



Department for the
Economy
www.economy-ni.gov.uk

SKILLS
TO SUCCEED

NORTHERN IRELAND

Higher Education Strategy

ISSUE 4



Contents

1. Welcome
2. Update on the Interim Review of the Higher Education Strategies
3. Aligning employability skills with the Programme for Government
4. Horizon 2020
5. HE Conference – Assisting providers in preparing for Quality Review Visits
6. Undergraduate Awards 2017
7. Further Information



Welcome

By Trevor Cooper, Head of Higher Education Policy and Finance Division, Department for the Economy.

Welcome to the latest issue of the Higher Education Strategy e-zine which is designed to keep you up-to-date in relation to the implementation of the two Higher Education strategies for Northern Ireland, 'Graduating to Success' and 'Access to Success'. This issue also reflects on recent developments, achievements and case studies from across the sector.



Trevor Cooper, Head of Higher Education Policy and Finance Division, Department for the Economy.

There have been a number of important developments of relevance to Higher Education since the last issue of the e-zine. The formation of the Department for the Economy which now has the responsibility for Higher Education is the most notable and since then the publication of the draft Programme for Government (PfG) and a draft economy strategy to provide us with our strategic agenda for the years ahead.

Specific to the Higher Education Strategies, an interim review also concluded in the period. These and other developments have contributed to an environment of change, challenge and uncertainty

but also provided an opportunity to take stock and prioritise.

The [interim review of the Strategies](#) concluded in May 2016. The review concluded that the original vision of the Strategies should remain with a key recommendation being the development of a refreshed implementation plan. The refreshed implementation plan was drafted taking a number of the above developments into account, as detailed in section two. I would like to thank all those who contributed to the refreshed implementation plan and the project teams who continue to drive the projects forward.

Project outcomes aligned to the draft PfG and draft Economic Strategy were revisited and refocused as part of the refreshed implementation plan and this is evident in changes made to Project 1 which is to 'increase the number of students undertaking HE courses in economically relevant subjects' - an in-depth update on this project is included at [section three](#).

Welcome

[CONTINUED](#)

A key strand of Graduating to Success is ‘to support internationally excellent and world-leading research and development’ (Project 2), with drawdown of European Funds identified as an outcome to achieve this. The Horizon 2020 programme contributes to this outcome – achievements in this area and the impact of EU Exit on this is set out at [section four](#).

Quality is another area contributing to the change environment across the sector. A new approach to quality assessment is being

implemented in the current academic year and, as part of the new approach, the Quality Assurance Agency will undertake Quality Review Visits on behalf of the Department. Preparations are underway – learn more in [section five](#).

I hope you find this issue of the e-zine both interesting and informative. Contact details and where to get further information are included at [section seven](#).

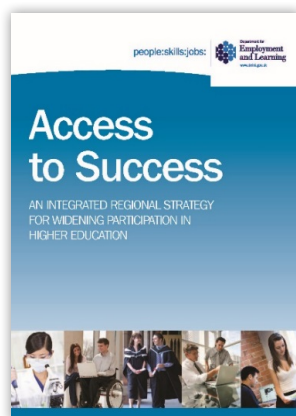
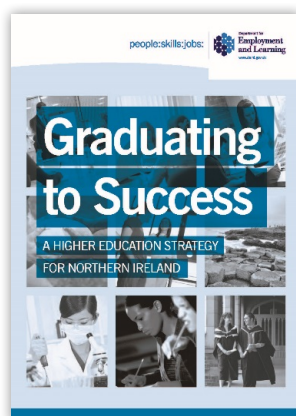
Higher Education Strategy Guiding Principles

- More responsive to the needs of the economy
- A higher quality learning experience
- A more accessible higher education sector
- A more flexible lifelong learning environment

The vision for Higher Education is one of a sector which is vibrant and of international calibre; which pursues excellence in teaching and research; which plays a pivotal role in the development of a modern, sustainable, knowledge-based economy; which supports a confident, shared society; and which recognises and values diversity.

Update on the Interim Review of the Higher Education Strategies

In the last issue of the e-zine readers were advised that the Interim Review of the Implementation of the 'Graduating to Success' and 'Access to Success' Strategies was in progress. The review was finalised in May 2016.



The Interim Review established that the strategies, and their direction of travel, were still valid and that they were, on the whole, supported by the wider Higher Education (HE) sector. However, it also recognised that the strategies were being implemented in a different fiscal environment to when they were initially developed. Unsurprisingly this led to the sustainability of the sector being identified by the HE institutions (HEIs) as the key issue facing the sector as a whole.

The final report flowing from the review aimed to draw on lessons learned

whilst taking account of the views of stakeholders within the HE sector and the wider economic environment, in order to provide a platform to inform the direction of travel and ensure the best use of resources during the remainder of the implementation programme.

