



Department for the
Economy
www.economy-ni.gov.uk

A PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON THE PRINCIPLES FOR VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

(December 2022)

Introduction

1. In May 2021, the Department set out an ambitious vision for the future of our economy. Our vision is to create a ten times better economy driven by sustainable, innovative and inclusive growth. Everyone should have the opportunity to participate in, and benefit from, this growth.¹
2. Our vision for a 10X economy includes an ambitious vision for skills which are a cornerstone to success.² We need a highly skilled workforce to meet the needs of our small, advanced economy, to improve productivity and to support our role as a global leader in sectors such as cyber security, fintech and advanced manufacturing.
3. Creating a highly skilled workforce in Northern Ireland is also about anticipating and supporting the skills needed in the future. Labour market requirements are evolving, and it is important that the workforce is well equipped to meet the demands of work now, and in the future.
4. Our 10X ambition for skills must be supported by vocational qualifications. We need robust vocational qualifications that equip learners with the skills, knowledge and behaviours that the labour market needs, and that will give citizens the opportunity to thrive in their lives and careers.
5. The pace of change in the labour market also demands a suite of qualifications that can provide progression pathways from the beginning of a learner's journey all the way through their lives, with ample opportunity to reskill and upskill to meet the changing needs of industry, and to progress and succeed in their chosen career. Some occupations are at risk due to automation, while the drive towards net zero is likely to create new occupations or change the skill requirements of existing occupations.
6. Investing in skills will provide opportunity for every person, from every background, in every community across Northern Ireland. It is critically important that this includes those furthest away from the labour market, and those with low or no formal skills. This approach will also mean that our businesses have the right people, with the right skills, at the right time, to underpin our innovation.
7. Vocational qualifications currently underpin a wide range of departmental programmes such as apprenticeships and traineeships and are delivered in a range of educational settings including our network of further education colleges, training organisations, businesses and schools. The wide range of vocational qualifications mean that they serve many purposes; they can provide a more practical and industry-focused pathway into employment or higher level study; they can be a first step in reengaging with education; and they can support lifelong learning and career progression. The diverse range of pathways available ensures that everyone has the opportunity to learn.

1 [A 10X Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/a-10x-economy)

2 [Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland. Skills for a 10X Economy. \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/skills-strategy-for-northern-ireland)

8. The Skills Barometer for Northern Ireland has also highlighted the increasing need for ‘soft skills’, also referred to as transversal skills, such as critical thinking, self-management and work professionalism, that will support our labour force to adapt and succeed.³ It is our vision that all vocational qualifications will provide learners with the opportunity to develop and demonstrate these skills alongside the occupationally specific knowledge and skills needed by industry. Investing in the development of core transversal skills is worthwhile, as they equip people with skills that are important in many occupations, are transferable across occupations, and are in high demand by employers.⁴
9. This consultation document sets out our ambitions for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. We believe that the principles proposed will provide a solid foundation for qualifications that will provide learners with high quality vocational education and provide industry with the highly skilled and resilient workforce it needs.

3 [DfE \(2019\) The Skills Barometer for Northern Ireland. Available from: Skills Barometer 2021 update | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

4 [Understanding current and future skills needs - Policy Report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

Context

10. Vocational qualifications are the foundations upon which our vocational education and skills system is built. They are delivered in FE colleges, schools (including Irish Medium schools), private training organisations, the community and voluntary sector and businesses to a wide range of different learners and fulfil a range of different purposes. Vocational qualifications are also delivered within a range of departmental programmes such as ApprenticeshipsNI,⁵ Traineeships⁶ and Skills for Life and Work.⁷
11. High performing vocational qualifications should provide a stable framework and structure which provides continuity and confidence. They should also be flexible and agile in order to respond to evolving priorities and policy changes in Northern Ireland.
12. The purpose of this consultation is to present a set of underpinning principles required to ensure that vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland:
 - Continue to support our employer-led and high-quality departmental programmes and initiatives, including apprenticeships;
 - Support delivery of our Skills Strategy⁸ and support the Department’s vision for economic growth;⁹
 - Provide appropriate learner pathways at all stages that are valued by all key stakeholders including employers, parents, learners, educators and policymakers both in Northern Ireland and elsewhere; and
 - Can adapt to market changes brought about by policy decisions in England, and unexpected events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. A summary of recent changes in England can be found at Annex A.
13. Northern Ireland’s economy has traditionally been made up of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and in 2022, 90% of businesses in Northern Ireland had less than 10 employees showing an increased focus on micro businesses.¹⁰

5 [Apprenticeships | nidirect](#)

6 [Traineeships explained | nidirect](#)

7 [Skills for Life and Work | nidirect](#)

8 [Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland. Skills for a 10X Economy. \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

9 [A 10X Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

10 [Northern Ireland business: activity, size, location and ownership, 2021 \(nisra.gov.uk\)](#)

14. The Northern Ireland economy is rapidly adapting to the recent events of COVID-19 and the UK's exit from the European Union. Our economy is also exposed to global shifts, or 'megatrends', such as energy decarbonisation and sustainability, and ageing populations. As a small, advanced economy it is vital that we look to the future and ensure that everyone is equipped with the skills to actively contribute to economic growth.
15. The Skills Barometer for Northern Ireland, first published in 2015, defined a series of challenges that we must overcome to ensure we continue to make progress on meeting the future demands of our labour market.¹¹ Firstly, it forecasts fewer and fewer job opportunities for individuals with low or no qualifications.¹² Secondly, it highlights that the most significant skills undersupply will be in mid-level qualifications. It is a priority, therefore, to support as many people as possible to participate and achieve high quality qualifications at level 3 and beyond. Thirdly, the Skills Barometer suggests the overall number of graduate and post-graduate qualifications is marginally undersupplied. The greatest challenge at this level, however, is to rebalance the field of study of the qualifications being delivered, with continued and growing emphasis on qualifications in the core sciences (physics, chemistry and biology), mathematics, computer science and engineering and technology.
16. The challenges identified by the Skills Barometer set the context for this consultation. Vocational qualifications equip learners with the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed by the labour market, and it is vital that qualifications offered in Northern Ireland can support the needs of both learners and the economy.
17. These proposed principles for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland are the result of extensive research and internal and external stakeholder engagement. CCEA Regulation was commissioned by the Department to undertake a series of research projects including case studies on best practise in vocational education systems and approaches to vocational reform and design principles. The Department also worked with Edge Foundation to host a series of online workshops where nearly 100 stakeholders representing groups across the sector participated in interactive surveys and plenary discussions on the future of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. The six proposed principles were also subject to review by the Vocational Qualifications Reform Project Board and the Skills Council.
18. This consultation is running simultaneously with the consultation on [Level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE](#). Some of the key principles identified in this consultation may be relevant to the options and recommendations for level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE, given much of HE in FE provision is vocationally focused. We would appreciate feedback on the potential application of the principles in a level 4/5 context.

