

About the IoD

The IoD is an independent, non-party political organisation representing over 20,000 company directors, senior business leaders, and entrepreneurs. It is the UK's longest-running organisation for professional leaders, having been founded in 1903 and incorporated by Royal Charter in 1906. Its aim is to promote good governance and ensure high levels of skills and integrity among directors of organisations. It campaigns on issues of importance to its members and to the wider business community with the aim of fostering a climate favourable to entrepreneurial activity in the UK.

The IoD welcomes the opportunity to submit a response to the DE Independent Review of Education, in Northern Ireland. Economic, skills and future proofing the talent pool for NI is of considerable interest to IoD and our membership. Working with our members and committee representation, we wish to present our views in this brief response.

The list of recommendations is purposely pitched at a high level with each warranting a paper in its own rights. The aim of IoD's response is to foster further discussions between industry and the education sector and to ensure significant changes lead to a modern, agile, digitally focussed education system, aimed at developing NI's young people with a strong foundation in the skills and talent necessary to grow a successful NI economy.

Section 1: Global factors - local impact

Rapidly evolving technology and significant improvements in digital connectivity have significantly increased the need for a suitably qualified and skilled workforce. This is continuing to place the education sector under mounting pressure to meet these requirements.

Covid and Brexit have exacerbated the problem by reducing the easy migration of suitably qualified individuals.

The culmination of such factors means the education sector is facing serious challenges to provide a digitally skilled, agile resource pool from within our own shores. Adding to the immediate need for the education and skills sector to work towards developing a home-grown generation of people who can build and support the growth and success of the NI Economy. The importance of education and training to the future success of NI cannot be underestimated if we want a dynamic, innovative, prosperous and inclusive region. In addition, the education system needs to be strongly aligned with the needs of Industry 4.0. To do all this we must create an educational system that is aligned to the trajectory of success for all citizens.

The role and function of an education system is paramount to the success of the economy. If we do not have a performing education system that is aligned to the needs of a 21st Century economy, then we will not have economic success. If we do not have economic success, then we will not have social success. Economic success is the gateway to dealing with inclusion, dealing with levelling up and dealing with the left behind – the current system needs addressed significantly.

Section 2: The strengths and weaknesses in the current system.

NI has a strong history of high academic achievement and attainment.

- Substantial work has gone into reducing the number of children leaving school without any qualifications, resulting in a reduction over the last two decades in the proportion leaving education with no qualifications from 5% to 1%. There has also been a significant fall in those leaving without 5 GCSEs from 50% to 24%.
- A Level and GCSE results are at a record high, with a high proportion of students achieving three A Levels or five GCSEs.
- Although lagging behind the UK average in literacy and numeracy, NI's education outcomes are still higher than the OECD average.

While NI has a positive story to tell in terms of improvement over the last period we are still producing too many pupils who leave school without any or with limited qualifications. In addition, whilst we are improving, we are not doing so at the same rate as other countries, e.g. Estonia, Latvia resulting in NI's education attainment falling behind.

Recognising the above, there are many significant areas that need addressed, namely:

- A focus on *Levelling Up* to ensure comparable grades received from those from deprived socio- economic backgrounds. To ensure there is reduction in those from these communities leaving school without 5 GCSEs A* - C.
- A more stringent approach to *efficiency and measurement*. NI should and could gain better outcomes by focusing on the areas, which will result in skill creation to match business needs. This includes, but not exclusively in the areas of:
 - Greater focus on STEM and less on areas of oversupply
 - More focus on efficiency – direct spending towards pupils and rationalise the administration of education and reduce the number of surplus places.
 - Allocation of budgets to enhance vocational marketing, facilities and a higher level of vocational skill development
- Teachers and tutors remain key influencers. To ensure they are fully equipped to advise and support modern teaching, there needs to be a radical change in the curriculum to ensure synergy with educational output and the current and future needs of the economy and workforce. For example, STEM education in primary schools is often facilitated by companies/charities on one-off or ad hoc events therefore not comprehensively embedded in the curriculum.
- NI spends more on education per pupil than any other part of the UK. That means we spend more on administration, duplication and overheads costs. Successive reports have pointed out the need for major rationalisation of the education system to end duplication and to focus limited resources in a more impactful way.

Section 3: Areas to be addressed – industry and employers’ perspective

Curriculum & upskilling for teaching staff

- In order to break down stereotyping, earlier intervention is required for young people re career opportunities and advice. Careers and future skill development should be an integral part of primary school development to help build earlier messaging around the wide range of possible options.
- At secondary education level, more focus needs to be given prior to pupils choosing GCSE subjects. Support at this stage needs to show the vast range of opportunities available, medium- and long-term skill gaps discussed and explained and the use of role models widely used.
- A modern curriculum for a digital age – is a must for NI. STEM, business and digital skills need to be integral elements of the educational curriculum, from primary school onwards.
- Increased funding for a greater role-out of the teacher industry placement programme. This should be mandatory for careers teachers and those involved in providing careers and employment guidance.
- Greater emphasis on development of employability skills and soft skills as a crucial aspect of how the education system prepares young people for work. Recent IoD research shows 68% of business leaders believe that the communication skills of school leavers need to be improved, with the ability to work to deadlines, problem solving, teamworking, and creativity cited as key employability skills.

Careers advice and guidance

Careers education and advice have been an ongoing debate and discussion issue in Northern Ireland for a long time. The absence of a high quality, consistent and evidence-based careers support and advice system has been highlighted and numerous attempts made to improve this.