One of the key recommendations flowing from the review was to develop a Refreshed Implementation Plan for the strategies' programme up to 2020, ensuring that resources are focused on projects and target outcomes which aim to make meaningful and quantifiable impacts.

A Refreshed Implementation Plan has subsequently been developed and endorsed by the Implementation Committee. It remains aligned to the strategies' guiding principles and visions but also reflects wider developments and emerging priorities, including: developments across the higher education sector; the evolving financial climate in Northern Ireland; the new Programme for Government (PfG) and draft Economic Strategy.

An overview of the most significant areas of change within the Refreshed Implementation Plan is outlined below:

Update on the Interim Review of the Higher Education Strategies

CONTINUED

Refreshed Implementation Plan

A number of outcomes within the strategy projects have been revised, removed or superseded as part of the refreshed implementation plan and one new project has been introduced. Please click the coloured tabs on the left to view all of the changes made:



section
3

Aligning employability skills with the Programme for Government

The refreshed implementation plan for the Higher Education strategies discusses the importance of graduate employability in achieving our Programme for Government (PfG) targets. Specifically, the PfG seeks to increase the proportion of local graduates from local institutions in professional or management occupations or further study six months after graduation.



Project 1 of the HE strategy has always had a focus on increasing the economic relevance of HE provision, and has been measured in terms of the proportion of graduates leaving our HE institutions with degrees in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects, the target being 22% of graduates having achieved qualifications in STEM subjects by 2020. The most recent data, for 2015/16 leavers, shows that this target was first met in this year, with 22.8% of graduates in STEM subjects.

Our revised approach to project 1 recognises that increasing the pool of STEM skills in the economy

remains of paramount importance, but also seeks to widen out the definition of economic relevance, taking into account the availability of new tools and data that will enable a more nuanced approach to be taken. In particular, the development of the Skills Barometer report allows government to use dynamic forecasting techniques to assess what skills a future, successful Northern Ireland economy requires to achieve the high growth ambitions set out in the PfG.

The 2017 Skills Barometer report forecasts a significant annual undersupply of skills at qualification levels 3 to 5, but only a marginal annual

total undersupply of skills at level 6 and above (figure 1). Analysis shows, however, that undersupply at level 6 varies markedly across different subjects, as shown in figure 2. An undersupply is forecast across all STEM areas, with the notable exception of biological sciences, and an undersupply is also expected in the humanities, languages, arts and architecture. Conversely, the labour market requirements for graduates in education, social studies and law are forecast to be oversupplied.

section
3

Aligning employability skills with the Programme for Government

CONTINUED**Roll over each map below to enlarge**

The Skills Barometer represents a powerful tool to support policy interventions over the coming years, but care will be needed in how it is used. For example, graduates are already expected by the labour market to possess a range of transversal skills such as effective communication, problem solving and team-working skills that make them desirable to employers, to an extent regardless of the subject area in which they have graduated. This varies across sectors and the 2017 report notes that, for example, the engineering sector tends to largely require STEM graduates.

In reconfiguring its approach to project 1, the Department has recognised that seeking to encourage a higher proportion of graduates with STEM and other subject-specific skills requires an intervention at the point at which decisions are made by prospective students, their advisers, and their parents. Our intention is therefore to develop a means of making information available that links subjects studied to possible labour market outcomes. This is likely to involve the use of the Skills Barometer forecasts, the Destinations of Leavers in HE survey (or its replacement) and potentially Longitudinal Educational Outcomes data, which link educational records with tax and benefits data, to illustrate the impact of different subject choices on future career prospects.

Aligning employability skills with the Programme for Government

CONTINUED

Ultimately, while we recognise that students take many different factors into account when selecting their course of study, we believe that clear information on potential economic outcomes should form a key part of their toolkit when making such a far-reaching decision, and that it is at this stage in their educational journey that that information is likely to have the greatest impact.

The availability of better data on employment outcomes and forecast economic needs will also support the HE sector in Northern Ireland in ensuring that the courses offered continue to fit this broad picture. We have undertaken through project 1 to develop a more comprehensive and dynamic monitoring system on HE outcomes to examine how this progresses.

Finally, another factor to take into consideration is that the numbers of graduates in a given subject area

may have differential prospects in terms of employability. For a specific example relating to STEM graduates, the 2016 Wakeham review¹ examined DLHE data and concluded that STEM graduates are less likely than their non-STEM peers to secure employment six months after graduation.

There are a few points worth noting with this: firstly, a six-month post-graduation survey point may not be as revealing as a later survey point, which would provide a graduate with more opportunities to find graduate-level employment. Indeed, the successor to the DLHE survey will use a 15-month post-graduation survey to reflect this. Secondly, other data suggests that this area is complex, with both Longitudinal Educational Outcomes data and graduate labour market statistics showing that STEM graduates tend to have better employment outcomes than others in their cohort². This rather complex picture

invites further investigation, and we have proposed in the revised project 1 to do just this.

