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## Group of National Experts on Vocational Education and Training

A Skills beyond School Commentary on Northern Ireland  
OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training

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*This country report has been prepared as part of Skills beyond School, the OECD's thematic review of postsecondary vocational education and training. For more information please see: [www.oecd.org/education/vet](http://www.oecd.org/education/vet). This report is only available in PDF format.*

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**OECD Reviews of Vocational  
Education and Training**

**A SKILLS BEYOND  
SCHOOL COMMENTARY  
ON NORTHERN IRELAND**

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January 2014



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# A Skills beyond School Commentary on Northern Ireland

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## **Summary: Strengths and challenges of postsecondary vocational education and training in Northern Ireland**

### ***Strengths***

- Substantial efforts have been made to sustain and develop employers' engagement with postsecondary VET. In particular, the six further education colleges aim to maintain a strong collaboration with regional employers.
- Successful mergers have led to an efficient regional structure of six further education colleges. This consolidation opens the possibility for stronger synergies and to take advantage of economies of scale.
- Foundation degrees are developed locally in partnership with employers. Proposals for new foundation degrees are expected to strengthen further the involvement of employers in the design of the programme.
- A rigorous quality assurance scheme is in operation. A specialised quality and performance body undertakes monitoring visits to suppliers and participating employers.
- There is considerable attention to the development of the teaching workforce. There are specific efforts to both evaluate and respond to teachers' training needs in the sector.
- Policy on VET is nested within a broader skills and economic development strategy. The local skills strategy establishes specific up-skilling goals for the workforce.
- Career and pastoral services are strong and allow students to have access to independent professional career advice.

### ***Challenges***

- Reflecting both international experience and local demand, the VET system needs to develop a substantial postsecondary segment above upper secondary level and below the level of a bachelor's degree.
- Reform of the apprenticeship system is necessary to enhance its level and broaden its range. The main challenge is to upgrade apprenticeships, while ensuring that structures remain in place to integrate young people at risk into the labour market. A review of apprenticeships and of youth training are already advancing. Outside apprenticeships, work-based learning is a limited element in

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programmes. Work-based learning, systematically integrated into vocational programmes as a mandatory, credit-bearing and quality assured component, is a key element in effective postsecondary provision.

- Routes for further up-skilling vocational graduates, including avenues for apprentice graduates to progress to higher level technical and professional qualifications, need to be developed.
- The qualification system requires reform, in the face of proliferating qualifications and potential divergences between the approach of England and that of Northern Ireland.
- Foundation degrees face a number of challenges if they are to become the predominant qualification in the mix of provision.
- More robust data on labour market outcomes are needed, building on already planned measures designed to collect better data on vocational graduates, and encouraging institutions to make use of data for policy evaluation and development.

### **The commentary on Northern Ireland and its place in the wider OECD study**

This commentary is one of a series of country reports on postsecondary vocational education and training prepared as part of an OECD study (see Box 1). The series includes *reviews*, involving an in-depth analysis of a country system leading to a set of policy recommendations backed by analysis. In addition there are *commentaries* (such as this one). These simpler exercises include an assessment of strengths and challenges in the country system. The commentaries are designed to be of value as free-standing reports, but are also prepared so that they can become the first phase of a full review, should a country so wish.

### **Box 1 Skills beyond School: The OECD study of postsecondary vocational education and training**

Increasingly countries look beyond secondary school to more advanced qualifications to provide the skills needed in many of the fastest growing technical and professional jobs in OECD economies. The OECD study, *Skills beyond School*, is addressing the range of policy questions arising, including funding and governance, matching supply and demand, quality assurance and equity and access. The study will build on the success of the previous OECD study of vocational education and training *Learning for Jobs* which examined policy through 17 country reviews and a comparative report. The study also forms part of the horizontal OECD *Skills Strategy*.

Full country policy reviews are being conducted in Austria, Denmark, Egypt, Germany, Israel, Netherlands, Korea, Switzerland, the United Kingdom (England), and the United States (with case studies of Florida, Maryland and Washington State). Shorter exercises leading to an OECD country commentary will be undertaken in Belgium (Flanders), Canada, Iceland, Romania, Spain, Sweden and in Northern Ireland and Scotland in the United Kingdom. Background reports will be prepared in all these countries, and in France and Hungary.

See: [www.oecd.org/education/vet](http://www.oecd.org/education/vet)

This commentary outlines the main features of the Northern Ireland postsecondary vocational education and training system. It then provides a brief assessment of the main strengths of the system and the policy challenges which need to be addressed by Northern Ireland in the future. This assessment is supported by international comparisons that illustrate how other countries have dealt with similar challenges.

This commentary was prepared using a standard methodology. Authorities in Northern Ireland provided a background report (Department for Employment and Learning, 2013) following which an OECD team made a visit to Belfast on 4-6 June 2013, where the team discussed issues arising with a range of policy makers, stakeholders and staff in training institutions.

## The background: Education and training in Northern Ireland

### *Educational levels<sup>1</sup>*

Education is compulsory until the age of 16 and the majority of students continue with full-time education afterwards. All state schools enjoy a high level of autonomy in relation to budgets and staffing, balanced by a high degree of accountability (see Box 2).

#### **Box 2 Education in Northern Ireland**

Education in Northern Ireland is the responsibility of the government but provision of education is decentralised. Central administration of pre-primary and secondary education and the youth service is the responsibility of the Department of Education while The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment advises the Department of Education, monitors standards and awards qualifications. The further and higher education sectors are the responsibility of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL).

The Education and Training Inspectorate, which is part of the Department of Education, inspects schools, further education institutions and training organisations. At higher education level, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education provides quality assurance services across the United Kingdom. This agency is independent of UK governments and is owned by the organisations that represent the heads of UK higher education institutions.

*Source:* Adapted from European Encyclopaedia on National Education Systems (EENES) (2013), Eurypedia. United Kingdom (Northern Ireland). Overview, <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/United-Kingdom-Northern-Ireland:Overview> (accessed 17 June 2013).

Upper-secondary education is characterised by subject specialisation and a range of providers aiming to provide people with a large choice of programmes leading to general/academic, pre-vocational or vocational qualifications. Qualifications are offered by awarding organisations that are external to the school/college within a qualifications framework that is common to England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EENES, 2013).

Higher education institutions are independent private bodies, they receive their income from a number of sources, including student fees, but they also receive public funds. Higher education institutions are responsible for their own admission policy, their degrees, and the conditions on which they are awarded. But all institutions structure their programmes along broadly similar lines (EENES, 2013).