11 DfE (2019) The Skills Barometer for Northern Ireland. Available from: [Skills Barometer 2021 update | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

12 The Skills Barometer breaks attainment levels down to: low skills (level 2 and below, or 5 GCSEs including English and Maths) mid-level skills (levels 3 – 5, or A-Level and equivalent to Higher National Diploma and equivalent) and high-level skills (levels 6 – 8, degree and postgraduate qualifications).

How to respond to this consultation

19. This consultation will be hosted online at the following website: [Principles for Vocational Qualifications in Northern Ireland](#)
20. The Citizen Space website has been specially designed to be as user-friendly and welcoming as possible for those who wish to complete the consultation. It also allows the Department to rapidly collate results. For this reason, we would particularly encourage anyone who is interested in responding to this consultation to utilise Citizen Space as the method of their response.
21. However, if this is not possible, you can respond to this consultation via email at: vqrbranch@economy-ni.gov.uk or you can respond in writing to the DfE Vocational Qualification Reform Branch in Adelaide House by 17:00 on 9th March 2023: Vocational Qualification Consultation, DfE Vocational Qualification Reform Branch, 4th Floor, Adelaide House, Adelaide Street, Belfast, BT2 8FD.
22. When responding via email or in writing, please state whether you are responding as an individual, or representing the views of an organisation – and if so, please state the name of the organisation. Also, quote the following Consultation Reference: Vocational Qualification Consultation.

Section A

The purpose of vocational qualifications

23. When asked about the purpose of vocational qualifications, stakeholder feedback identified that vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland should fulfil the following three purposes:
- To provide practical learning and a competent, technically skilled workforce;
 - To improve productivity and work readiness and anticipate future skills needs; and
 - To instil lifelong learning and opportunities to reskill/upskill.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Question 1 - Do you agree on the three purposes of vocational qualifications? If not, why?

Have you any other feedback?

Different categories of qualifications

24. Vocational qualifications are traditionally qualifications that are set within an employment context that lead to specific employment, skills development or facilitate progression within specific employment.¹³ The term is often used in Northern Ireland to describe the wide range of qualifications which are not GCSEs or A Levels (general qualifications). In this consultation, we will continue to use *vocational qualifications* to refer to the wider qualification offer (Levels 0-5) outside the traditional GCSE/A Level route. We have however split the wider provision into three distinct groups to try and better categorise the wide range of qualifications available.
25. Qualifications may be categorised by their purpose, progression routes and intended audience, for example:
- Intended purpose: how specific is the qualification to a particular occupation? Is it a general introduction or preparation, or a licence to practise, or focused on a specific/niche area within an occupation?
 - Intended progression: does the qualification provide access to further study or to employment?
 - Intended audience: is the qualification intended primarily for adult learners, young people, employees, etc.?
26. For the purposes of this consultation, we have created three broad categories to convey the application of each proposed principle where actions relating to a category are distinct within a principle.

13 For more information on qualifications in Northern Ireland go to: [Guide to qualifications | nidirect](#)

Categories

	Purpose/Progression	Example of Qualification
Applied Generals	<p>For learners who want to undertake a qualification that is more practical in nature and that provides a broad study of a specific vocational area.</p> <p>At level 3, used for progression into Higher Education as an alternative to A Levels.</p> <p>Progression is primarily to further study, but the qualification may also facilitate progression to a specific occupation if completed as part of a vocational programme, e.g. apprenticeship.</p>	<p>Some BTEC Diplomas / extended diplomas</p> <p>Some OCR Cambridge Technicals</p>
Professional & Technical	<p>For learners who want to undertake study of a practical nature leading to employment in a specific occupation.</p> <p>Qualifications are designed to enable the learner to acquire knowledge and skills that are required by the National Occupational Standards (NOS) or professional standards to be able to perform a particular job.</p> <p>Some qualifications in this category also provide opportunities for learners who want to undertake further progression, development or specialisation within their chosen occupation.</p> <p>Qualifications could be focused on the knowledge and skills required for specific roles or tasks within the occupation.</p>	<p>NVQs</p> <p>BTECs</p> <p>Some Awards, Certificates, Diplomas¹⁴</p> <p>HNDs / HNCs</p> <p>License to Practice qualifications</p>

14 These titles relate to the size of a qualification. For more information on qualifications in Northern Ireland go to: [Guide to qualifications | nidirect](#)

	Purpose/Progression	Example of Qualification
Skills for Life and Work	For learners who want to acquire generic skills that are not linked to a specific occupation but that build confidence and provide evidence of personal competence to facilitate employment or personal development e.g. numeracy, literacy, employability skills.	Entry level qualifications Essential Skills Employability qualifications

27. Qualifications such as GCSEs and A Levels are for learners who want to undertake study that tends to be more theoretical in nature, is set within a subject context and leads to further study and higher education. These qualifications are primarily delivered in schools. Qualifications in this group are not in scope of this consultation.

CONSULTATION QUESTION

Question 2 - Do you agree that these three categories cover all vocational qualifications?

Question 3 - Are there any vocational qualifications that don't fall into these three categories?

Have you any other feedback?

28. We have set out six principles in no particular order which we propose should be applied to all vocational qualifications available for publicly funded delivery in Northern Ireland, as well as any vocational qualifications developed in the future.