In future, while we have retained the 22% target for graduates in STEM areas, we would expect a more dynamic system to evolve where students are making better informed decisions and universities are responding to economic needs in the way that courses are developed and marketed. The way in which this is monitored, and how HE outcomes relate to economic needs, is likely to shape the way this area develops over the coming years and beyond the lifetime of the current strategy. However this is taken forward, we want to ensure that a partnership approach is taken with the sector and other stakeholders, as all actors have distinct roles to play in delivering PfG ambitions, and effective joint working will be the most effective way to reach those goals.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/stem-degree-provision-and-graduate-employability-wakeham-review>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/graduate-labour-market-quarterly-statistics>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/graduate-outcomes-longitudinal-education-outcomes-leo-data>

Horizon 2020

Horizon 2020 is the European Union's competitive research and innovation programme with a budget of around €80 billion. Running from 2014 to 2020, it funds all stages of research and innovation, from blue skies research through to near market activity.

Horizon 2020 engagement provides Northern Ireland with access to significant research and innovation funding streams that help to transform Northern Ireland's economy to become increasingly knowledge-based and export-orientated. Being able to work with the best European researchers also allows the local research community to maximise Northern Ireland's potential to engage in excellent research which makes a significant contribution to addressing a range of local, national and worldwide challenges.

Northern Ireland's Horizon 2020 performance

The Executive set a target for Northern Ireland participants to draw down €145m through Horizon 2020. Northern Irish universities have so far secured €57.2 million European Research and Innovation

Funding since Horizon's launch in 2014; this total includes €23.3 million for an Innovative Medicines Initiative secured by Queen's in September 2015, which was a belated award from Horizon's predecessor programme, FP7.

Horizon also supports the achievement of the Graduating to Success target for the universities to significantly increase their drawdown of European research funds by 2020 compared with the period 2007-13. The average annual drawdown of European research funds to date by Northern Ireland universities (€16.5 million) represents an increase of some 86% from the FP7 average annual drawdown (€8.9 million).



Northern Ireland Contact Points

The Department for the Economy supports Northern Ireland Horizon 2020 drawdown by providing funding to the universities to support the work of the university-based Northern Ireland Contact Points. These Contact Points have played an essential role in Northern Ireland's successful draw down of Horizon 2020 monies by providing a range of hands-on, practical assistance to potential Northern Ireland applicants to Horizon 2020.



Horizon 2020

CONTINUED

EU Exit

A [joint report](#) from the UK/EU negotiators, issued in December 2017, includes a commitment that UK entities will be able to participate fully in Horizon 2020 following the UK's withdrawal from the EU. Subject to successful wider negotiations, UK organisations will therefore be able to participate fully for the remainder of Horizon 2020 and to receive funding for the lifetime of any Horizon projects. This guarantee should provide assurance to both potential applicants in Northern Ireland and potential partners outside the UK.

The UK Government's previous [underwrite guarantee](#) also provided assurance that successful UK applications submitted to Horizon 2020 before EU exit would be funded for the project's duration.

New work programmes 2018-2020

The Horizon 2020 work programmes for 2018-2020 were launched in October 2017, and since then the Northern Ireland Contact Points have been holding a series of information events for their respective thematic areas. The purpose of these events is to provide potential Northern Ireland applicants to the new Horizon work programme with an early insight into the topics that the European Commission will fund between 2018-2020, with a view to ensuring that Northern Ireland research and innovation is well positioned to access funding in these emerging areas.

With a potential €30 billion in funding opportunities still available during the remainder of the Horizon programme, Northern Ireland's world class scientists and innovators remain well positioned to build on the success to date and take advantage of the opportunities Horizon 2020 continues to offer.

Case studies of successful Northern Ireland Horizon 2020 projects

Please click the tab to view case study

HE Conference - Assisting providers in preparing for Quality Review Visits

On Friday 6th October 2017, South West College (SWC) hosted a Higher Education (HE) Conference in their Dungannon Campus. Organised by Elizabeth Shackels (SWC), with assistance from Karen Lennon (Colleges NI) and supported by the Department's Higher Education Improving Quality Branch, the aim of the event was to assist providers in preparing for their quality review visits, scheduled to commence in Spring 2018.

The keynote speaker at the event, Dr Anca Greere, The Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Manager for Higher Education explained that this tailored event was aimed at providing the NI HE providers with a unique opportunity to gain a better understanding of the requirements and operational process of their Quality Review Visits, which now forms part of the revised model for higher education quality assessment.