**Table 1 The education system in Northern Ireland**

Phase of education	Type of institution		Year/grade key	Typical age
Higher and further education	Further education institutions and private training providers	Higher education institutions (universities and other higher education institutions)		18 +
Upper secondary education	Vocational or academic qualifications including apprenticeships, GCE AS-level and GCE A-level examinations (usually taken at age 17 and 18 respectively) provide access to further and higher education and the world of work			
	Further education institutions and private training providers	School sixth forms		17 — 18
				16 — 17
	General Certificates of Secondary Education ( GCSEs ) in academic or vocational/applied subjects (usually taken at age 16) provide access to post-compulsory general/academic and vocational studies and the world of work			
	Lower secondary education	Secondary schools (including engagement with further education colleges via the "Entitlement Framework" in years 11 and 12)	Key stage 4	Y12
Y11				14 — 15
Key stage 3			Y10	13 — 14
			Y9	12 — 13
Primary education	Primary schools	Key stage 2	Y8	11 — 12
			Y7	10 — 11
			Y6	9 — 10
		Key stage 1	Y5	8 — 9
			Y4	7 — 8
		Foundation stage	Y3	6 — 7
			Y2	5 — 6
Pre-school and nursery education	Pre-school settings which include statutory nursery schools , nursery units attached to statutory primary schools, voluntary playgroups and private day nurseries		Y1	4 — 5

*Source:* Adapted from National Foundation for Education Research (2010), Diagram of Education System in Northern Ireland, [www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/index.cfm?9B19C763-C29E-AD4D-0523-E50CBB9AE495](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/index.cfm?9B19C763-C29E-AD4D-0523-E50CBB9AE495), (accessed on 17 June 2013).

## Postsecondary vocational education and training

### *Postsecondary VET institutions and programmes<sup>2</sup>*

Postsecondary VET in Northern Ireland includes several programmes and institutions, but further education colleges play the biggest role. Key programmes include: *Further education provision*; *Training for Success*; *Programme-Led Apprenticeships*; and *ApprenticeshipsNI* (DEL, 2013).

#### *Further education (FE)*

Further education in Northern Ireland has traditionally occupied the sphere between compulsory school education and higher education, delivered by universities.<sup>3</sup> As such, the largest group of people in further education tend to be those aged between 16 and 19, but many other age groups undertake full or part-time further education. FE colleges are therefore the main providers of sub-bachelor level professional and technical education and training in Northern Ireland. FE colleges also play a central role in raising literacy levels and in providing skills. Six multi-campus regional colleges enrol about 150 000 students (DEL, 2013), 8% more than when the colleges were reorganised on a regional basis in 2007/08 (DEL, 2013). Achievement rates vary by subject area: biological sciences had the lowest achievement rate of 60% while education, creative arts and design and mass communication and documentation had the highest rates at 90% or more (DEL, 2013). The overall achievement rate in the 2011/12 academic year was 84%, an increase of four percentage points on the previous year (DEL, 2013).

#### *Specific initiatives*

*Training for Success (TfS)* is designed to develop relevant occupational and employability skills while addressing both essential skills barriers and personal and social development needs. During an initial assessment period a Personal Training Plan (PTP) is developed, tailored to meet the individual's personal and social development needs. TfS includes: *i*) Skills for Your Life – a training programme of up to fifty-two weeks to address the personal and development needs of young people who have disengaged from learning or face other learning obstacles; *ii*) Skills for Work – a programme of up to fifty-two weeks of training to help young people gain skills and a Vocationally Related Qualification at Level 1 to be able to gain employment and/or to progress to higher level training at Level 2. The programme is delivered by providers in the voluntary and private sector as well as FE colleges (DEL, 2013).

*Programme-Led Apprenticeships (PLA)* were introduced in September 2009 as a measure to support school leavers in a dwindling job market. The guarantee and age eligibility conditions plus support structures are similar to those in place for TfS. Participants are unwaged and follow a level 2 apprenticeship framework similar to that which they would have followed had they been able to access employment (DEL, 2013). The programme was closed to new entrants as of June 2013.

*ApprenticeshipsNI* is open to those who have reached the minimum school leaving age and are in, or about to take up, employment with a Northern Ireland based employer. Participants must be contracted to work a minimum of 21 hours per week (inclusive of day release/off-the-job training) and be paid in accordance with the National Minimum Wage regulations. Apprenticeship training can take up to four years to complete depending on the occupational field, and aims to help participants to develop skills and knowledge required to work at a high level in their chosen occupation. Participants are expected to follow and achieve externally regulated Qualification and Credit Framework qualifications at levels 2 or level 3. The programme is delivered by a range of training providers, but the vast majority (90%) of level 3 apprenticeships are delivered by FE colleges. There are currently over 100 different apprenticeship frameworks on offer (DEL, 2013).

### **Previous OECD analysis and recommendations**

Recent relevant OECD work has largely been undertaken within the UK context, including the OECD Economic Surveys: United Kingdom (2013); Jobs for Youth: UK (2008); and, more recently, a review of Northern Ireland undertaken by the Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED) Programme at the OECD (OECD, forthcoming). Employment, education and training policies are devolved to Northern Ireland.

Currently, alongside this commentary on Northern Ireland, a full review of England (Musset and Field, 2013) and a commentary on Scotland (Kuczera, 2013) have been published— all funded by the UKCES. The review of England makes a number of policy recommendations some of which are either directly or indirectly relevant to Northern Ireland, either because the recommendations concern UK-wide arrangements (such as the system of awarding bodies), or because programmes and policies in Northern Ireland have some similarities to those in England (see Box 3).

### **Box 3 The OECD's Skills beyond School review of England: Key conclusions**

#### **Strengths of the system**

- The needs of many different groups of learners are met through diverse offers.
- The autonomy of FE colleges allows them to be entrepreneurial and flexible.
- Quality assurance arrangements are demanding.
- Higher Apprenticeships, introduced in 2009, are growing fast and are highly valued by employers and students.
- England enjoys a strong base of research expertise, and good data. The UKCES plays an important role in providing strategic policy advice.

#### **Challenges and recommendations**

##### ***Strategic development of the postsecondary sector***

Challenge: England has too little vocational provision at postsecondary level in comparison with many other countries, and relative to potential demand.

Recommendation: Take strategic measures to encourage the expansion of high quality postsecondary vocational programmes reflecting both labour market demand and student needs. Review funding and progression arrangements to this end.

##### ***The rationalisation of vocational qualifications***

Challenge: The current system of awarding bodies for qualifications inhibits employer engagement in the development of qualifications at both national or local level and causes confusion because of the large number of overlapping qualifications.

Recommendation: To implement a franchise system for vocational qualifications, under which awarding bodies would bid for the right and the obligation to provide a set of qualifications within specific professional domains, during a franchise period. Qualifications should allow a proportion of the curriculum to be locally negotiated with employers by training providers.

##### ***Mandatory workplace training***

Challenge: Postsecondary VET programmes make limited and variable use of workplace training, although it plays a central role in the strongest postsecondary VET programmes.

Recommendation: To make quality workplace training a substantial and mandatory part of postsecondary VET programmes. Build local partnerships between employers and FE colleges to this end.

**Box 3 The OECD's Skills beyond School review of England:  
Key conclusions (*continued*)**

***Supporting the professional development of the further education college workforce***

Challenge: Continuing reforms need to get the balance right between pedagogical preparation and up-to-date industry experience in the FE workforce.