- I. All vocational qualifications should present opportunities for the development and demonstration of relevant transversal skills.¹⁵**
- II. All vocational qualifications must reflect economic need and support inclusive growth.**
- III. All vocational qualifications must be appropriately assessed.**
- IV. All vocational qualifications must be based on recognised standards and allow portability and progression.**
- V. All vocational qualifications should embrace innovation.**
- VI. All vocational qualifications must support flexible delivery and access to all.**

¹⁵ Skills that are typically considered as not specifically related to a particular job, task, academic discipline or area of knowledge and that can be used in a wide variety of situations and work settings (for example, organisational skills). Further detail on page 11.

29. It is anticipated that the principles will be implemented through the qualification regulation and accreditation process through our regulator, CCEA Regulation. It will require further consideration as to how this can best be achieved and how the current process may need to change to ensure the consistent application of the principles. A summary of the current regulation process can be found at Annex B.
30. These principles will be used to inform future decisions on our approach to creating, regulating and funding vocational qualifications.
31. Further stakeholder engagement may take place once the set of appropriate principles are agreed to consider the technical detail and in particular how the principles will be considered across the full range of educational levels and providers.

CONSULTATION QUESTION

Question 4 - Do you agree with the six general principles listed above? If not, why?

Have you any other feedback on this section?

Section B

Principles to underpin vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland

In order to appropriately meet the needs of learners and the economy, we propose that all vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland should adhere to the following six principles:

1. All vocational qualifications should present opportunities for the development and demonstration of relevant transversal skills.

1.1. The purpose of this principle is twofold:

- I. To ensure that opportunities for demonstrating and attaining relevant transversal skills are clearly mapped and integrated into all vocational qualification specifications; and
- II. To emphasise the strategic importance of digital skills for Northern Ireland and make the inclusion and contextualisation of digital skills development mandatory in any new vocational qualification used in Northern Ireland.

Transversal skills

1.2. UNESCO defines transversal skills as: “Skills that are typically considered as not specifically related to a particular job, task, academic discipline or area of knowledge and that can be used in a wide variety of situations and work settings (for example, organisational skills).”¹⁶ These skills ‘cut across’ different tasks and roles and are sometimes known as employability skills, meta skills or transferrable skills.

1.3. Stakeholder feedback demonstrated that transversal skills are a key underpinning principle for high performing vocational education. Employers also report that they value these skills highly. Embedding these skills into vocational qualifications was also identified as an area where Northern Ireland could improve.

1.4. Transversal skills are vital for learners. They support independent functioning and the ability to cope with practical problems or choices as a worker and citizen, learning from personal experiences in diverse formal and informal settings. They are the skills needed to guide and encourage successful behaviors in learners. The importance of transversal skills is already reflected in DfE’s Apprenticeship and Traineeship Programmes.¹⁷

¹⁶ [Unesco International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training](#)

¹⁷ [An Employer Guide to Traineeships - A New Training Pathway. \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

1.5. There are eight broad categories of transversal skills:

- I. Problem Solving and Decision Making
- II. Numeracy
- III. Literacy
- IV. Digital Literacy
- V. Work Professionalism
- VI. Working with Others
- VII. Self-Management
- VIII. Citizenship

1.6. The transversal skills defined above draw on two existing skills frameworks: ‘transversal skills’ identified by UNESCO (UNESCO, 2016) and the Cross-Curricular Skills, Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities within the Northern Ireland Curriculum. These skills are not formally certified but are seen as central for life and work.

What do these transversal skills mean?

Transversal Skill	What does this look like?
Problem Solving and Decision Making	<p><u>Creativity and Innovation</u>: ability to identify problems and come up with effective solutions and make decisions using innovative and creative thinking.</p> <p><u>Critical Thinking</u>: ability to carefully and systematically analyse problems to find ways to solve them. Ability to identify several possible solutions and then logically evaluate each one, compare the merits of each, and then select the one most suitable.</p>
Numeracy and Literacy	<p><u>Numeracy</u>: ability to understand and apply mathematical concepts and skills to solve problems in a variety of situations and real-life scenarios.</p> <p><u>Literacy</u>: ability to apply reading, writing, speaking and listening skills across a variety of subject areas.</p>
Digital Literacy	<p><u>Health, Safety and Security</u>: ability to stay healthy, safe and legal online – protecting data, identity and wellbeing, including online transaction and digital footprint</p> <p><u>Information and Data Literacy</u>: ability to handle information – find, interpret and evaluate information and data from multiple sources using a range of devices.</p> <p><u>Digital Content Creation</u>: ability to identify and use appropriate software to design and display content for different purposes and audiences.</p> <p><u>Connecting and Collaborating</u>: ability to interact with others - communicate, collaborate and network effectively using digital tools for projects and social interaction</p> <p><u>Learning and Working Online</u>: ability to learn and work in a blended environment - using digital tools to learn and manage tasks.</p>

Transversal Skill	What does this look like?
<p>Work Professionalism</p>	<p><u>Commitment:</u> ability to maintain a professional attitude, showing consideration and respect for others in the workplace.</p> <p><u>Leadership:</u> ability to influence and motivate others to achieve a common purpose or goal.</p>
<p>Working with Others</p>	<p><u>Verbal and non-verbal Communication:</u> ability to confidently express oneself using clear verbal and non-verbal communication.</p> <p><u>Listening and Empathy:</u> ability to listen and take on board information. Can understand others’ perceptions, opinions, concerns and can provide respectable feedback when appropriate. May include others and create space for their opinions and concerns.</p> <p><u>Emotional Intelligence:</u> ability to develop and maintain good relationships, communicate clearly, inspire and influence others, work well in a team and manage conflict.</p> <p><u>Leadership:</u> ability to influence and motivate others to achieve a common purpose or goal.</p>
<p>Self-Management</p>	<p><u>Self-Initiative:</u> ability to identify and take opportunities, to use initiative and recognise how important this is in personal development.</p> <p><u>Risk:</u> ability to undertake tasks beyond comfort zone and to calculate risks, make decisions and be accountable.</p> <p><u>Resilience:</u> ability to accept and adapt to change, challenges and difficulties, taking positive action.</p> <p><u>Time management:</u> ability to identify tasks and plan, prioritise and adapt when faced with changing circumstances.</p> <p><u>Emotional Intelligence:</u> ability to recognise own emotions and how they affect thoughts and behaviour. Ability to recognise own strengths and weaknesses and have self-confidence.</p>
<p>Citizenship</p>	<p>Ability to confidently demonstrate intercultural understanding through working in diverse groups.</p>

1.7. There is growing evidence of the criticality of transversal skills for the future of work and our workforce and of a growing demand for higher-order general cognitive skills which are transferable across jobs. It is arguable that vocational education and qualifications should guarantee a minimum threshold of transferable cognitive skills and higher-order skills.¹⁸ In order to keep pace with transformation in the current and future labour market, transversal skills should be included in the curricula of qualifications to ensure that students have the knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviours to thrive in life and work.

