ensure alignment between proposed initiatives and existing provision and allow for the consideration and management of any potential adverse impacts and ensure consideration of value for money across the piece.
26. In addition, the group noted that initiatives such as Higher Level Apprenticeships can have a positive overall impact in increasing the total number of learners completing level 4 and 5 qualifications. Further Education Colleges would therefore need to focus on how they managed the challenges of delivering qualifications to cohorts of both classroom based and worked based learners in a way which avoided duplication but recognised the different needs of those learners.

Strand E – Pathways and Progression [NB these recommendations are still subject to discussion and final agreement with the Task and Finish Group]

27. The objective of this work strand was to identify if there are clear and consistent entry requirements, pathways and progression opportunities in place for learners at level 4 and level 5 and Higher Education in Further Education, including those with non-traditional or no qualifications. The work strand sought to identify any potential changes to policy to improve pathways and progression opportunities for learners. There was recognition that this work interfaced with work under strand C, the joint project on 14-19 education with the Department for Education (DE) and ongoing discussions through the Tertiary Education Senior Leaders Forum. The group concluded their recommendations under a number of headings:

Progression into Levels 4 and 5

- The group recommended consideration of whether the development of a bridging / transition model for students progressing from level 3 onto levels 4, 5 and 6 should be taken forward. Consideration should be given to whether there is merit in incorporating a bridging or transition model for students progressing from level 3 study with qualifications that are not always recognised by local universities.
- There should be engagement with the Department of Education to identify whether there is scope to review the Department of Education qualifications approvals process to ensure that qualifications have clear progression routes. This recommendation has

also been identified within the 14-19 project and should be taken forward as part of the wider work on qualification reform in Department of Education and Department for the Economy.

- The Department should work with further education, higher education, and schools to identify how clearer information on where a learner's level 3 qualification outcomes will lead, and exactly which qualifications are likely to be accepted by Higher Education Institutes. This relates to recommendations from the 14-19 project around information and communication of the available pathways throughout education and training.
- To facilitate progression from level 3 to levels 4 and 5, consideration should be given to simplifying the application process potentially through the use of a single portal for all applications. This relates to work with The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), noted under strand C above.

Support for articulation between levels 4 and 5

- Further Education Colleges and universities should ensure that there is clear and definite information communicated to part-time learners in respect of the options for transferring to another part-time or full-time course. This is being pursued under the auspices of the Tertiary Education Senior Leaders Forum, with agreement at working level on optimum transfer windows, and the complexities of transfer outside of those periods. Work should now be taken forward to ensure this information is available to learners.
- The Department should consider what policy changes can be implemented to ensure that if a learner has successfully completed at least one year of a higher education course, and they decide to withdraw from that course, institution or fully from education, that they obtain recognition and a qualification for the part of the course they have successfully accomplished. This will contribute to the Skills Strategy aims of developing a culture of lifelong learning and is already being discussed under the auspices of the Tertiary Education Senior Leaders Forum.

Effective information and communication

- The Department, in conjunction with The Department of Education, Further Education Colleges and universities should develop a communications plan with the aim of ensuring more effective communication targeted at all stakeholders, in particular prospective learners and parents, highlighting the usefulness, value and attractiveness of level 4 and 5 qualifications. As part of the ongoing communications campaign, consideration should be given to branding and marketing of Level 4 and 5. This relates to recommendations from the 14-19 project around information and communication of the available pathways throughout education and training and to the recommendations on branding and communication in Strand A.
- Linking to the recommendation above, the communications plan should also detail how information on level 4 and 5 pathways can be better disseminated through schools (including careers teachers), the Careers Service and other key stakeholders. This

relates to recommendations from the 14-19 project around information and communication of the available pathways throughout education and training.

Further research

- Modularisation is already a key part of many higher education courses delivered in Northern Ireland. The Department should continue to assess and examine reforms in other jurisdictions and consider whether a similar approach would be beneficial for Northern Ireland, engaging closely with relevant stakeholders.