Left to right: Elizabeth Shackels (SWC), Michael McAlister (CEO SWC), Dr Anca Greere (QAA)

section
5

HE Conference - Assisting providers in preparing for Quality Review Visits

CONTINUED



Heather Millar (SERC Quality Manager and NI QA Reviewer), Cathy Shaw (QAA Specialist), Anca Greere (QAA Quality Manger), Liam Curran (SWC HE Curriculum Manager and NI QA Reviewer). Taking the Workshop on the Expectations of the UK Quality Code.

In February 2018, as part of the approach to quality assessment, the QAA will commence a series of Quality Review Visits in Northern Ireland, involving the two university colleges (Stranmillis and St Mary's) and the six Further Education Colleges. The Quality Review Visits will be carried out by a team of trained peer and student reviewers. They will test each provider's arrangements against relevant baseline regulatory requirements to ensure that the provider is able to deliver a consistently high-quality student academic experience and that academic standards are secure.

Students are at the heart of the process, with opportunities for them to take part in the Quality Review Visit, including by contributing to a student submission, meeting the review team during the on-site visit, working with the provider in response to review outcomes, and acting as the Lead Student Representative. In

addition, review teams normally include a student reviewer.

The outcomes of the Quality Review Visit will be considered by the Department, and will be used to reach a broader judgement about each provider's readiness to exit the 'developmental period' (a period of closer scrutiny) and be categorised, for quality and standards purposes, as 'established providers', alongside Queen's University and Ulster University.

The conference provided an opportunity for attendees to participate in a number of workshops covering various aspects of the baseline regulatory requirements and gain a better understand how they would be considered through the Quality Review Visit process.

It was attended by approximately 150 delegates from across the Northern Ireland higher education

sector. Five Northern Ireland FEC representatives, who are also QAA reviewers, facilitated the workshops, supported by five QAA quality specialists, including a student reviewer, and the Principal and CEO of London South East Colleges Sam Parrett OBE, and LSEC Quality Manager Ramita Tejpal, whose College had a successful QRV in 2017



Helen Kealy (QAA Specialist) & Dorothy McElwee (NWRC Quality Manager and NI QA Review) taking Workshop on Handling Complaints and the Good Practice Framework.

HE Conference - Assisting providers in preparing for Quality Review Visits

CONTINUED

The 6 workshops were themed around the following:

- 1. Governance: Roles and Responsibilities:** Promoting student involvement in the HE Process
- 2. Expectations of Quality Code;** including student learning experience
- 3. Consumer Protection:** Ensuring consumer protection obligations are met through effective policy and procedure
- 4. Handling Complaints and the Good Practice Framework:** ensuring policy and procedures are transparent and communicated in timely manner
- 5. The Quality Review Process:** Provider submission, Student submission, facilitator, the visit and the report
- 6. Role of the Lead Student Representative:** Student submission, the role of the Lead Student Rep and the QR Visit.

Delegates participating in one of the six workshops

Feedback from the event was very positive and both the QAA and the local higher education providers have developed a greater understanding of the quality assessment requirements that will apply.

The Northern Ireland Quality review visits are due to take place between February and June 2018. All the providers involved have already been notified by the QAA as to the week of their review, and preparatory work within each provider is already under way.



section
6

Undergraduate Awards 2017

A huge congratulations to the fourteen undergraduate students from Northern Ireland who have been recognised in the 2017 Undergraduate Awards Programme.

The mission of the Undergraduate Awards, which is part funded by DfE, is to find and celebrate outstanding undergraduate work, and those students who have the capacity to become future influencers. It is the world's largest international academic awards programme, recognizing innovation and excellence at undergraduate level.

Papers from Northern Ireland's recognised students have been selected as among the very best from an overall pool of over 6,000 submissions from 299 institutions in 48 countries.

Sarah McKenna (pictured far left) from Queen's University Belfast has been named the Undergraduate Award Global winner in the category of Social Sciences: Sociology & Social Policy.

Jasmine McCrory (Literature), Ryan Sterritt (Medical Sciences) both from Queen's University Belfast and Lucy Coburn (Education) from Stranmillis University College were named regional winners from the island of Ireland in their category. Details of all awards winners can be found on the [Undergraduate Awards website](#).

To hear a bit more from two of the students recognised, click the name below:

HANNAH

JASMINE



Further Information

We would be delighted to have any feedback, suggestions or queries.
Please contact us via one of the following methods:

T: 028 90 25 7745

E: HE.StrategyProgrammeManagementOffice@economy-ni.gov.uk

Tell A Colleague

Do you know a colleague who might be interested in receiving this e-zine?
If so please forward this issue of the e-zine to them

If a colleague has forwarded this e-zine to you and you would like to subscribe to
receive future issues please [click here](#)

If you would like to unsubscribe from this newsletter, please [click here](#)