

Skills and Education Group  
Department for the Economy  
Adelaide House  
39-49 Adelaide Street  
Belfast, BT2 8FD

03 March 2023

**RE: Open College Network Northern Ireland response to the Consultation on the Principles for Vocational Qualifications in Northern Ireland**

On behalf of OCN NI, I welcome the opportunity to respond to the public consultation on the *Principles for Vocational Qualifications in Northern Ireland*.

Open College Network NI (OCN NI) is a self-financing educational charity and is currently the largest provider of professional and technical qualifications in N. Ireland. We are an Awarding Organisation that advances education by developing nationally recognised qualifications that recognise the achievements of adults and young people. We work with centres such as Further Education Colleges, Private Training Organisations, Voluntary & Community Organisations, Schools, SMEs, and Public Sector bodies to provide learners with opportunities to progress into further learning and/or employment. We are regulated by CCEA Regulation to develop and award regulated professional and technical (vocational) qualifications from Entry Level up to and including Level 5 across all sector areas. In addition, OCN NI is also regulated by Ofqual to award similar qualifications in England.

As an indigenous Awarding Organisation based in Belfast, our priority is to develop and maintain qualifications tailored to the needs of people living and working in NI. Our flexibility and responsiveness to economic needs ensure our qualifications are tailored to the needs of education and training providers, employers, learners and align with the policy objectives of the *Skills for a 10x economy - Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland* and *Draft Programme for Government*. Since OCN NI was established in 1995, we have developed economically relevant and learner-engaging curricula, which have benefited the lives of over half a million people living in NI.

The OCN NI mission is *to develop and award qualifications which engage, enrich, and equip learners for life* and our vision is *a successful, inclusive society where every learner matters*. We, therefore, welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

This paper details our response and follows the layout provided in the online version of the consultation. In addition, OCN NI has also submitted an online response as per departmental guidance (response ID is ANON-JTQB-DJFM-J).

Page 1 of 7

**QUESTION 1 – Do you agree on the three purposes of vocational qualifications? If not, why?**

OCN NI agrees with the three purposes of vocational qualifications as outlined in the consultation.

**QUESTION 2 – Do you agree that these three categories cover all vocational qualifications?**

OCN NI agrees with the three categories outlined in the consultation.

**QUESTION 3 – Are there any vocational qualifications that don't fall into these three categories?**

OCN NI does not believe any vocational qualifications fall outside of these three categories.

**QUESTION 4 – Do you agree with the six general principles listed above? If not, why?**

OCN NI broadly agrees with six general principles, however applying these principles may be more difficult in practice!

OCN NI agrees with the statement that the qualifications regulator will need to further consider how the current process may need to change, to ensure the consistent application of the principles. Awarding bodies would also need to be consulted on the types of indicators/evidence required to meet these principles.

In relation to principle 5 '*All vocational qualifications should embrace innovation*', vocational qualifications can incorporate the latest industry developments and technological advancements. Vocational qualifications can also embrace innovation by encouraging education and training institutions to think creatively and innovatively when completing assessments. This can be done by including open-ended tasks, project-based assessments, or assessments that require students to apply their learning to real-world scenarios.

However, innovation in vocational qualifications also has the potential to be a barrier to learning and needs to be appropriate for the learning objectives and the learners' needs. For example, if the innovation in vocational qualifications involves the use of complex or unfamiliar technology, it could be a barrier to learning for students who are not confident with technology or do not have access to the necessary equipment. It is therefore important to carefully consider how innovation is implemented in vocational qualifications to ensure that it enhances learning rather than acting as a barrier.

**QUESTION 5 – Do you agree that Vocational Qualifications should, where possible, present opportunities to develop transversal skills? If not, why?**

In general, OCN NI agrees that vocational qualifications should provide opportunities to develop transversal skills. Transversal skills are applicable across a wide range of jobs and industries and include communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork, and time management.

Developing transversal skills can be beneficial for individuals in their personal and professional lives. For example, strong communication skills can help a person effectively convey their ideas and collaborate with others, while problem-solving skills can help them find creative solutions to challenges they encounter.