1.8. Transversal skills are also associated with enterprise and entrepreneurship, giving learners additional skills to manage the challenges of starting and developing new businesses.

18 [World Development report 'The changing nature of work', \(2019:77\)](#)

- 1.9. The requirement for all vocational qualifications therefore is that they embed opportunities to develop these transversal skills wherever possible. Individual qualifications may not be able to offer opportunities to develop all of the transversal skills to the same level, but relevant transversal skills should be mapped in a coherent and integrated way with opportunities for students to develop their skills over the length of their programme of study.
- 1.10. Effective transversal skills development should be achieved through learner-centred practical tasks set in the context of the subject or occupational area. It is also important that students build experience of applying their knowledge, skills and behaviours in authentic situations, through real-life projects, placement or employment opportunities.
- 1.11. Transversal skills enhance the talents of our current and future workforce and contribute to work performance in combination with technical skills. They give individuals the capacity to continue to learn, develop further and adapt their knowledge. Transversal skills are not directly dependent upon a specific subject but rather complement the learning taking place and ensure that all learners develop the cross-cutting skills that will support success in the workplace and beyond.
- 1.12. Numeracy and literacy can also be identified as transversal skills but are more easily demonstrated and assessed through specific standalone qualifications that can, and should, continue to be used to equip learners with these skills. Literacy and numeracy qualifications such as Essential Skills provide currency throughout an individual's career and should be provided as and when necessary to support a full programme of learning. Due to their importance and transferability, opportunities to develop literacy and numeracy skills should be incorporated into all qualifications.
- 1.13. The fast pace of technological change and the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted that digital literacy is an essential foundation for individuals to navigate life and the workplace. The Digital sector in Northern Ireland has also been growing at a faster rate than the broader economy.¹⁹ It is clear therefore, that the development, retention and evolution of the digital capability of learners and employees underpins not only personal and professional development but also Northern Ireland's economic growth.
- 1.14. As technology advances, our workforce will need to continue to develop their digital knowledge and our vocational qualifications need to be designed with this strategic digital direction in mind. Digital skills as the linchpin for our skills and inclusive growth ambitions has already been recognised and reflected by the Department. It is a key policy objective in the Skills Strategy to develop a digital spine in our skills system.²⁰ Northern Ireland's vocational qualifications should reflect this and fit into the new digital landscape. All vocational qualifications should assist in building on the work ongoing in schools to develop digital skills and place increasing emphasis on the development of digital capability in our workforce. All vocational qualifications must equip learners with the appropriate level of digital skills needed to thrive in their lives, their workplace or to access opportunities within Northern Ireland's growing digital sector itself.

19 [Research Bulletin 22/2- Skills demanded by digital IT sector \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

20 [Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland - Skills for a 10X Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

- 1.15. Stakeholder engagement conducted for the development of this consultation further emphasised the importance of digital skills development in Northern Ireland to help protect against future rapid changes in the labour market by providing a core of transferable skills. Digital skills should be more embedded and contextualised within qualifications and vocational qualifications should reflect the wide range of digital systems and software used across a range of sectors and occupations.
- 1.16. The type of digital skills acquired during the qualification will diverge depending on the level being accessed by the learner. A useful concept in this context is the distinction made between a Digital Citizen, Digital Worker and Digital Maker.²¹ Digital Citizens have been defined as people with the skills to participate in digital aspects of society - to use technology safely and effectively. Digital workers have a sufficient level of digital skills to make them applicable in the workplace. Workers in all sectors need the professional and technical skills to effectively engage with the technologies that will apply in their chosen careers. Digital Makers are the creators of digital technology, individuals who work in digital careers or with new and emerging enabling technologies.
- 1.17. This principle should be applied appropriately to all vocational qualifications across all groups. It will ensure that all vocational qualifications available on the market future-proof the skills of our people and facilitate economic growth in the digital age.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

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

Have you any other feedback?

21 [digitalskills_framework \(ccea.org.uk\)](https://www.ccea.org.uk/digitalskills-framework)

2. All vocational qualifications must reflect economic need and support inclusive growth.

- 2.1. The purpose of this principle is to ensure that vocational provision in Northern Ireland is:
- **Respected** and informed by employers, educational providers and other stakeholders;
 - **Reflective** of economic need; and
 - **Responsive** to social and labour market changes and challenges.
- 2.2. A key characteristic of effective vocational training systems across the world is the support from, and collaboration with, stakeholders across the system. This principle sets the requirement that vocational qualifications' design and development should involve early engagement with appropriate stakeholders, reflect Northern Ireland's strategic economic context and be consistent with relevant departmental policies and strategies.

Respected by stakeholders

- 2.3. All stakeholders should be involved early in the process of qualification development where possible. Co-operation with stakeholders is something we already do well; there are longstanding and effective engagement approaches such as the role of Sector Partnerships in the development of apprenticeship frameworks which received positive mention during research for this consultation. FE Colleges have also built strong regional industry links to identify skills needs. It is important that our vocational qualifications retain this collaborative and industry-informed approach.
- 2.4. Education providers at all levels should be satisfied that vocational qualifications delivered in Northern Ireland can meet their intended aim such as entry into employment, access to further and higher study before employment and/or career progression.
- 2.5. All vocational qualifications should also be shaped by, and meet, Northern Ireland specific regulatory requirements. To ensure that qualifications do this, it is important that key stakeholders, including relevant industry representatives, are engaged at the earliest stage to ensure that vocational qualifications can equip learners with the necessary skills (and to the appropriate standard) required to support employment and economic growth. It is also important that employers and industry representatives highlight current or potential skills gaps or new skills requirements at the earliest stage to ensure that skills pipelines can be maintained in Northern Ireland.
- 2.6. To ensure that employer expectations are being met and that specification content can be applied directly to workplace situations, work experience placements and work-based projects should be an integral part of vocational qualifications where possible.