Recommendation: Pursue reform of further education college teacher qualification requirements to ensure a good balance between pedagogical skills and up-to-date industry experience.

Source: Musset, P., and Field, S. (2013), *A Skills beyond School Review of England*, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, OECD Publishing. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264203594-en>

The OECD Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED) Programme review of Northern Ireland (OECD, forthcoming), recommends strengthening the role of employers (especially SMEs) in the design and delivery of vocational education and training to meet local demand, and that the apprenticeship system in Northern Ireland should be reformed to make it more responsive to non-traditional sectors at the local level (OECD, forthcoming).

The OECD Economic Survey of the UK (2013) argues that central and local governments should enhance co-operation with employers on VET and apprenticeship programmes. It recommends: *i*) raising awareness of government programmes to support youth employment; *ii*) simplifying training and apprenticeship systems; and *iii*) enhancing co-operation between local authorities, schools and enterprises in integrating graduates into the labour market (OECD, 2013a:31).

The OECD Jobs for Youth Review of the UK (2008) recommends simplification of the academic and vocational qualifications framework, less gender segregation in apprenticeship training and more participation by ethnic minorities. It recommends guidelines on the minimum number of hours of training to be provided in apprenticeships, the promotion employer-provided off-the-job training and the involvement of group training associations in apprenticeship schemes. Apprenticeship recruitment should set targets to favour jobless candidates and action should be taken to raise apprenticeship completion rates (OECD, 2008).

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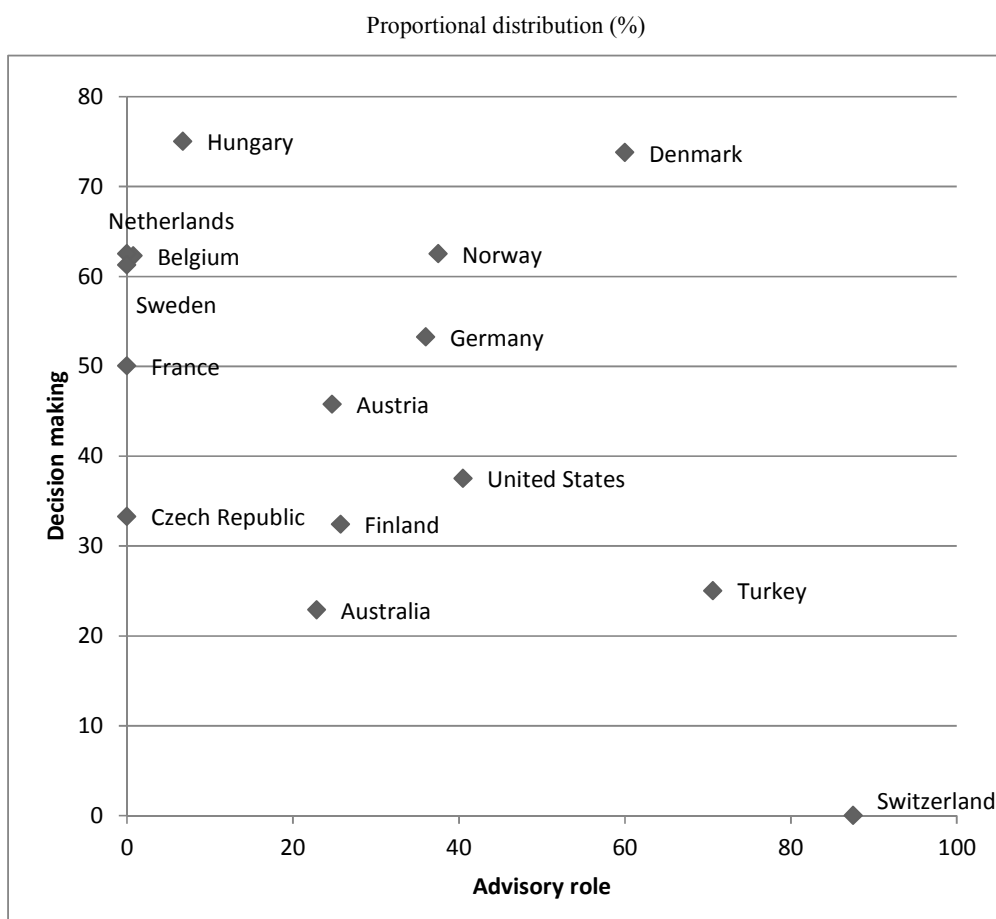
## **Strengths and challenges of the postsecondary VET system in Northern Ireland**

This section of the commentary provides an assessment both of the strengths of Northern Ireland's postsecondary VET system and the challenges it faces, drawing on the OECD mission to Northern Ireland and the information presented in the background report. The framework for the assessment is provided by OECD analysis of vocational education and training systems across the world (Box 1).

### ***Strengths***

#### *Employers' engagement*

*In OECD countries*, one of the main challenges for vocational programmes is to meet the needs of the labour market effectively, and the engagement of social partners – both employers and unions - is essential to this process. But the degree of engagement varies markedly among countries (OECD, 2010). One key variable is the extent of influence over the VET system which is granted to employers and unions. A very limited advisory role is likely to be self-defeating since employers and unions will not invest in a consultative body unless they obtain significant leverage. For example, the participation of professional organisations in VET programmes might range from an advisory to a decision making role. Figure 1 shows how a selected group of OECD countries appear in terms of the combination of decision making and advisory roles. At one extreme, in Hungary, the participation of professional organisations is largely concentrated in decision making and there is a relatively small advisory role. At the other extreme, in Switzerland, the participation of professional organisations is largely concentrated in advisory tasks.

**Figure 1 The impact of social partners in VET**

Source: Author's elaboration based on data from Kuczera, M. (2010), *The OECD International Survey of VET Systems*, OECD, Publishing.

*In Northern Ireland*, the six FE colleges maintain strong collaboration with regional employers, offering a wide range of economically focused provision, tailored to meet both local and regional needs. Decisions on the number and type of student places and courses offered are driven by the level of demand locally, and the college commitment to delivering the priority skills needed in Northern Ireland. It is the responsibility of individual colleges to meet the needs of learners and employers in their areas in a cost effective way (Department for Employment and Learning 2013:41). In addition, through the Department's Employer Support

Programme, colleges are encouraged to work closely with Small to Medium-sized Enterprises and micro-businesses to provide unique training interventions to up-skill employees and owners who have skills deficits in areas such as innovation or research and development. Colleges also support economic development, by being the recognised skills provider of choice for a number of other wider governmental and DEL-led initiatives.

The *Training for Success* programme is demand-led and delivered by over 40 training suppliers currently contracted by DEL. Under the programme, work placements are provided by host employers willing to provide quality training to participants to develop professional and technical skills and assist progression towards sustainable employment. An employer agreement must be signed for every work placement and indicates the type of training that will be provided. Employers are also crucial to the *ApprenticeshipsNI* programme as all apprentices must be employed from day one and participating employers are responsible for the on-the-job element of training (DEL, 2013:39-42).

