



There are many  
paths to success

**Education and vocational  
qualifications in England,  
Scotland, Wales and  
Northern Ireland**  
July 2008



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1. Statistics from National Statistics Online unless otherwise stated

2. Scottish Government, updated for Jan-Mar 2008

3. Department of Finance and Personnel, Northern Ireland, 2007. There are concerns at how unemployment rates are calculated, for example they do not include anyone who has been arrested or imprisoned for participation in the political unrest ('The Troubles') before the Good Friday Agreement.

4. DELNI Labour Market Bulletin 21, March 2008

5. Learning & Labour Market Intelligence for Wales, Dec 2007

6. Learning & Labour Market Intelligence for Wales, Dec 2007

7. Labour Force Survey, published March 2007

## Section 1

### Introduction<sup>1</sup> – UK Countries Comparison

#### Scotland

- 5.1 million people
- 76.5% in employment (of economically active adults)
- Statistics on literacy and numeracy ratios are not available but it is assumed that as 87.7% of people have a qualification at SCQF Level 5 or above (equal to NQF level 2), a similar proportion are numerate and literate.<sup>2</sup>

#### Northern Ireland

- 1.7 million people
- Unemployment is lower than the UK average but employment amongst economically active adults stands at 73.4%.<sup>3</sup>
- 24% of adults are classed as low skilled and do not have a basic level of literacy and numeracy.<sup>4</sup>

#### Wales

- 2.97 million people
- 71% are in employment (of economically active adults)
- Literacy and numeracy rates are a huge concern – 53% do not have adequate numeracy skills and 25% do not have basic literacy skills.<sup>5</sup>
- 68.4% of adults have a Level 2 qualification or above.<sup>6</sup>

#### England

- 49.1 million people
- 78.7% are in employment (of economically active adults)
- 73.9% of people have a qualification at Level 2 or above.<sup>7</sup>
- Lord Leitch specified that 85% of adults are considered literate and 79% of adults are numerate.

## Section 2

### Key Players

The devolved administrations of the UK each have their own structures for the development and maintenance of education and training. The following table outlines the main agencies for each country. Each country also has its very own skills agenda, often seen as a response to the Leitch Review of Skills published in December 2006.

**Table 1**  
Main stakeholders and publications for education and training

	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales	England
<b>Government Department</b>	Scottish Government (Education & Lifelong Learning Department)	Department of Education (DENI) Department for Employment & Learning NI (DELNI)	Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning & Skills	Department for Children, Schools & Families Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills
<b>Funding Body</b>	Education Authorities Scottish Further Education Funding Council	Department of Education via Education & Library Boards	Local education authorities Welsh Assembly Government	Local authorities Post-16: Learning & Skills Council
<b>Quality Assurance (Inspectorate)</b>	HM Inspectorate of Education	Education & Training Inspectorate	Estyn	Ofsted
<b>Regulation &amp; Curriculum Development</b>	Scottish Qualifications Authority	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (QCA NI for NVQs)	Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning & Skills	OfQual & QCA (to become the Qualification & Curriculum Development Agency)
<b>Employer representation</b>	UK Commission for Employment & Skills	UK Commission for Employment & Skills	UK Commission for Employment & Skills	UK Commission for Employment & Skills
<b>Skills Agenda</b>	Skills for Scotland: A lifelong skills strategy (Sept 2007)	Success through Skills: the skills strategy for Northern Ireland (Jun 2006)	Skills that work for Wales: A skills and employment strategy (Jan 2008)	World Class Skills: implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England (Jul 2007)

The recent formation of the UK CES may indeed harmonise employer representation across all four UK nations but at present, each country also invests considerable resource in its own mechanisms for employer engagement, for example the Workforce Development Boards in Northern Ireland and the recently established Employment and Skills Board in Wales.

#### Unique Skills Strategies

Having their own skills strategy means that each country has slightly different priorities. The Leitch Review of Skills was seen to be of relevance only in the broadest possible sense and relevant stakeholders, including the government departments, can be quite vociferous about the need to uphold their own skills strategy. The different policy priorities are considered in greater detail in Section 4.

## Section 3

### Education Systems In The Four Nations

In Wales, Northern Ireland and England, the school systems are broadly similar although there are some slight differences in focus. There are seven years of primary school (from 5 to 11 years old), followed by 5 years of compulsory secondary school. Scotland is significantly different. The main features of the Scottish, Northern Irish and Welsh systems are summarised in Table 2. More details on the Scottish system are then provided below.