Reflect economic need and support inclusive growth

- 2.7. Vocational qualifications should meet the needs of learners and employers, support economic growth and be robust and agile to respond to changing economic needs.
- 2.8. As mentioned earlier, research for this consultation highlighted that three of the most important goals for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland are to:
- Provide practical learning and a technically skilled workforce;
 - Improve productivity and work readiness and anticipate future skills needs; and
 - Instil lifelong learning and provide opportunities to upskill or reskill.
- 2.9. To successfully support economic growth, all vocational qualifications should be developed in line with these goals.
- 2.10. The Department's vision for a 10X economy sets an ambitious path for economic growth in Northern Ireland over the next decade and shows clear desire for an inclusive approach to such growth. Vocational qualifications should be developed in a way that supports this vision. This means that Northern Ireland's vocational qualifications should give everyone the opportunity to participate in, and benefit from, the opportunities created by our changing and growing economy.
- 2.11. Within the 10X vision, the Department has identified a number of priority growth areas (e.g. cybersecurity and advanced manufacturing) over the next 10 years which, along with other essential sectors (e.g. health and social care and retail), will require a steady supply of skilled workers.
- 2.12. Particularly important is the need to ensure that there are opportunities for those furthest away from the labour market and for those with low or no formal skills. That means, in education and in the workplace, giving people the necessary training, re-skilling and upskilling opportunities, at all levels, to participate both in existing and future growth sectors. High quality vocational qualifications should be delivered across a suitable range of levels. They should demonstrate value for money in terms of relevance, uptake and outcomes achieved to support and deliver the Department's priorities.

Responsive to labour market changes

- 2.13. Over the next 15–20 years, many trends will affect our labour market and skills demand. These will include but are not exclusive to:
- Public finances;
 - The ageing population;
 - Migration;
 - The pace of technological change;

- Technology-facilitated changes to the location/organisation of work
- Climate change; and
- Changes in education and training provision.²²

2.14. Vocational qualifications should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that they remain relevant in line with key labour market drivers and trends. A qualification is responsive if its content remains relevant and responds positively to changing employer and learner demands. It is vital to not only meet the needs of the economy now but to ensure that the vocational qualification provision in Northern Ireland is agile and responsive to future skills needs.

2.15. This principle seeks to ensure that vocational qualification provision will reflect existing and emerging skills needs and meet the needs of Northern Ireland's economy as the labour market continues to evolve. This principle will ensure that vocational qualifications contribute to improved productivity and work readiness of all those who wish to learn and who are either new to, returning to, or changing roles within employment. This principle has relevance to all vocational qualification categories in varying degrees.

Applied General qualifications

2.16. As these qualifications are primarily used for progression to higher education, it is important that their content provides the necessary knowledge and skills base to meet the expectations of learners who wish to continue to higher level study. Applied General qualifications should also be cognisant of Northern Ireland's economic context and departmental strategies during their development. Qualifications in this category may or may not be designed with a specific occupation in mind but should reflect the appropriate sector standards and where they are occupationally specific, it is important that their relevance is assessed against up-to-date labour market information and economic priorities to give learners the best opportunity for success in their local labour market.

Professional and Technical qualifications

2.17. Professional and Technical qualifications as defined in this consultation are more central to fulfilling economic need and, as this principle outlines, should therefore reflect and contribute to departmental strategies as well as show evidence of early and robust stakeholder and industry engagement during development. Work-based learning opportunities in this category are vital so that learners have the opportunity to apply their skill in an authentic workplace environment. Professional and Technical qualifications are also key in supporting the Department's vision to embed a culture of lifelong learning and help facilitate the reskilling and upskilling of our workforce.

22 [Labour market and skills demand horizon scanning and future scenarios \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

Skills for Life and Work qualifications

2.18. As outlined earlier in this section, vocational qualifications are for everyone. This was communicated clearly during research for this consultation. The majority of qualifications in this category will provide opportunities across a range of levels and across a range of subject areas. The application of this principle to the Skills for Life and Work category is about recognising the value of this preparatory work to meet learners' specific needs before they are ready to undertake further study. The wide range of qualifications in this category may offer a first step in reengaging a learner in education, a chance to sample a range of occupations, preparation to directly enter the workplace or a chance for personal development. Meeting economic need may be the ultimate end goal but not the first or only aim for Skills for Life and Work qualifications. Ensuring that we have high quality qualifications that are linked effectively to progression pathways in this category promotes our vision for an inclusive economy and gives everyone the opportunity to support, and benefit from, its growth.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Question 6 - Do you agree that Professional and Technical qualifications should be economically focused? If not, why?

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?

Question 8 - How can we ensure vocational qualifications react to the needs of Northern Ireland's economy?

Have you any other feedback?

3. All vocational qualifications must be appropriately assessed.

- 3.1. The purpose of this principle is to ensure that vocational qualifications provide learners with sufficient evidence to show that they have met nationally and internationally recognised standards. Robust assessment helps to ensure that qualifications are accepted by employers and education providers and allows learners to progress in their career journey.
- 3.2. Assessment provides a formal structure to evaluate a learner's attainment of knowledge, understanding and skills. Assessments also allow learners to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in realistic and authentic situations.
- 3.3. It is key that all vocational qualifications are recognised by and valued by learners, educational providers, employers and the wider community, and that they represent nationally and internationally recognised standards of attainment.
- 3.4. All assessment methods must be:
 - Reliable: learner evidence is authenticated and judged consistently; assessment decisions should be consistent across all assessors for all learners undertaking the same assessment task. The criteria for success at each level must be clearly defined and should provide key stakeholders with a measurable outcome of competence.
 - Valid: assessments accurately reflect the qualification content and allow learners to demonstrate the knowledge and skills gained. Assessments accurately measure performance against the stated standards.
 - Fair: all learners should have equal opportunities to demonstrate their attainment; assessment methods should not adversely affect any learners and should support reasonable adjustments where necessary; and assessment materials should be inclusive and promote equality. All assessment methods should be easily understood by all key stakeholders.
 - Practicable: assessment can realistically be carried out without undue burden on centres and learners.
- 3.5. There is a range of valid and reliable assessment methods, including e-assessment, which can be used across qualifications, but it is important that the chosen methods support the learner cohort and reflect the main purpose of a qualification. Therefore, assessment strategies should be designed differently depending on the nature and purpose of the qualification.