#### *The governance framework for FE colleges is clear and effective*

*Across OECD countries*, managing multiple vocational institutions and programmes to deliver strategic coherence without damaging diversity and innovation is a major challenge. Institutional autonomy, while promoting local innovation, can add to the challenge of coherence and co-ordination. There are particular challenges for vocational programmes because of the additional need to engage social partners with their different agendas. Potential challenges might include:

- Lack of clarity for potential and actual students in the face of multiple pathways and sometimes competing offers.
- Lack of clarity for employers about the function and value of different qualification.
- Difficulties in articulation and transitions between different institutions and programmes.

In the face of these challenges, OECD countries often maintain co-ordination bodies designed to provide an overall steer for the VET system. The frameworks in Denmark and Switzerland build on strong industrial bodies (employer organisations and trade unions) and a long tradition of engagement in vocational education and training.

*In Northern Ireland* the reorganisation of FE colleges as six regional bodies merged smaller colleges, taking advantage of synergies between different institutions, and economies of scale. Such mergers are

always difficult to handle but typically fruitful, and the successful realisation of these mergers is a real strength (see Box 4). The colleges have missions to serve their regional communities, but at the same time, they enjoy a significant degree of autonomy: employing their own staff, owning their own property and having the right to charge fees where necessary (DEL, 2013:46). The Department for Employment and Learning does, however, retain the power to do all that is necessary or expedient for the purposes of the exercise of its duty under Article 3 of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 in so far as it relates to further education. In particular, the Department may make grants, loans and other payments for the purposes of, or in connection with, the provision of further education and also establish, amalgamate, recognise or provide for the discontinuance an institution of further education.

#### **Box 4 Reorganisations through institutional mergers**

*In Finland*, schools of higher vocational education were established in the 1990s mainly by merging existing technical and business colleges, plus other institutions formerly at secondary level.

*In Denmark*, until the late 1960s, the VET system was composed of professional schools (covering areas such as engineering, business studies, veterinary science and dentistry) and many smaller specialised schools and colleges, and it was highly fragmented. Many schools were small and thus vulnerable to fluctuations in budgets, staff and student intake. In 2000, the act on medium-cycle higher education created a common framework for all of these programmes and institutions. Postsecondary vocational education was redesigned in two sectors: nine academies of professional higher education, providing two-year degrees, and seven university colleges, providing three-year bachelor's programmes. 25 standard programmes replaced the previously existing 70 short-cycle programmes of varying content and length (Danish Agency for Higher Education and Educational Support, 2012). Their creation was surrounded by much controversy as professional groups and local interests feared for the independence of their educational institutions, but now the majority of the stakeholders seem to be satisfied with the new system (Rasmussen, 2004).

*In the Netherlands*, mergers between research intensive universities and universities of applied science (*hogescholen*) have become a chief mechanism for creating flexibility and sustaining growth.

#### **Box 4 Reorganisations through institutional mergers (*continued*)**

Kyvik (2002) discusses the merger of 98 vocationally-oriented colleges into 26 state colleges in Norway. The mergers, which took place in 1994, have in many ways proved to be a successful reform. The colleges now have more competent administration and professional leadership, and they have become far more visible and have acquired a higher status.

*Source:* Danish Agency for Higher Education and Educational Support (2012), *Skills beyond School: OECD Review of Post-Secondary Vocational Education and Training – National Background Report for Denmark*, <http://fivu.dk/en/publications/2012/oecd-review-skills-beyond-school-2013-national-background-report-for-denmark>; Kyvik, S. (2002), “The merger of non-university colleges in Norway”, *Higher Education*, Vol. 44, N° 1; Rasmussen P. (2004), “Towards flexible differentiation in higher education? Recent changes in Danish higher education” in Fägerlind I. and G. Strömqvist (Eds.) *Reforming Higher Education in the Nordic Countries: Studies of Change in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden*, International Institute for Educational Planning, UNESCO, 2004.

#### *Foundation degrees are developed locally through partnerships*

Outside the United Kingdom, a number of countries, including the United States, Canada, Korea, the Netherlands, and Flanders in Belgium maintain two-year “associate” or “foundation” degrees. Their key characteristic is that they are closely linked with bachelor degrees and are articulated so that students may progress to a bachelor’s degree through the addition of one or two more years of study – typically in a different institution which is very often a university. In some countries, such as the Netherlands and Flanders, they are entirely vocational, and therefore linked to “professional” bachelor degrees. But elsewhere, as in the United States and the UK, they may be either academic or vocational (in the US they are explicitly identified in one or other category). In the US, Canada and Korea, two-year degrees play a major role, so that substantial proportions (10–20%) of the adult workforce have such qualifications as their highest qualification. Foundation and associate degrees are not sharply distinct from other two-year vocational programmes. But, looked at internationally, there are also a much wider set of postsecondary short cycle vocational programmes, including a number of two-year programmes, which are much more free-standing, with relatively weaker links with bachelors programmes in universities. Denmark for example, maintains two-year programmes in

professional academies that often articulate with university college bachelor degrees.

*In Northern Ireland* foundation degrees are professional and technical higher education qualifications delivered by FE regional colleges but awarded by one of the Northern Ireland universities or the Open University. Foundation degrees are first and foremost a stand-alone qualification, but articulation to an honours degree is one option for successful students (DEL, 2013). Proposals for new foundation degrees are expected to strengthen further the involvement of employers in the design of the programme, the specific employment opportunities that will be open to someone who holds the proposed foundation degree and the bachelor degrees to which a foundation degree graduate may progress (DEL, 2007:40).

#### *A rigorous quality assurance regime*

Across OECD countries, quality assurance guarantees that institutions and programmes meet minimum requirements, a particularly important requirement in a decentralised system (Field et al., 2012). Kis and Park (2012) argue that strong quality assurance mechanisms in postsecondary VET programmes should ensure that graduates are better prepared for entry into the labour market and have successful careers. High quality programmes are more likely to be perceived by firms as relevant to their needs, and therefore worth the investment of time and money. In turn, this should facilitate industry engagement and encourage companies to offer workplace training to VET students (Kis and Park, 2012:46).

*In Northern Ireland*, the Quality and Performance Branch of the DEL undertakes a programme of compliance monitoring visits to contracted suppliers and participating employers. These visits aim to monitor supplier's performance in relation to the performance standards set out in their respective contracts. The Education and Training Inspectorate inspects the quality of provision across all further education, training and employment programmes. In addition, all further education colleges, training suppliers and lead contractors of the Department's employment programme are required to submit an annual self-assessment of the quality of their own provision. (DEL, 2013:43-53).

DEL publishes an annual assessment of quality and performance across its key programmes and provision. The latest report, *Delivering Success through Excellence* published in May 2012, seeks to augment and give context to the work of the Department's Quality and Improvement Adviser and wider assessments of quality, such as those conducted by the Education and Training Inspectorate and the Quality Assurance Agency. The report provides an update on a range of important performance indicators across

the spectrum of DEL provision and outlines the progress that has been made on the implementation of the Department’s Quality and Performance Action Plan (DEL, 2013:54).