In the context of vocational qualifications, it is especially important for individuals to develop transversal skills because these skills can help them adapt to new situations and take on new responsibilities as their careers progress. For instance, if an individual completes a vocational qualification in a specific trade, such as carpentry or plumbing, and then decides to pursue a different career path, the transversal skills they have developed through their vocational training may be useful in their new job.

Overall, OCN NI believes that vocational qualifications should provide opportunities to develop transversal skills.

In our efforts to support this principle., OCN NI has already developed specific standalone qualifications in Transversal Skills which if used correctly will not only be valuable in a variety of contexts and can help individuals be more adaptable and successful in their careers, but will also reduce the assessment burden on centre staff/learners. These existing qualifications remove a potential duplication of learning, should a learner decide to transition from one subject/career area to another.

**QUESTION 6** – Do you agree that Professional and Technical qualifications should be economically focused? If not, why?

Professional and technical qualifications need to be relevant and applicable to the field or industry in which they are used. This may involve a focus on economic considerations, as economics can be a relevant and important factor in many professional and technical fields. However, OCN NI does not necessarily agree that professional and technical qualifications should be solely or primarily focused on economics. While economic considerations may be an important factor in some fields, other important considerations should be included in professional and technical qualifications. For example, ethical and social responsibility, environmental sustainability, and health and safety may all be important considerations in various professional and technical fields.

In addition, professional and technical qualifications should also focus on the knowledge and skills that are necessary for individuals to be successful in their respective fields. This may include technical knowledge and skills specific to a particular field, as well as broader skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication.

Overall, while economics may be an important factor in some professional and technical fields, professional and technical qualifications should be balanced and comprehensive, taking into account a range of relevant considerations and providing individuals with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their chosen careers.

**QUESTION 7** – Do you agree that identified needs of Northern Ireland’s economy should be the driver for publicly-funded vocational qualifications? If not, why?

Vocational qualifications need to be relevant and applicable to the needs of the economy and the job market in which they are being used. Therefore, it makes sense for publicly-funded vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland to take into account the identified needs of the region's economy.

However, it is not necessarily the case that the identified needs of Northern Ireland's economy should be the sole driver for publicly-funded vocational qualifications. There may be other factors that are also important to consider, such as the needs and goals of individual learners, the availability of qualified instructors and resources, and the potential long-term benefits of the qualification for both the individual and the economy.

In addition, it is important to note that the needs of the economy can change over time. Therefore, it may be necessary to periodically review and update vocational qualifications to ensure that they are meeting the current and anticipated needs of the economy.

Overall, while the identified needs of Northern Ireland's economy should be a consideration when developing publicly-funded vocational qualifications, several other important factors may be considered when developing vocational qualifications:

- The needs and goals of individual learners: Vocational qualifications should be designed to meet the needs and goals of the learners who are completing them. This may involve taking into account the learners' interests, career aspirations, and prior knowledge and skills.
- The availability of qualified instructors and resources: In order for vocational qualifications to be effective, there must be qualified instructors available to teach the courses and adequate resources and facilities for learners to practice and apply their skills.
- The potential long-term benefits of the qualification: Vocational qualifications should provide learners with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in their chosen careers. It is important to consider the long-term benefits of the qualification, including the potential for career advancement and higher earning potential.
- Industry demand: It is important to consider the current and anticipated demand for workers with the skills and knowledge provided by vocational qualifications. This can help ensure that the qualification is relevant and applicable to the job market.

Finally, vocational publicly-funded qualifications should also consider the broader social and ethical positive implications on society. This may include issues such as environmental sustainability, social responsibility, and diversity and inclusion.