Applied General qualifications

- 3.6. In many instances, Applied General qualifications are used as an alternative to A Levels, providing another route into higher education and further study. With this in mind, it is important that assessment methods in these qualifications reflect the rigour and examination environments expected by Higher Education providers and appropriately assess a learner's knowledge and understanding as well as their ability to apply this in a range of appropriate settings.
- 3.7. In line with the approach taken in A Levels, we would expect that qualifications in this category would incorporate a minimum of 40% of the overall qualification to be assessed through external examination, set and marked by the awarding organisation.
- 3.8. Assessment by examination does not have to be a written paper but should be:
- Set by the awarding organisation;
 - Taken under conditions stated by the awarding organisation; and
 - Designed to be taken simultaneously by all relevant students.
- 3.9. It is vital that the assessment strategies to support qualifications in this category are designed to prepare learners for continued higher level study, as well as the potential transition to different delivery environments.
- 3.10. It is also important that qualifications in this category which are delivered with the purpose of progression into higher education are widely recognised and accepted by Higher Education providers.

Professional and Technical qualifications

- 3.11. Professional and Technical qualifications should primarily prepare students to enter, and progress in, skilled employment. Assessment should therefore reflect competence in relation to the occupational area. It is also essential that assessment methods used in these qualifications are suitable to the occupational area.
- 3.12. Due to the wide range of occupations and sectors, it is important to avoid being overly prescriptive when it comes to assessment strategy for these qualifications. Different occupational areas lend themselves to different, yet similarly valid, assessment methods and this should be taken into consideration. Feedback from stakeholders demonstrated no particular preference for one assessment method over another but support was expressed for the use of a range of methods to allow learners the best chance of demonstrating their knowledge and skills.
- 3.13. Qualification assessment should be fit for purpose to assess the content of a qualification while balancing the requirements of validity, reliability and comparability.

- 3.14. The assessment methods should also provide a holistic opportunity for students to demonstrate competence across the qualification. It is important to ensure that learners can make effective connections and draw together knowledge, skills and/or understanding from across the occupational requirements
- 3.15. A number of learners undertaking Professional and Technical qualifications may also decide to continue with higher level study, further highlighting the need to ensure valid and reliable assessment methods which are accepted by Higher Education providers.

Skills for Life and Work qualifications

- 3.16. Qualifications in this category should equip learners with the knowledge and skills they need to successfully manage their daily lives whether in the workplace, the wider community or at home. Due to the wide range of qualifications in this category and the varied range of users it is important to avoid being overly prescriptive in relation to assessment methods.
- 3.17. Assessment strategies for qualifications in this category should reflect and support the varied cohorts who undertake these qualifications. Assessment methods should be flexible to support all learners and give them the best chance to demonstrate the skills and knowledge attained through the course of their study. This may mean that a range of different assessment methods are used to assess knowledge and skills throughout the duration of the course. It is also important that the assessments should allow learners to apply their skills and knowledge in realistic environments and authentic situations where possible.
- 3.18. Assessment in this group of qualifications should be proportionate to the size and level of the qualification and also take into consideration the potential educational pathways the qualification could support including progression into Level 2 study.
- 3.19. This principle ensures that our assessment practices meet our ambitions for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland and the learners who access them.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

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?

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

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

Have you any other feedback?

4. All vocational qualifications must be based on recognised standards and allow portability and progression.

- 4.1. The purpose of this principle is to ensure that vocational qualifications equip learners with a recognised standard of knowledge and skills appropriate to the level, size and purpose of the qualification. Vocational qualifications should provide learners with the opportunity to acquire the appropriate knowledge and skills that will help them to successfully manage their lives, continue to further study, enter employment and progress in the workplace.
- 4.2. Qualifications underpinned by common, recognised standards allows for greater comparability and understanding of qualifications not only across the UK, but also internationally. This ensures that qualifications and skills are portable, and learners can move freely not only between employers but also geographically.
- 4.3. All vocational qualifications should provide opportunities to equip the learner with the appropriate standard of knowledge and skills to directly enter employment at a suitable level or progress to higher levels of study. It is vital that vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland should not leave any individual without a viable next step. It is therefore important that vocational qualifications are recognised, understood, accepted and valued by all stakeholders in the system, especially learners, employers and educational providers.

Professional and Technical qualifications

- 4.4. Professional and Technical qualifications should be based on National Occupational Standards (NOS) or recognised professional standards. It is a key feature to ensure that our vocational qualifications are recognised and portable across the UK and internationally.²³
- 4.5. It is vital that these qualifications reflect the recognised knowledge and skills expected by employers in their related sector, and in order to successfully deliver this, it is important that employers across the UK have the opportunity to influence the development of standards for their industry.
- 4.6. NOS describe the skills, knowledge and understanding needed to undertake a particular task or job to a nationally recognised level of competence. They focus on what the person needs to be able to do, as well as what they must know and understand, to work effectively. During NOS development and review, employers across the UK are consulted and have the opportunity to contribute to the final standards. This UK-wide consultation ensures a common understanding of what is expected in order to perform competently in the workplace and allows for transferability of skills across nations of the UK. This means that qualifications based on NOS are also recognised and portable across the UK. To further support portability, NOS also cover a range of core, multi-sector standards that can be applied and transferred across sectors and occupations.

