

## **Higher skills ambition needed for Northern Ireland**

### ***Action required to stop Northern Ireland slipping behind other countries on Skills***

Northern Ireland risks slipping further behind other countries in the Skills of its workforce, a new report by a leading research institute finds.

The report, from Learning and Work Institute, looks at how the Skills of Northern Ireland's workforce are likely to compare to other countries by 2030. It finds that in 2030 Northern Ireland will have a substantially higher proportion of people qualified below the equivalent of GCSE level than the OECD average (17.4% compared to 12.8%) and a lower proportion with at least a degree-level qualification (44.9% compared to 47.8%).

Welcoming the report, Anne McVicker, Director from WRDA said: WRDA's vision is of a fair and equal society where women are empowered and are a visible force for change and influence in all areas of life particularly in training, education and skills development. We are delighted to add our support today and believe that NI needs political support for adult learning.

According to the new report, commissioned by Open College Network NI (OCN NI), by 2030 Northern Ireland will have the fourth highest proportion of low qualified people out of 16 OECD comparators. Moreover, it will be ranked as low as 14th for the proportion of people who are highly qualified. In comparison, the Republic of Ireland would be joint first for the proportion of people with high qualifications and have the joint lowest proportion with low qualifications. Northern Ireland's Skills profile in 2030 will struggle to match the UK's position today, despite a further ten years to improve Skills.

This would have profound implications for economic growth and people's life chances. Education and Skills are central to improving economic growth, social justice and community cohesion. The report highlights that learning can help to increase employment, improve productivity, grow incomes, support community cohesion, improve wellbeing and reduce health inequalities. The coronavirus crisis has sharpened the need for investment in Skills to tackle the big rise in unemployment and help people retrain for new jobs.

Martin Flynn, CEO OCN NI said: "This report provides us with a glimpse into what the future may be like, in terms of NI's skills profile. While the report shows that Northern Ireland's skills are likely to improve over the next 10 years, we will still remain behind other countries. The report provides the Northern Ireland Executive with an opportunity to set a higher skills ambition in Northern Ireland, which in turn will contribute to improved economic growth, social justice and community cohesion."

The report calls for the Northern Ireland Executive to set a new higher ambition for Skills, backed by investment. It argues for increased investment in learning and skills, making learning a key part of other public services like health, and taking a more joined-up approach

with government, employers and individuals working together. There should be regular independent reports to keep track of progress and compare this to other countries.

Stephen Evans, chief executive of Learning and Work Institute, said: “The importance of learning and Skills have been heightened by the coronavirus pandemic. Many more people will need help to find work or to retrain. Our report shows that Northern Ireland’s Skills are likely to improve, but still lag behind other countries. If we want a prosperous, fair and inclusive Northern Ireland, we need to invest in a higher ambition for learning and Skills.”

Martin Flynn concluded: “Time and again our partners across the education, health and community sectors, and our learners, have commented on how the impact of achieving qualifications like OCN NI learning outcomes have overflowed into other parts of their life and helped deliver wider individual, family, social and economic outcomes.”

“Such transformation for learners, by increasing their self-esteem, confidence, improved motivation, changed behaviour and attitudes have benefited them, their families and their community so we are calling on the Northern Ireland Executive to raise the bar in terms of skills attainment ambition in Northern Ireland.”

**ENDS**

**Notes for editors:**

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1. Learning and Work Institute is an independent policy, research and development organisation dedicated to lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion. We research what works, influence policy, develop new ways of thinking, and help implement new approaches.
2. The Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCN NI) is a leading Awarding Body, working with Further Education Colleges, Schools, Training Organisations, Third Sector Organisations, Health Trusts, Prisons and other education and training organisations. Our offices are based in Belfast and we are regulated by statutory bodies to develop professional and technical (vocational) qualifications from Entry Level up to and including Level 5 across all subject areas. Its mission is to ‘develop and award qualifications which engage, enrich and equip learners for life.’

OCN NI is an independent, self-financing charitable organisation that has a proven track record of delivering and contributing to the NI Skills agenda. As an indigenous Awarding Body based in Belfast, its priority is to develop and maintain qualifications tailored to the needs of people living and working in NI. Its flexibility and responsiveness to economic need ensures its qualifications are tailored to the needs of education and training providers, employers, learners and align to the outcomes of the NI Programme for Government.

3. Women’s Resource Development Agency is feminist organisation established in 1983. WRDA’s work covers lobbying, policy, Good Relations, health promotion and training. WRDA’s vision is of a fair and equal society where women are empowered and are a visible force for change and influence in all areas of life. Organisational high level outcomes include working to empower women to make informed choices through improved knowledge and skills; contributing to reducing inequalities and improved wellbeing (including health, economic and political); mobilising and enabling all women

and gender minorities (including non-binary and gender diverse people) to be a visible force for change.