Greater emphasis needs to be given to careers advice and guidance within the school environment, including the need for careers teachers to be a full time position instead of an add-on to existing teacher responsibilities.

- Better alignment with future skills requirements which are needed by the economy as identified in the NI Skills Barometer. The results of the NI Skills Barometer must be shared and form part of an informed approach taken by those advising on careers, both at both primary and secondary school leavers.
- Careers advice needs to be widened to give equality to vocational/apprenticeship options. This will involve an uplift in building relationships with employers, colleges and alternative education and training pathways.
- Business and industry insight opportunities for careers advisors needs to be built in as a core element – industry placements, business bootcamps, employer summer schools
- Creation of a digital platform that is easily accessed and which provides clear and up to date information on jobs and career pathways.

Inspection and testing

Governance needs to be fit for purpose and aligned to a modern, agile teaching and learning environment. Requirement for more robust accountability, including performance targets for senior personnel and plans for underperformance

- Role of Education Training Inspectorate (ETI) needs to take a more structured approach to dealing with under/poor performance. Targets and timescales should be transparent, with measurable milestones in place to regularly monitor improvement or no improvement, with a clear set of consequences highlighted when improvements are not made
- Greater increased autonomy for individual head teachers vs accountability and incentivisation of performance, in line with how performance is measured and rewarded in the private sector.
- As in business, the education system should have targets to ensure accountability. For example: reduction of 25,000 empty places by date X.
- There have been steps made to rationalise the education sector, but there is still an oversupply of boards, ALBs. Recommendation to move towards one skills oversight body instead of 7 ALB's and 1,400 voluntary organisations involved in delivering, to ensure standards are uniform and consistent.
- In terms of scrutiny and quality assurance NI needs better systems of measurement for success that concentrate on outcomes not outputs and which allow for better comparisons between various sectors.
- The Executive has underlined their determination to introduce Outcome Based Accountability into Northern Ireland – this is to be encouraged as it is designed to lead to a joined up policy delivery and better outcomes across society.

Collaboration and partnership

The best systems for education and training across the world, in terms of success and outcomes, tend to be systems that are joined up and integrated. Currently, the NI system could be described as a competitive rather than collaborative one. Steps must be taken to create a more positive partnering approach, involving education, industry and parents.

- NI needs to develop and plan for a more collaborative and coherent system which has porosity and legibility and where young people and parents can easily understand the advantages and disadvantages of various pathways. Investment needs to be made to clearly demonstrate that all options of education advancement have equality.
- The current system identifies a number of areas of tension, especially between schools and Further Education colleges. The funding regime clearly encourages schools to retain young people after 16, regardless of the appropriateness of this. At the time of the Bain Report in 2006 - a report that recommended the rationalisation of schools in NI - 74% of schools had 6th Forms. In 2018/19 that figure had risen to 82%. These 6th forms are providing A Levels plus increasingly more L3 technical education. The absence of a DE 6th Form Policy has allowed this to continue. There is a requirement for clarification and agreement about appropriate provision by both schools and FE colleges that works in the interest of young people, their futures and the success of NI.
- There were fundamental questions raised about the alignment and relevance of the Northern Ireland curriculum to the needs of a dynamic, innovative forward looking economy that delivers prosperity to all. There is a strong requirement to have business and industry more involved in the development of that curriculum.

The Ambrose Report made five recommendations regarding careers, education and advice. This report was produced in 2014 and many of the recommendations are still valid as a means to improve

education standards and strengthen closer partnering between education, industry and business. The key suggestion:

- Starting from P7, every young person should be allocated an e-portfolio which will not only capture their academic outputs but will capture their live experiences regarding sport, hobbies, work placements and experience etc. This will encourage recording achievements, extra-curricular activity and life skills from an early age to assist teachers and parents in building student profiles and aiding recruitment and training needs at a later stage.

Recommendations for a world class education system

- Increasing requirement to redress the imbalance in qualified teachers/educators against industry's needs. The NI Skills Barometer continues to highlight there is an undersupply of qualified individuals at level three and above and an oversupply of level two and below.
- Trends show the demand for level two qualifications and below has declined over the last two decades, as demand for level three and above has increased. Although NI figures show only 1% of school leavers have no qualifications, there is still a significant number of students leaving with low qualifications. Driven by an increase across new and emerging industries, such as, digital, FS, there has been a significant shift in requirements of the local labour market. The education and training sector requires stronger alignment to address this imbalance.
- NI has had significant success in gaining a reputation as having a highly skilled workforce, especially in attracting FDI companies. However, there is an increasing undersupply of skills in computer scientists, engineers and mathematicians and oversupplies in teaching, social work and law students. The impact of the EU Exit has added to a loss of skills, talent and pipeline in some of these areas. In order to maintain NI's position as a highly skilled market place this disparity between oversupply and market demands requires alignment.
- Best practice models are a useful driver to help shape changes and set challenges in bring about fundamental transformation in the current system. Current examples of high performing education systems, with transferrable approaches include:
 - **Finland** has consistency been ranked in the Top 20 education systems. Their system does not incorporate national standardised testing but test on learning outcomes. Vocational education is job focused whereas school learning and apprenticeships go hand in hand.
 - **Estonia's** education system is underpinned by modern technology in teaching. There is a high level of teaching knowledge and skills in the digital field and Estonian education widely uses numerous smart solutions including, digital databases, digital textbooks, e-learning materials.

The changes in working practices, largely driven by technology and digital advances, shows no sign of abating and Northern Ireland will be left behind if we do not now make the hard decisions.