23 [National Occupational Standards Strategy 2022 and beyond | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

- 4.7. In some sectors and occupations there are additional or alternative standards set by regulatory bodies or legislation and it is important that all legislative and regulatory requirements are reflected in the qualifications where appropriate.
- 4.8. Where it is identified that NOS are not the appropriate standards, or suitable NOS do not exist, other recognised standards should be used such as WorldSkills. In higher level qualifications (e.g. levels 4/5) or where a professional body sets its own standards such as accountancy, the appropriate standards should be used. Where recognised standards cannot be identified, evidence from employers should support qualification content.
- 4.9. Work-based learning provides learners with real-life work experiences where they can apply academic and technical skills and develop their employability and transversal skills. Some form of work-based learning should be included in qualifications in this group. Simulated or virtual work experience or work-based projects may be used in areas where face-to-face placements are difficult to obtain but some form of face-to-face work placement should be included, where possible.

Applied General qualifications and Skills for Life and Work qualifications

- 4.10. For these qualifications NOS should be used when available, however there may be some instances where NOS are not available such as in less occupationally specific areas. In these instances, alternative recognised standards should be used as the basis for qualification development. There are also a range of international benchmarks and standards such as WorldSkills standards, which could be considered in the development of qualifications to further support recognition and portability. Feedback from stakeholders showed strong support for the continued use of NOS and other recognised standards to maintain quality and facilitate portability.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

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

Have you any other feedback?

5. All vocational qualifications should embrace innovation.

- 5.1. The purpose of this principle is to ensure that vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland reflect educational best practise, support a range of pedagogies (and demonstrate transformation in learning delivery and assessment) and the Department's vision for economic growth through innovation over the next decade.
- 5.2. Vocational qualifications should support innovation through new ways of teaching and learning to provide learners with the best opportunity to develop and demonstrate the knowledge, skills and behaviours required to achieve their life and career goals. Innovation in vocational qualifications should be appropriate to the learner, qualification and sector, and should improve or enhance the learner experience.
- 5.3. Pedagogies involving a more practical application of knowledge and skills, such as project-based learning (PBL), can help embed skills and behaviours and provide authentic projects and tasks that set learning in the context of real workplace scenarios. Approaches such as PBL can help drive innovation and entrepreneurship and vocational qualifications should enable these ways of working.
- 5.4. New and emerging technologies are also changing how we live, work, and learn and vocational qualifications should allow education delivery organisations to maximise the potential of these technologies and provide a stimulating and realistic environment in which learners can develop. For example, the use of Virtual Reality (VR) allows learners to perform tasks in a simulated workplace, while industry-specific equipment and computer software allow learners to gain experience in realistic work-based tasks and subsequently meet the expectations of employers.
- 5.5. Experience during COVID-19 demonstrated the potential benefits that can be achieved through the use of online learning alongside face-to-face delivery. With appropriate support, learners can not only develop their digital skills but benefit from the flexibility provided by online delivery when used as part of a blended delivery model. Vocational qualifications should allow opportunities to maximise the use of technology to enhance educational delivery, where and when appropriate.
- 5.6. In order to maximise the benefits of this principle for learners, it is expected that vocational qualifications are delivered by appropriately qualified staff who have relevant skills and, where appropriate, up to date experience in the sector relevant to the qualification. It is also expected that education settings have the facilities and equipment to deliver the full specification of the qualification to the highest possible standard.

Applied General qualifications

5.7. These qualifications should allow for a blend of traditional teaching methodologies as well as more practical and innovative approaches to embed knowledge and skills. Qualifications in this category used for progression to further study must ensure that a minimum level of academic knowledge is embedded to facilitate the transition to higher level study while also providing the practical skills and behaviours needed in the workplace. Qualifications in this category could benefit from more engaged methods of delivery such as project-based learning but some learners may also benefit from a more traditional academic approach to prepare learners for the environment and expectations of Higher Education providers.

Professional and Technical qualifications

- 5.8. The nature and purpose of qualifications in this category demands a practical approach to learning that prepares learners for the workplace. These qualifications should provide the learner with opportunities to learn and demonstrate the skills and behaviours expected by employers in a realistic setting where possible. There are various approaches to delivery of these qualifications and this should be reflected in their design.
- 5.9. For qualifications in this group, PBL can be an effective method. PBL enables a teaching and learning method in which learners gain new knowledge and skills by working for an agreed defined period of time²⁴ to investigate and respond to a complex business-related²⁵ problem, project or challenge in a learning group.
- 5.10. Work-based learning is also a key component in this category of qualifications, but it can be challenging to secure appropriate workplace opportunities for all learners across all sectors. New technologies can support this by facilitating simulated or virtual work experience in areas where placements are difficult to obtain. Work-based learning provides learners with real-life work experiences where they can apply academic and technical skills and develop their employability and transversal skills.
- 5.11. Additionally, for some sectors, such as engineering and advanced manufacturing, new technologies are key to efficient and effective design and manufacture of products, therefore a key skills component in the qualifications should be through the use of this industry-specific equipment and software which is appropriate to the qualification level, and sector. It is important that learning in this area reflects the skills needed by employers working in the sector.

24 Due to the challenging and complex nature of the issue being addressed, a PBL project will typically require a substantive amount of time to complete.

25 Business-related will normally be sector specific and involve actual engagement with an industry stakeholder during the project lifecycle.

Skills for Life and Work

- 5.12. Many qualifications in this category are not occupationally specific but may also benefit from alternative, innovative and practical approaches to delivery. Many learners taking these qualifications have struggled with a more academic approach to learning and prefer a more hands on, 'learning by doing' approach.
- 5.13. For qualifications in this category, it is important that delivery can be flexible and adapted to meet learner needs and the delivery settings of a range of educational providers. Approaches such as contextualised learning, where information is presented in a way that learners can relate to their own personal experiences, would be suitable for qualifications in this group. It is also important that these qualifications offer opportunities to demonstrate practical skills in authentic real-life or work-related situations.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Question 13 - Do you agree with the approach set out in this section? If not, why?

Have you any other feedback?