Strand F – Funding and Maximum Student Numbers

28. The objective of this work strand was to consider:
- whether any changes should be made to the way Higher Education in Further Education is funded, including funding to Further Education Colleges and student support; and
 - how maximum student numbers (MaSN) should be set.
29. The group considered the fact that current regulations seek to limit access to Higher Education Student Support Finance for those studying at level 4 and 5 to those studying Foundation Degrees, Higher National Certificates/Diplomas, Certificates of Higher Education and Diplomas of Higher Education. While this focus on a small range of qualifications could help to address the challenge of brand awareness and the complex landscape of qualifications at this level, it could restrict responsiveness and agility to meet employer need, make it harder to support more modular forms of learning and would fail to meet Purpose 1 set out above and developed through strand A, which focusses on the need to deliver professional qualifications relating to a specific occupation or career including licence to practice/standard industry requirements for a particular occupation. There is a clear link to the outcome of work in strand C – but even with a continued focus on Foundation Degrees there may be times when this additional flexibility is important.
30. The group were concerned that opening up Higher Education Student Support Funding to a wider range of qualifications should ensure that any qualifications were good quality and value for money. There may also be a financial consequence to broadening funding eligibility which would have to be considered in the context of the current fiscal situation. The group therefore recommended the broadening of funding eligibility beyond the existing range of qualifications, subject to affordability and appropriate assurances about the quality and value for money of qualifications. Further work should therefore be undertaken to assess costs and to consider quality assurance mechanisms.
31. The group also considered the appropriateness of Higher Education Student Support Funding for level 4 and 5 qualifications. It was noted that eligibility for level 4 and 5 student support was on the same basis as level 6 qualifications such as Honours Degrees. While there was discussion about the level of support to part time students, it was noted this had been subject to recent review and would be considered again in

the near future. The group therefore recommended that the principle of parity between level 4 and 5 and level 6 should be maintained for Higher Education Student Support Finance going forward.

32. Finally, the group noted that as provision of level 4 and 5 and Higher Education in Further Education grew in the future this would create tensions whereby bids from Further Education Colleges outstripped available funding. A consistent and transparent approach to allocating funding with the Maximum Student Numbers was therefore required. The group discussed and agreed a number of factors that will be used by the Department to develop a new model for the allocation of funding going forward: these include demand, demographic change, 10X sector needs and Skills Barometer data, levels of achievement and rurality.
33. The group also noted the importance of financial support to students through mechanisms such as bursaries and scholarships as well as the pastoral support provided (and the lessons that could be learned from the additional support provided in response to the challenges presented by Covid).

Strand G - Level 4 and 5 provision at Higher Education Institutions and Level 6 provision at Further Education Colleges

34. This area of work was included as part of the Foundation Degree policy in work strand C and will be included in the public consultation, as noted above.

Strand H - Retention and achievement at level 4 and above

35. This Task and Finish Group's consideration of retention and achievement involved gathering information relating to the collection and use of retention and achievement data across the further education and higher education sectors. Ensuring there is a clear and consistent approach to the retention and achievement of learners including those from disadvantaged socio-economic groups is essential for measuring progression and outcomes. The number of individuals successfully completing these qualifications is as important in creating a pipeline of supply as the number starting courses. A focus on this area can also help ensure good value for money.
36. It was noted by the Task and Finish Group that the data available suggested that both retention and achievement rates for Higher Education in Further Education were positive. However, there were limitations with the data which made it hard to draw firm conclusions and to benchmark across sectors. Retention rates only reflect students starting their final year who complete that final year, for instance.

The Task and Finish Group therefore recommended that:

- considerations relating to the measurement of retention and achievement should continue to be explored as part of the ongoing substantive work in higher education and Further Education including work looking at education of 14-19 year olds; and

- opportunities to publish retention rates across academic years for Higher Education in Further Education should be explored and included in published data.

Summary

37. Findings from the review and research commissioned from Stranmillis University College highlight that level 4 and 5 provision is a crowded and complex space. Strand A of the review has attempted to set out clear principles and unique selling points which will guide the development and reform of Level 4 and 5 and Higher Education in Further Education going forward. While we can seek to maximise the number of people completing these qualifications through ensuring we maximise retention and achievement and ensuring the careful coordination of our policy initiatives, these will not address the fundamental challenge presented by low awareness and understanding of these qualifications.
38. Ensuring we have a range of qualifications which meet employer need but which are understood and can be navigated by learners is likely to be important in boosting uptake of these qualifications. We will be seeking views on how to best achieve this – through a continued focus on more flexible Foundation Degrees or through an approach that opens up a wider range of qualifications subject to an overarching brand and quality assurance process. A wide range of provision and clear pathways and progression are likely to be important in attracting learners to these qualifications, alongside ensuring these qualifications are prominent through platforms such as The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). Barriers to taking up these qualifications – particularly entry criteria – should be kept as low as possible without negatively impacting successful achievement and completion rates.
39. Either of these approaches – a continued focus on more flexible Foundation Degrees or an overarching brand – will need to be supported by an active and ongoing communications strategy making use of our careers service and other channels to address the key issue of low awareness and understanding. This reflects the findings of research by Stranmillis University College. Without a stronger awareness and understanding of these qualifications, other measures may have a limited impact.