*Attention to the development of the teaching workforce*

*Across OECD countries*, the quality of the teaching and training profession is as critical in vocational programmes as it is in general education (OECD, 2010). Often there are challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers who meet the demanding twin requirements of pedagogical skills, and practical professional expertise. While most countries require teachers to have pedagogical preparation, and usually practical experience in their specialism, keeping that practical knowledge of the workplace up-to-date is often more of a challenge (see Box 5 for one example). This challenge is typically addressed in two ways. First, part-time working arrangements, with practitioners continuing to work in their field while also working as trainee teachers, have obvious advantages. Second, directly recruiting practitioners from industry in mid-career is useful. Both strategies require a suitably flexible framework of pedagogical preparation suitable to persons in this position (rather than one merely adapted to younger entrants to the profession).

**Box 5 The preparation of vocational teachers in Switzerland**

Teachers and trainers in postsecondary professional colleges are well-prepared both in their profession and pedagogically. The Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, SFIVET (*Eidgenössisches Hochschulinstitut für Berufsbildung, EHB*) provides basic and continuing training to examiners and college teachers. They are required to have a professional college degree, or a higher education degree, or an equivalent qualification in their chosen field. Both full and part-time teachers are required to pursue a specialised programme in vocational pedagogy, covering the skills required to convey practical skills rather than academic knowledge. The supply of well-trained teachers and trainers is underpinned by the high prestige of teaching in a professional college and flexible arrangements to blend work in the profession with teaching. Such part-time teaching arrangements not only allow teachers to keep their job in industry, but also ensure that professional colleges’ curricula reflect up-to-date industry requirements.

*Source:* Hoeckel, K., S. Field and W. Grubb (2009), *OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training: A Learning for Jobs Review of Switzerland 2009*, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, OECD Publishing. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264113985-en>

*In Northern Ireland*, there is much attention given to the preparation of teachers and trainers in VET. Following an evaluation of the teacher education programme in FE in 2006, DEL revised the teaching qualification in order to meet the needs of the 14-19 agenda and facilitate the transfer of teachers' skills across the post-primary education sector. This qualification is known as the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (further education) and is delivered by the University of Ulster. The qualification is underpinned by the Lifelong Learning UK professional standards for teachers. With effect from September 2009, this has become a mandatory qualification for all new-entrants, permanent, full-time and associate lecturers who are not qualified teachers. The induction component must be completed within the first year of teaching and be followed within the next two years by the successful completion of the second year of the postgraduate certificate (DEL, 2009:2-3). In addition, the Department is currently piloting a short programme to allow part-time lecturers to develop the requisite pedagogical skills. The aim is to provide appropriate content delivered in a flexible manner to ensure the requirements to exercise a teaching activity in the FE sector do not become barriers for the incorporation of industry trainers hired on a part-time basis.

*A VET system which is underpinned by broader economic and skills strategies*

The OECD's Skills Strategy (OECD, 2012) describes how different strands of policy – on the development of skills in education and training systems, and their maintenance and development in the labour market, alongside other factors such as migration – all feed into the development of workforce skills. While very often these different strands of policy are linked to different government departments, with different objectives and agendas, countries can gain by explicit measures and arrangements to co-ordinate these different strands of policy into an overall skills strategy.

*In Northern Ireland* such co-ordination is already explicit. The Northern Ireland Skills Strategy sets out a vision for skills development in the province. This strategy will be realised by focusing on those entering the labour force for the first time; up-skilling the existing workforce; and ensuring that those currently excluded from the labour force are provided with the skills to compete for jobs, retain jobs and progress up the skills ladder. The Skills Strategy is a key driver of the Executive's economic vision for Northern Ireland (DEL, 2013:2).

The aim of the Skills Strategy of NI is to enable people to access and progress up the skills ladder, in order to: *i)* raise the skills level of the whole workforce; *ii)* raise productivity; *iii)* increase levels of social

inclusion by enhancing the employability of those currently excluded from the labour market; and *iv*) secure Northern Ireland's future in a global marketplace. To do so, the following targets are pursued:

- Increase the proportion of those people in employment:
  - with Level 2 skills and above to 84-90% by 2020, from a baseline of 71% in 2008;
  - with Level 3 skills and above to 68-76% by 2020, from a baseline of 56% in 2008;
  - with Level 4-8 skills and above to 44-52% by 2020, from a baseline of 33% in 2008.
- To increase the proportion of those qualifying from Northern Ireland higher education institutions with graduate and post graduate level courses in STEM subjects<sup>4</sup> by 25-30% in 2020 from a baseline of 18% in 2008 (DEL, 2011:6).

#### *Career guidance and pastoral care are strong*

*Across OECD countries*, more complex careers, with more options in both work and learning, are expanding opportunities. But they are also making decisions harder as young people face a sequence of complex choices over a lifetime of learning and work. Helping young people to make these decisions is the task of career guidance. But in many countries career guidance faces a number of challenges: too often those offering guidance are inadequately acquainted with labour market issues, with career guidance sometimes playing a subsidiary role to psychological counselling; guidance services can be fragmented, under-resourced and reactive, so that those who need guidance most may fail to obtain it; advice sometimes lacks objectivity because guidance personnel are based in education institutions with a pro-academic bias; relevant labour market information is not always available or readily digestible and comprehensible; and the evidence base on what works in career guidance is too weak (OECD, 2010).

*In Northern Ireland*, most of these common challenges of career guidance are effectively addressed. The Careers Service of DEL aims to ensure that young people who enter training will have access to careers services. Industry factsheets provide relevant information on job prospects and relevant skills and entry requirements. Guidance services offered by college careers departments are buttressed by the option of referral by the college staff to the Careers Service to access independent careers guidance (DEL, 2013:51).

### *Challenges<sup>3</sup>*

#### *Meeting the demand for postsecondary vocational education and training*

One over-arching challenge, faced by many countries, is the need to meet demand for postsecondary vocational education and training – that is qualifications above upper secondary level, but less than a bachelor’s degree (see Box 6).

#### **Box 6 Postsecondary vocational education and training: Supply and demand**

In the United States around 12% of the labour force has a postsecondary certificate as their highest qualification – and certificate graduation rates have tripled in recent years. A further 10% have an associate degree (Kuczera and Field, 2013). Similarly in Canada, around one-quarter of the cohort gains an associate degree as their highest qualification (Department of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2012). In France, in 2010-2011 almost 360 000 students were enrolled in two-year postsecondary VET programmes (*Brevet de technicien supérieur* and *Diplôme universitaire de technologie*), representing one-third of the students entering postsecondary education (Ministère de l'éducation nationale / Ministère de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche, 2013). In Korea, roughly one-third of the youth cohort enters junior college or polytechnic programmes, which are dominated by two-year programmes in postsecondary VET (Kis and Park, 2012). In Scotland, in 2008/9 nearly 17 000 persons graduated with higher national certificates and diplomas, compared with 32 000 with bachelor degrees (Scottish government, 2010). In Switzerland around 15% of the entire cohort graduate through the professional education and training system, through professional colleges and industry-led federal exams (Fazekas and Field, 2013). In some other countries, while postsecondary VET is smaller in scale, it is rapidly growing. In Sweden, the numbers enrolled in higher VET programmes trebled between 2001 and 2011, while in Romania enrolments in post high school education grew from 44 000 in 2005/6 to 70 000 in 2010/11 (Ministry of Education and Research Sweden, 2013; NCDTVET Romania, 2013). All of the programmes mentioned here are substantial one-two year postsecondary vocational programmes.

