



Postsecondary Vocational Education and Training in Northern Ireland Strengths and Challenges

In summary, the OECD assessment of the strengths and challenges of the vocational education and training (VET) system in Northern Ireland is as follows:

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 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.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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.¹ The study also forms part of the horizontal OECD Skills Strategy (OECD, 2012).²

Full country policy reviews are being conducted in Austria, Denmark, Egypt, Germany, Israel, Korea, the Netherlands, 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.

[A Skills beyond School Commentary on Northern Ireland, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training](#) (J-L. Álvarez-Galván, 2014) was published on 21 January 2014.

Further information about the policy review and reports on VET systems in other countries is available on the OECD website: www.oecd.org/education/vet

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1. OECD (2010), *Learning for Jobs*, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, OECD Publishing.
doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264087460-en>
 2. OECD (2012), *Better Skills, Better Jobs, Better Lives: A Strategic Approach to Skills Policies*, OECD Publishing.
doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264177338-en>