**QUESTION 8** – How can we ensure vocational qualifications react to the needs of Northern Ireland's economy?

To ensure that vocational qualifications react to the needs of Northern Ireland's economy OCN NI would suggest the following:

1. Periodically review and update qualifications: It is important to periodically review vocational qualifications to ensure that they are still relevant and applicable to the needs of the economy. This may involve updating the content of the qualification to reflect changes in the field or industry or adding new qualifications to meet emerging needs.
2. Consult with industry experts and employers: Engaging with relevant sector bodies and employers can help to identify the skills and knowledge that are most in demand in the region's economy. This input can be used to inform the development and review of vocational qualifications.
3. Monitor labour market trends: Tracking labour market trends can provide valuable insights into the skills and knowledge that are most in demand in the region. This information can be used to guide the development and review of vocational qualifications.
4. Encourage continuous learning and professional development: Encouraging individuals to pursue continuous learning and professional development can help ensure that the workforce is equipped with the skills and knowledge that are needed to meet the changing needs of the economy. This may involve offering opportunities for individuals to update their skills or earn additional qualifications throughout their careers.

**QUESTION 9** – Do you agree that for Applied General qualifications, at least 40% of the overall contribution to the qualification should be externally assessed? If not, why?

OCN NI does not agree that for Applied General qualifications, at least 40% of the overall contribution to the qualification should be externally assessed. The proportion of a qualification that should be externally assessed is ultimately a decision that should be based on the goals and objectives of the qualification and the needs of the learners who will be completing it.

In general, external assessment can be a useful way to ensure the validity and reliability of a qualification. However, it is also important to consider the specific learning objectives of the qualification and the most effective and appropriate ways to assess those objectives. It may be that external assessment is not the most suitable method for certain learning outcomes, or that a different proportion of external assessment would be more appropriate.

External assessment of qualifications does not automatically indicate a higher level of quality and credibility in the qualification. Other factors, such as the reputation of the institution offering the qualification, the rigour of the curriculum, and the relevance of the material covered, also play a significant role. In addition, the introduction of the regulators' *Centre Assessment Standards Scrutiny (CASS)* conditions has ensured a greater level of quality standards and public confidence.

It should also be noted that a similar proposal was made in England by Ofqual during Level 2 and Level 3 qualification reforms, which were not introduced based on the feedback of stakeholders. Introducing 40% external assessment to these qualifications in Northern Ireland could potentially lead to some Awarding Bodies withdrawing from the market, due to the inconsistency and expense placed on AOs.

**QUESTION 10** – Do you think there should be a minimum threshold set for external assessment in Professional and Technical qualifications?

No. The proportion of a qualification that should be externally assessed is ultimately a decision that should be based on the goals and objectives of the qualification and the needs of the learners who will be completing it.

In general, external assessment can be a useful way to ensure the validity and reliability of a qualification. However, it is also important to consider the specific learning objectives of the qualification and the most effective and appropriate ways to assess those objectives. It may be that external assessment is not the most suitable method for certain learning outcomes, or that a different proportion of external assessment would be more appropriate.

As such, it may not be necessary or appropriate to set a minimum threshold for external assessment in Professional and Technical qualifications. Instead, the proportion of external assessment should be determined based on the specific goals and objectives of the qualification and the most effective methods for assessing those goals.

**QUESTION 11** – Do you agree that assessment methods should be more flexible for Skills for Life and Work qualifications? If not, why?

It is generally beneficial for assessment methods to be flexible and adaptable to the needs and abilities of the learners being assessed. This is particularly true for Skills for Life and Work qualifications, which are designed to help individuals develop practical skills and knowledge that apply to a wide range of situations

and contexts.

In addition, flexible assessment methods can help to make qualifications more inclusive and accessible to learners with diverse backgrounds and abilities. This can be especially important for Skills for Life and Work qualifications, which may be taken by learners with a wide range of prior knowledge and experience.

Overall, OCN NI agrees that assessment methods for Skills for Life and Work qualifications should be flexible and adaptable to the needs and abilities of the learners being assessed to provide a fair and inclusive evaluation of their skills and knowledge.

**QUESTION 12** – Do you agree that vocational qualifications should continue to be based on NOS or other appropriate recognised standards? If not, why?

In general, OCN NI believes it is important for vocational qualifications to be based on National Occupational Standards (NOS). This can help to ensure that the qualifications are relevant, applicable, and recognised by employers and other stakeholders. However, it is worth pointing out that NOS are not available/appropriate for every subject area and qualifications should only be mapped to NOS where appropriate i.e. qualifications required to perform specific job roles.