Outside the United Kingdom, apprenticeships also play a significant postsecondary role. In Ireland all apprenticeships are postsecondary, with a school-leaving certificate a pre-requisite (Kis, 2010). In Canada, a substantial proportion of apprentices have high school diplomas. Even in Germany, where apprenticeship is nominally at upper secondary level, the average age of a starting apprentice is 19, while around 20% of starting apprentices already have the German equivalent of A-levels, the *Abitur*, which also grants entry to university. In France, there were 111 405 apprentices at the postsecondary level in 2010-2011, about 60% of them in two-year apprenticeships in the service sectors (RERS, 2012).

**Box 6 Postsecondary vocational education and training: Supply and demand  
(continued)**

On the demand side, a forecast of employment change in the 27 EU countries between 2010 and 2020 implied that nearly two-thirds of overall employment growth will be concentrated in the technicians and associate professionals category - the category (one of nine) most closely linked to postsecondary VET. The same category currently represents only 15% of EU employment. Similarly, in the United States Carnevale et. al. (2010) predict that in the decade to 2018, nearly two-thirds of job vacancies will require more than high school education, but only half of these, or one-third of all vacancies will require four-year degrees or more. So nearly one-third of the vacancies will require some postsecondary qualification but less than a four-year degree – in most cases a postsecondary vocational qualification - in the US context an associate degree, certificate, or certification (Kuczera and Field, 2013).

In sum, the overall implication is that most OECD economies need a substantial and growing amount of postsecondary vocational provision below bachelor level.

Northern Ireland and England stand out as countries where, relative both to other countries, and to potential demand, there is limited provision of postsecondary VET (Scotland, by contrast, through a wide range of Scottish higher national diplomas and certificates, has a much fuller level of provision). *In Northern Ireland* foundation degrees represent the main means of meeting this demand, although in the future higher level apprenticeships may play a more significant role, but in neither case is the level of provision very significant. The outstanding challenge is to consider whether growth in these two domains will be sufficient to meet likely actual and latent demand.

*Upgrading apprenticeships*

*Across OECD countries*, apprenticeships combine education and training in schools or other VET institutions with workplace training. Apprenticeships are common in many countries but particularly strong systems are found in the Germanophone dual system countries where half or more of young people may enter apprenticeships (OECD, 2010). The blend of school and workplace learning offered by apprenticeships is a powerful and effective method of preparing young people for jobs and careers. They are very effective at securing smooth initial transitions into the labour market particularly (but not only) where labour markets are relatively regulated. For example, Quintini and Manfredi (2009) discuss different transition patterns from school to work across OECD countries. They note that in countries with regulated labour markets and strong apprenticeship systems, such as Germany, about 80% of school leavers succeed in rapidly integrating into

the labour market. The design of apprenticeships can be highly variable: on-the-job and off-the-job components are alternated within a week (e.g. Austria, Belgium-Flanders, Germany) or in blocks of several weeks (e.g. Ireland, Canada). In Norway, two years of off-the-job training are followed by two years on-the-job training.

In some OECD countries, apprenticeships are used not only in traditional trades, but also to train apprentices in sectors such as the civil service and tourism. They are also increasingly used to train for technical areas, such as laboratory and hospital technicians. In Norway, apprentices are found in public administration. In Switzerland, a new IT engineer occupation was designated in the 1990s with an associated apprenticeship. In Germany, dual VET programmes are offered in 349 trades and have variable length (between two and three and a half years) according to the field and technical difficulty. Dual system principles have also been applied successfully to higher level technical trades which would involve tertiary education in other countries (Hoeckel and Schwartz, 2010).

One distinctive feature of some apprenticeship systems – notably in some of the dual system countries - is a legislative framework and a distinct apprenticeship contract that is different from a normal employment contract. Such a contract typically defines the conditions under which either apprentice or employer may terminate the arrangement. It also allows the employer to pay the apprentice an agreed (and incrementally increasing) proportion of the standard wage for a skilled worker during the standard period of an apprenticeship. Such contracts, while strongly binding the employer to retain the apprentice during the apprenticeship period (save in exceptional circumstances) leave the employer under no obligation to recruit the apprentice when their training is complete. This classical structure means that the apprenticeship structure is only really suitable for new recruits, and is not normally suitable for incumbent workers, who would have to abandon their normal employment contract to be recruited as an apprentice under an apprenticeship contract.

*In Northern Ireland*, Programme-Led Apprenticeships (PLA) and ApprenticeshipsNI seem to have mixed results. During the OECD team's visit to Belfast, employers' representatives expressed reservations about the level, length and content of many of these apprenticeships and their relevance to local industry. Such reservations clearly erode apprenticeships' attractiveness for both employers and students. However, the content and framework of apprenticeships in Northern Ireland is determined by employer representative bodies themselves. At the same time, it should be noted that some projects enjoy excellent employer engagement in Northern Ireland, such as the ICT apprenticeship programme.

Apprenticeships are now the target of reform; a review of apprenticeships and of youth training are already advancing in Northern Ireland. Such reform faces a number of challenges. One is that there are strong arguments for raising the level of apprenticeships, given the requirements of the economy for higher skills, given the need to raise the status of the apprenticeship brand, and given parallels with other countries where apprenticeship is typically at higher and quite often at postsecondary level. The challenge is to achieve that upgrading while ensuring that structures remain in place to integrate young people at risk into the labour market. Currently the public sector has little direct role as an employer in apprenticeships, because Northern Ireland's own rules stipulate that DEL cannot provide funding for apprenticeships in the public sector. This is unfortunate, not least as the public sector might be expected to do a lot to increase the number and quality of apprenticeships and support deprived groups.

#### *Work-based learning*

In OECD countries the evidence shows that work-based learning is a powerful tool for developing both hard and soft skills, for transitioning students into employment, engaging employers and linking the mix of provision to employer needs. At the same time it is too often neglected, partly because education and training organisations find it easier to work on their own without having to involve employers, and partly because employers do not recognise the potential returns from offering work placements to students.