6. All vocational qualifications must support inclusion and access to all.

- 6.1. The purpose of this principle is to ensure that vocational qualification provision in Northern Ireland supports flexible delivery and access to allow every individual the opportunity to realise their potential and progress in their career journey.
- 6.2. A key feature of vocational education, and its qualifications, is inclusivity. This was a strong message communicated to us from stakeholders. This principle seeks to highlight flexibility and inclusivity as a necessary feature of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland.
- 6.3. Vocational qualifications are taken by a diverse range of learners and are delivered across a range of different programmes and educational settings such as FE colleges, apprenticeships, training providers, schools (including Irish Medium schools), community and voluntary organisations and universities. Each delivery setting has unique strengths and challenges and where possible, vocational qualifications should support and address these, respectively.
- 6.4. A diverse cohort of learners also comes with a range of needs and challenges. Vocational provision in Northern Ireland should provide opportunities for all learners to access and gain suitable qualifications that will support their career aspirations where possible.
- 6.5. The flexibility offered by vocational qualifications ensures that all learners no matter their learning preference, ability or personal circumstances have an opportunity to access the qualifications they need. It is therefore important that all vocational qualifications delivered in Northern Ireland continue to accommodate reasonable adjustments and can offer equal access to all learners as far as reasonably possible. This would be supported by ensuring that vocational qualifications, where possible, can support a range of delivery and assessment methods, in line with requirements set out in sections 3 and 5, to maximise opportunities for learners to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and behaviours.
- 6.6. The wide range of vocational qualifications, offered across a broad selection of subject areas, provides opportunities for those who have faced barriers in their educational journey and require an alternative pathway to allow them to reengage with the education system and with learning.
- 6.7. Vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland also play a vital role in lifelong learning and the reskilling and up-skilling of employees. High quality vocational qualifications create resilience in the workforce and can offer opportunities for personal and career development for individuals. A wide range of subject areas, occupationally specific and specialist qualifications and flexible delivery options are vital aspects of a vocational system that can support the Skills Strategy aim of promoting a culture of lifelong learning in Northern Ireland.

- 6.8. The common use of modularisation in vocational qualifications also offers an opportunity to increase participation and provide a varied range of pathways to suit both the individual and employers. All vocational qualifications should offer a modular approach to delivery as far as possible.
- 6.9. Experience during the COVID-19 pandemic also demonstrated the importance of flexibility to ensure that learners have a range of options available regardless of economic and labour market changes. For example, it is important that qualifications delivered in Northern Ireland can provide transition between different delivery settings such as employed routes (e.g. apprenticeships) and non-employed routes (e.g. full-time education).
- 6.10. This principle should be applied appropriately to all vocational qualifications across all groups.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Question 14 - Do you think vocational qualifications can support social inclusion? If yes, how? If not, why?

Question 15 - Do you think vocational qualifications can support lifelong learning? If yes, how? If not, why?

Have you any other feedback?

7. Summary of Consultation Questions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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?

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

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?

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

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

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

QUESTION 13 – Do you agree with the approach set out in this section? If not, why?

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

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

ANNEX A

Vocational education reform in England, including T Levels, and impacts in Northern Ireland

1. Vocational education is undergoing substantial reforms across the UK. England in particular have a significant and wide-ranging programme of reform to vocational and technical education under way. This builds on several independent reviews, including the Wolf Report on vocational education (2014), the Sainsbury Report on technical education and the Auger Report (2019) on post-18 education and funding.
2. This work culminated in a 'Skills for Jobs' white paper published in January 2021. It builds on ongoing reforms (such as to apprenticeships) and indicated several areas for further work. The white paper's stated aims are to put employers at the heart of the vocational training system, boost higher level technical qualifications as an alternative to university, support lifelong learning, simplify funding and accountability and create teaching excellence. The Skills and Post-16 Education Act (2022) underpins these reforms.
3. As part of these changes, England are moving to base qualifications on their new employer-led standards developed by employer panels and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) and which form the basis of their apprenticeship provision. Northern Ireland, along with Scotland and Wales continue to use National Occupational Standards as the basis for vocational qualifications. The new NOS strategy was published in October 2022 and can be found here: [National Occupational Standards Strategy](#)
4. There has also been a drive to rationalise and simplify qualification provision. This has seen England removing funding for qualifications at levels 1 – 3 with limited or no take-up.
5. In April 2022, the Department for Education in England concluded a public consultation with significant proposals for change in level 2 qualifications and below that would be funded, while Ofqual has published a new regulatory approach to some level 3 qualifications following consultation between February and April 2022.
6. It is possible that the policy changes in England could have some impact on the availability of qualifications in Northern Ireland. The qualification regulator for Northern Ireland, CCEA Regulation is monitoring the situation closely to manage this risk.
7. Scotland, Wales and Ireland are also considering or delivering reforms to their vocational education provision. In particular, Wales have launched a review of vocational qualifications.

T Levels

8. England have also introduced T Levels at level 3 as part of their wider reforms to technical education. T Levels are a new vocational programme aiming to be the new 'gold standard' vocational qualification at level 3.
9. The stated aim of T Levels, and that of wider reforms, is to put employers at the heart of the vocational system to ensure a future streamlined skills landscape that meets the skills needs of employers and stays up to date with the fast pace of change in the economy. T Levels are therefore based on English apprenticeship standards which are developed by employer panels. They are regulated by Ofqual but also approved by IfATE.
10. T Levels are equivalent to 3 A Levels and are delivered over 2 years. T Level grades comprise a core exam component, employer-set project and a mandatory industry work placement of 45 days. They are a large, challenging qualification aimed at 16–19-year-old high performers as an alternative to A Levels, though in September 2022, a small two-year pilot for adult learners also commenced. There is an option of an initial transition year to bring students up to the required standard, if necessary.
11. The qualification is being rolled out in England over four 'waves' from September 2020 – September 2023. The 24 T Levels form part of 11 'routes'. The first ever T Level students (1,029) received results in August 2022 in construction, digital and education and childcare pathways.
12. The intention is to then start removing funding from existing vocational qualifications which duplicate T Levels or A Levels or which have low take-up.
13. There is a broad core to a T Level with the option to specialise e.g., construction and digital pathways. The first and second waves (three and seven T Level qualifications respectively) are being delivered by a selected group of settings in schools and colleges. They have a different model of development and delivery with only one / two awarding organisations delivering a specified T Level having won commercial tender for its development and delivery.
14. More information on T Levels can be found here: [Introduction of T Levels - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/introduction-of-t-levels)

ANNEX B

The diagram below outlines the role of CCEA Regulation Quality Assurance of regulated qualifications in Northern Ireland.