**QUESTION 13** – Do you agree with the approach set out in this section

In general, OCN NI agrees with the approach set out in this section. In this ever-changing world, particularly as we attempt to overcome the challenges around Covid19, the need to support the upskilling of all our people in Northern Ireland has never been greater. Developing the skills of our people to compete in a global marketplace, but as importantly, learning to live with each other as we continue to emerge from our past conflict and at the same time tackle increasing economic and social inequality is essential if we want to ensure a better life for all in Northern Ireland. Recognising that learning remains an explicit enabler to achieve all of these outcomes at the same time positions skills for growth and social inclusion at the heart of our economic and social debate.

While there is no one silver bullet to meet our existing and future challenges, learning and skills must become the golden thread running through all N. Ireland public policy. As such, it demands appropriate funding. When done right, investment in skills and learning reduces costs to the public purse and delivers more responsive public services as well as a community more at ease with itself. Therefore, the funding of a higher learning and skills ambition for Northern Ireland, to deliver growth and social inclusion, needs to be a central issue within the departmental budget.

**QUESTION 14** – Do you think vocational qualifications can support social inclusion? If yes, how? If not, why?

Economic growth, social inclusion and community cohesion are intrinsically linked to education and skills. Improved learning outcomes help drive development in these areas. A strong learning culture is therefore essential to modern economies. Economic growth has tended to be weaker in Northern Ireland over the last decade than in the UK as a whole. Northern Ireland has both a significant productivity gap with the UK and a lower employment rate.

Economic and educational inequality endure in Northern Ireland while relative poverty remains a significant issue. Health inequality continues to be a further concern, with life expectancy being lower for the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland. Coronavirus and the transition to a new trading relationship with the EU will change and add to these economic and social challenges. In this context, it is becoming increasingly

important to look to viable long-term solutions to promote economic prosperity and social inclusion. Essential to this is the further development of learning and skills in Northern Ireland. This can have both a direct and indirect impact on economic growth while improving social inclusion. Specifically, learning can help to increase employment, improve productivity, grow incomes, support community cohesion, improve well-being and reduce health inequalities. These are essential outcomes for ensuring a fair and prosperous Northern Ireland. Longer-term skills development and the fostering of a lifelong learning culture for Northern Ireland should therefore be a key goal for the present decade and needs to be recognised and funded appropriately.

Vocational qualifications can support social inclusion by providing individuals with the knowledge and skills they need to access and succeed in the job market. This can be particularly important for individuals who may face barriers to employment, such as those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with disabilities.

Overall, vocational qualifications can support social inclusion by providing individuals with the knowledge and skills they need to access and succeed in the job market, improving their self-esteem and confidence, and providing a sense of purpose and direction.

**QUESTION 15** – Do you think vocational qualifications can support lifelong learning? If yes, how? If not, why?

Yes. Vocational qualifications can support lifelong learning by providing individuals with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their chosen careers and adapt to new situations and challenges as their careers progress. This can be especially important in today's rapidly changing job market, where it is often necessary for individuals to update their skills and knowledge in order to remain competitive.

Vocational qualifications can also provide individuals with a sense of accomplishment and personal fulfilment, which can motivate them to continue learning and growing throughout their lives. In addition, vocational qualifications can provide a sense of purpose and direction for individuals, which can help to guide their learning and development over the long term. However, it is important to ensure that when designing/funding vocational qualifications for adult learners (especially returners) they need to be smaller in size compared to the traditional 16-18 model as these are inaccessible in size and nature for adult learners.

Overall, vocational qualifications can support lifelong learning by providing individuals with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their careers, improving their motivation and sense of accomplishment, and providing a sense of purpose and direction.

**-END-**

Over the coming years, OCN NI will continue to support our local government, its departments and our education and training providers. We will tackle educational underachievement and help to create a skilled workforce to meet the needs of the NI economy and beyond and we welcome the opportunity to respond to this public consultation.

Yours sincerely



Martin Flynn  
Chief Executive