There is a world of difference between programmes in which internships are an occasional, voluntary addition to the programme and those in which work-based learning is systematically integrated as a credit-bearing element in the programme, subject to quality assurance. Outside formal apprenticeships, where workplace training is the central element, postsecondary VET programmes make variable, but sometimes extensive use of workplace training as a component of programmes, often in the form of substantial internships (typically periods of months). In some cases the requirement is systematic and mandatory (mandatory both for those who deliver the programme and for the students). Evidence from a number of countries suggests that making work-based learning a systematic and mandatory element of programmes is feasible and has multiple benefits (see Box 7). A mandatory arrangement is sometimes initially difficult, as employers and vocational training institutions adjust. Courses designed primarily for part-time students who are in work often make less formal use of workplace training, since it is often assumed (not always correctly) that students are already gaining relevant experience through their ordinary work (OECD, 2010).

### **Box 7 International experience of systematic mandatory workplace learning**

Many institutions tend to operate in silos, and education and training institutions are no exception. Reaching out to employers means breaking out of these silos. It also means overcoming a natural resistance on the part of classroom teachers to the idea that students can learn much in the workplace that they cannot learn so readily in the class room. So institutions naturally need strong incentives to establish partnerships with employers to facilitate an effective workplace learning element in programmes. Employers also need incentives. Sometimes employers believe (often wrongly) that offering work placements is an unnecessary cost, that they can reasonably avoid, while still benefiting by recruiting from the graduates of a vocational programme.

Against this background, making work placements a systematic, mandatory, quality assured and credit-bearing element of a programme can operate as a game-changer. It means that programmes will only be funded when training institutions develop and maintain the active partnerships that support quality work placements. Under these conditions training providers will see employer partnerships as central to their mission, while employers will see that, unless they are willing to offer work placements, the programme from which they draw their recruits may close or contract, and the government funding shift to another sector, or another region. Many currently reluctant employers will choose to offer work placements under these conditions, assuming that they value the training programmes. Potentially it also means that some programmes which are of so little interest to employers that they will not offer placements to students may have to consider reducing training places or even close. This gives employers a desirable influence over the mix of training provision, allied with the principle that the greatest influence goes to those employers that are prepared to contribute most, by way of the offer of work placements.

A number of countries, such as Spain, Romania and Denmark, and more recently Sweden, have effectively transitioned their postsecondary VET systems to ones involving mandatory workplace training. In Spain, in both upper secondary and postsecondary programmes, workplace training normally takes place through a compulsory three-month module at the end of the programmes (Field, Kis and Kuczera, 2012). In Sweden, all two-year higher (postsecondary) vocational programmes have a considerable amount of work-based learning (at least 25% of total programme hours), usually in several blocks. This mandatory work-based component of all programmes allows good co-operation between education providers and employers. The work-based components are designed so that students apply concepts learned in the study programme at the workplace, with specific attention given to the links between theory and practice. The education provider is responsible for quality assurance of the selected workplace programme and many education providers choose to appoint a placement co-ordinator to facilitate the process (Ministry of Education and Research Sweden, 2013). In Denmark, work placement has been mandatory in all programmes since August 2009, to ensure that all programmes are professionally oriented and of relevance for the employers and thus the students. All academy postsecondary 2-year programmes include three months of workplace training and all professional bachelors programmes, include at least six months workplace training (Field et. al., 2012).

*In Northern Ireland*, outside apprenticeships, there is a real challenge in developing the kind of systematic work-based learning that is characteristic of the strongest VET systems. Of course there will be obstacles in realising this objective, but there is in fact a great deal of telling and successful experience of effective reform to realise systematic mandatory work-based learning, even in countries where close partnership with employers has not been a longstanding tradition. The example of Swedish higher vocational education, described in Box 7, is particularly notable, partly because it represents an innovative approach to the funding of postsecondary VET that builds in work-based learning, and partly because Sweden has very successfully expanded this programme against a historical background in which employers have had very little engagement with the vocational training system. For some further examples of OECD analysis of the value of workplace training and recommendations for how to develop it in different national contexts see Kis and Field (2009) on Chile, and Kuczera and Field (2010) on China.

#### *Up-skilling of apprenticeships to higher VET qualifications*

*Across OECD countries*, VET systems face the challenge of ensuring that graduates of the initial VET system have access to further learning opportunities. Such opportunities are desirable because growing technological complexity is increasing the demand for higher level skills, because students themselves are aspiring to higher level qualifications and because the absence of such opportunities tends to leave initial VET pathways as low status dead ends. There is evidence that students are more willing to pursue shorter VET programmes if they know that such programmes offer a route to more advanced studies (Dunkel and Le Mouillour, 2009). In different countries graduates of upper secondary vocational programmes often pursue two sorts of up-skilling – first higher level or more specialised professional training; second, more academic qualifications at bachelors or master level that may open up different or wider career opportunities (see Box 8). Many countries – as different as Denmark and China - are now actively pursuing reforms to improve the “permeability” of higher level qualifications to graduates of initial vocational programmes, explicitly as a means of improving the attractiveness of initial vocational education to young people.

### Box 8 Pathways from vocational qualifications to higher education

While it is not realistic or desirable to imagine that a large proportion of those who initially pursue an initial vocational qualification will subsequently enter academic tertiary education, the steady increase in the level of skills required in modern labour markets imply that efforts should be made to open up tertiary institutions to the greatest extent possible. In Germany, access to university for students without the normal higher education access qualification was substantially enhanced in 2009.<sup>a</sup> Switzerland has been relatively successful at opening *Fachhochschulen* to graduates from the dual apprenticeship system through the creation of a specific vocational matriculation examination (the *Berufsmaturität*), to be completed in parallel to an apprenticeship programme, and that provides access to tertiary education. Today, around 12% of all apprentice graduates obtain the *Berufsmaturität* and they represent half of the students in the universities of applied science (Musset et. al, 2013). Austria introduced a similar exam (the *Lehre mit Matura*) in 2008. In Denmark, in 2005-2007, 8-11% of graduates from academy professional programmes started an academic higher education degree within 27 months (Danish Agency for Higher Education and Educational Support, 2012). In France, it is possible for *institut universitaire de technologie* (IUT) students after the first two years of study to be admitted by universities<sup>b</sup> and the *grandes écoles*, whose masters-level graduates may in turn, pursue their doctorates at universities (Dunkel and Le Mouillour, 2009).

Notes:

a. New regulation permits those who pass an advanced vocational examination (e.g. *Meister*) a general entrance to academic higher education and holders of vocational qualifications without such qualification a subject-specific higher education entrance qualification.

b. In that case the students get course exemptions for the first two years of university.

*In Northern Ireland*, the further education curriculum policy underwent a major review in 2007. Since then the curriculum has been developed to ensure that FE colleges offer provision that strengthens economic and workforce development, enhances social cohesion and advances the individual's skills and learning. As part of the annual College Development Planning processes, colleges are expected to: increase the proportion of enrolments at level 2 and above; increase the proportion of enrolments that are on the regulated qualification frameworks; increase the proportion of enrolments that are on professional and technical courses; and increase the number of learners who complete a recognised qualification in "essential skills". But Northern Ireland does not appear to have clear (and well recognised) avenues for apprentice graduates to progress to higher level technical and professional qualifications such as the master craftsman

qualifications found in Germany and the other German-speaking countries which blend higher level technical skills, skills in running a business, and the capacity to supervise and develop apprentices. Professional examinations, organised by industry or professions but regulated by government, also play a significant role in up-skilling apprentices in the German-speaking countries.