Other considerations

40. A number of important points not directly covered by the work strands above have been raised during the course of the review.

Fees, bursaries and scholarships

41. There is limited information available on the price elasticity of demand for these qualifications – the extent to which lower fees might encourage uptake. Some evidence suggests that the ability to pay fees through loans with repayment contingent upon earnings makes potential students less concerned with fee costs – however this may vary between different cohorts of student and reflect their personal circumstances. Other initiatives such as bursaries and scholarships which can help to address day to day costs may be more effective in encouraging potential students (and retaining them). Going forward we will work with Further Education Colleges to try and better

understand the impact of these initiatives and to consider how they can be used to drive uptake of these qualifications, in line with economic needs.

Level 3 pipeline

42. Some learners will become aware of Higher Education in Further Education options as a result of studying at a lower level – such as level 3 – in a Further Education College. This pipeline was not part of the review considerations. However, understanding how the provision at level 3 feeds into higher education would enable a targeted approach to be undertaken. Anecdotally, it may be that reduced numbers in colleges studying at level 3 could have an impact on those progressing to study Higher Education in Further Education.
43. An initial step in exploring the data available to demonstrate how level 3 students are moving into higher education would be beneficial and lead to greater understanding of any gaps that need filled. In particular it is currently hard for us to examine the picture holistically with year-on-year steps between qualifications, levels and years difficult to observe through current data sets.

NI Domiciled Students going to GB

44. A significant proportion of students leave Northern Ireland to study in GB. A proportion of these students are referred to as ‘determined leavers’ who want to study in GB and are not considering remaining in Northern Ireland regardless of the provision on offer.
45. However, a significant number may be ‘reluctant leavers’ who study in GB due to a number of factors. Understanding these factors and being able to identify provision gaps in Northern Ireland could potentially lead to retaining a number of these students. Initial analysis by the Department has helped to identify the subjects and broad grade ranges studied by students going to GB. This is available in tables 21, 22 and 23 in the link [Higher education ad-hoc tables](#) and will be used by both colleges and other Higher Education providers to help develop provision in Northern Ireland to ensure there are options for those who want to stay and study in Northern Ireland.

Studies in the Republic of Ireland

46. Collaboration between the Further Education Colleges and Institutes of Technology in Republic of Ireland is already in place, albeit in small numbers. Consideration of developing pathways for study in Republic of Ireland and the alignment, or joint development, of the qualifications could help with uptake in Northern Ireland in some areas.

Outreach and addressing barriers

47. Awareness and understanding of the level 4 and 5 offering has been a consistent theme throughout the review. Outreach activities and engagement with schools/parent/communities would be beneficial for raising awareness of alternative pathways into and through higher education. This may be an area where more could be done through work on widening access and participation in higher education – and where more coordinated work could take place across higher education providers.

48. While the challenges that tuition fees and living costs can present is noted above, there may also be other barriers such as digital poverty that act as barriers to those considering higher education.

Transition between HE in FE and other HEIs

49. The Tertiary Education Senior Leaders Forum, chaired by the Department, has been overseeing a programme of work to strengthen collaboration between colleges and other higher education institutions.
50. This work will include considering how to strengthen the movement and transition of students between different institutions to reflect their needs and abilities – and how to better share resources across providers to ensure an effective tertiary education ‘eco system’ which can meet the needs of everyone.

Next steps

51. As noted above, a number of areas considered by this review will be subject to public consultation. We look forward to hearing a wide range of views through this process and to finalising our position having considered those views.
52. Work has already begun on a number of the recommendations set out above which do not require public consultation – and the Department will continue to engage closely with stakeholders and partners as progress work across the agreed recommendations.