### *Qualification systems*

For employers, recruitment can be a risky task, partly because it is difficult for employers to directly measure skills among potential recruits, and partly because it is sometimes difficult to fire a recruit who turns out to lack relevant skills. The function of vocational qualifications is to serve as a signal, and sometimes a guarantee, that qualified persons have the right set of competences to pursue a particular occupation. That signal allows employers to recruit the right people and allocate them to appropriate tasks and jobs.

For qualifications to be credible to employers, they need to be underpinned by adequate quality assurance – in effect a guarantee that everyone that has the qualification has the required competences at the relevant level. This is obviously particularly important in licensed professions (e.g. in healthcare or electricity) where there are compelling health and safety concerns. More generally, quality assurance needs to be designed around the requirements of employers, so that the qualifications are seen as relevant and up-to-date in the labour market.

Employers may give less weight to formal qualifications in recruitment, if they are in a position to fire recruits that turn out to lack relevant competences – in other words where labour market regulation is less onerous. This is notably the case in the United States and to some extent in the United Kingdom. Some indirect evidence for this conclusion comes from the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (2013b), as it shows that in countries with less labour market regulation, basic skills are more closely correlated with labour market outcomes independently of education level.

The current system of awarding bodies in Northern Ireland has very serious drawbacks. The OECD review of postsecondary vocational education and training in England (Musset and Field, 2013), which parallels this commentary on Northern Ireland, argues that this proliferation of competing qualifications in the system undermines the labour market value of vocational qualifications (see Box 3). It is extraordinarily hard for employers to engage effectively in the construction of qualifications, and a whole sequence of previous OECD reviews has argued for simplification of

the system. These concerns apply widely to vocational qualifications outside higher education.

During the visit of the OECD team to Belfast, employers, authorities and colleges expressed their concern about deficiencies of the current system. Most FE colleges have nevertheless been able to tailor programmes to employer needs and, in practice, have overcome the obstacles posed by the current qualifications system. In the case of Northern Ireland, two alternatives seem plausible at the moment: a move away from the current qualification system in order to create a new and independent one (more like Scotland); or to take part in a substantial reform of the current system along the lines proposed in the OECD review of England.

#### *Clarifying the future direction of foundation degrees*

*Across OECD countries*, shorter postsecondary programmes like foundation degrees are much more likely to be successful when provided by institutions other than universities. The explanation seems to be simple: universities have more incentives to promote longer degrees than shorter ones. Longer courses allow universities to charge more fees and make a more effective use of the resources available. At the same time, it seems that some higher education institutions are not ready to handle the segmentation process generated by the co-existence of two types of programmes oriented to different users. For example in the Netherlands, the Dutch foundation degrees have been placed in the vocational universities (the HBOs) and they have not developed very quickly.

There are also some real questions about the viability of the classical foundation degree model – in other words, one which is closely dependent and linked to a bachelor's degree. In the United States, the vocational associate degrees have a good labour market return, but transition rates from these degrees to full bachelor's degrees are relatively low – so these qualifications have an increasing role as free-standing qualifications (Kuczera and Field, 2013). Conversely in Korea, many of the two-year vocational degrees have very weak rates of return (Kis and Park, 2012). It is notable that in the United States, stable rates of participation in associate degree programmes contrast with rapid increases in participation in shorter vocational “certificate” programmes. One could argue from this experience, alongside the weak take-up in the Netherlands and Flanders for their two-year degrees that the strongest future for foundation degrees might lie in their re-establishment as a qualification more independent of university bachelor degrees.

*In Northern Ireland*, the numbers of students enrolling on foundation degrees and the level of awareness of the qualification by employers is not

as high as DEL would have anticipated at the time of their introduction (see the first challenge above – on the need for a substantial level of provision at this level). As a result, the Department faces a challenge to increase the profile of foundation degrees. The medium term ambition is that foundation degrees will become established as the preferred qualification at level 5 for employers, students and the wider community (DEL, 2013).

A range of measures are being undertaken to help promote foundation degrees. These include:

- *Advertising / promotion campaign*: The campaign is targeted primarily at employers and their employees.
- *Validation of foundation degrees*: The framework requires employer involvement from an early stage in the process to ensure that the developed qualification meets the skills needs of the sector.<sup>5</sup>
- *Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)*: DEL formed a working group that agreed *APEL: Guidelines* which are a model for implementing and achieving uniform policy and practice across Northern Ireland<sup>6</sup> (DEL, 2013).

#### *Insufficient data on labour market outcomes*

*Across OECD countries*, information underpins the link between vocational education and training and the labour market. Knowledge of job prospects allows students to make informed choices about training programmes, and policy makers to see whether graduates are obtaining relevant work; clear information about learning outcomes helps employers to understand what qualified recruits have learnt. Better data can be provided either through one-off surveys of those leaving vocational programmes, or by tracking cohorts of individuals through vocational programmes into employment. Such information needs to be supported by the institutional capacity to analyse and make use of the data.

*In Northern Ireland*, there is, at the moment, insufficient information about the labour market outcomes of VET programmes. This challenge is well-recognised, and in response, DEL will, under its Research Agenda 2012-15 pursue a project on *What happens to students once they leave their further education and training courses?* This study will consider the possibilities of conducting a survey similar to the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) Survey to track leavers from the FE and training sectors. Such a survey should yield labour market information on leavers from all of its key areas of sponsored provision. That in turn will help frame careers advice, student choices, policy development and service delivery. This project has been initiated and is progressing.

## Notes

1. This subsection has been adapted from EENES, 2013.
2. For a detailed description and statistics of postsecondary VET institutions in Northern Ireland and their governance system please see the background report elaborated by Northern Ireland authorities (Department for Employment and Learning, 2013).
3. In addition, it should be also noted that FE is playing an increasingly important role in the provision of qualifications at level 4 and above (HE level).
4. Science, technology, engineering and mathematics.
5. A number of colleges had also expressed either a desire to partner with a university in England in the development and validation of foundation degrees, or an ambition to validate their own foundation degrees. The Department for Education and Learning has clearly stated its policy on a number of occasions that only the local Northern Ireland universities or the Open University can validate foundation degrees and that it has no plans to allow colleges to validate their own qualifications (Department for Employment and Learning, 2013).
6. All Northern Ireland universities and colleges endorsed the *Guidelines* documentation for implementation from the 2011/12 academic year onwards (Department for Employment and Learning, 2013).



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#### **Further reading**

OECD (2010), *Learning for Jobs*, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, OECD Publishing.

See also [www.oecd.org/education/vet](http://www.oecd.org/education/vet).

For more information about OECD work on skills, see [skills.oecd.org](http://skills.oecd.org).