**Table 2**

Main features of school-based education

Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Nursery – 3 and 4 yr olds</li> <li>- Primary School (P1 – P7) – from 4/5 yrs old to 12 yrs old</li> <li>- Secondary School               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- S1-S4 compulsory (to 15/16 yrs old), normal qualification route is Standard Grades but students may also choose Intermediates and Access qualifications</li> <li>- S5-S6 optional (for Highers and Advanced Highers)</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Recognising that the current school curriculum and assessment arrangements are seen as very complex, Scottish Government is consulting on the Curriculum for Excellence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- For Years 4–7 in primary school, there is a diagnostic test by computer of children's literacy and numeracy skills in the autumn term.</li> <li>- End of Key Stage 1 &amp; 2 tests are no longer statutory, although CCEA supplies assessments for schools that prefer to continue this model; there is instead teacher assessment. The 11 plus examination will cease to be mandatory from the coming academic year 2008/09.</li> <li>- The revised curriculum for Key Stages 3 and 4 was introduced in Sept 2007. Less detailed than previous specifications, it seeks to recognise 'one size does not fit all'. RE is an obligatory area of learning' alongside the Arts, English (Irish in Irish speaking schools), Environment &amp; Society, Maths, Modern Languages, PE and Science &amp; Technology.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There is a baseline assessment for all children when they start school.</li> <li>- Key Stage 1 and 2 assessments are conducted by the teacher in the national curriculum core subjects, rather than independently.</li> <li>- The basic curriculum at all ages must include religious education and personal and social education.</li> <li>- At Key Stage 4, PE is a mandatory national curriculum subject alongside the core subjects of English, Welsh, maths and science.</li> <li>- A significant proportion of young people are taught in the Welsh language – it is not a statutory obligation to teach English at Key Stage 1 (5 – 7 yrs old).</li> <li>- Since 2004, the basic curriculum also must include work-related education for 14 – 16 yr olds.</li> <li>- The Welsh Baccalaureate has been piloted as part of a review of provision for 14 – 19 yr olds.</li> </ul>

### Scotland

Children can start school in the August after their 5th birthday. If they are born between September and February, they can attend before their 5th birthday or defer until after their 5th birthday. At primary school, the curriculum centres on language, mathematics, environmental studies, expressive arts, religious and moral education. The cross cutting themes of Scottish culture, ICT, citizenship, enterprise in education and personal development are also studied. Assessment is both formative and summative, internal and external, and collected throughout the course of their studies. Students in P1-P7 are graded throughout with A being the lowest possible grade and E/F, the highest. The Scottish Survey of Achievement collects externally assessed achievement data at P3, P5, P7 and S2.

From P7, students progress to secondary school. The qualification structure is all the more complex at this level. The majority of learners participate in Standard Grade qualifications in S3 and S4, which are offered at three levels (Foundation, General, Credit). These equate with Key Stage 4. 8 subjects are normally studied for Standard Grades, including the compulsory maths, English, a language (which could be Gaelic) and science. The following summarises the highest grade available for these qualifications:

- Credit – Grade 1 or 2
- General – Grade 3 or 4
- Foundation – Grade 5 or 6
- Course completed – Grade 7

Access 1, 2 and 3 qualifications (1 is the lowest, 3 the highest) are also available in secondary school and focus on those with the greatest learning needs. Access 3 equates with Standard Foundation. Intermediates 1 and 2 were introduced to either prepare students in other subject areas or stretch the most able of students before they go onto Highers. After S4, learners can decide to progress onto the optional Highers and Advanced Highers in S5 and S6. Rather than stay in school, learners can attend a further education college or participate in a Modern Apprenticeship.

Highers are seen as the 'gold standard' and normally 5 or 6 subjects are studied. Students may decide to go to university after S5 if they have completed their Highers or go onto Advanced Highers in S6, making them a similar age to English students when they enter university. Highers are graded A – D (with A the highest). SQA have prepared a short leaflet that summarises the different national qualifications available. Likewise the Scottish Government produces a number of useful statistics on the achievements and destinations of school leavers. In 2006/7, nearly 87% of school leavers were in positive destinations three months after leaving.

### Qualification Frameworks

With the specified aim of enhancing the transparency and understanding of qualifications, plus enabling the mobility of learners, each of the four nations have agreed to participate, to varying degrees, in the Vocational Qualification Reform Programme UK. This overarching programme is centrally co-ordinated by DIUS with the strand on qualification framework development being led by QCA. As such, it specifically concerns the development of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), the replacement for the National Qualification Framework in England and as it stands, Northern Ireland.

England, however, is not the first of the four countries to develop a framework that utilises credit. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and the Credit and Qualifications Framework in Wales (CQFW) are long established and actually seen as more inclusive models as they are capable of recognising learning from schools and higher education. How the QCF will recognise these forms of learning is still up for debate. Qualification levels are the same across England, Wales and Northern Ireland but are different from the SCQF – the differences are demonstrated effectively by this leaflet 'Qualifications can cross boundaries'.

**Table 3**  
The current education landscape for 14–19 year olds

	<b>England</b>	<b>Wales</b>	<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>Scotland</b>
<b>School based qualifications</b>	Key Stages 1, 2, 3	Key Stages 1, 2, 3	Key Stages 1, 2, 3	Access 1,2,3
	GCSEs	GCSEs	GCSEs	Standard Generals & Intermediates
	AS & A levels	AS & A levels	AS & A levels	Highers & Advanced Highers
	Higher Education	Higher Education	Higher Education	Higher Education
<b>Vocational / practical learning</b>	NVQs, Advanced GNVQs, Vocationally Related Qualifications (VRQs)	NVQs, Advanced GNVQs, Vocationally Related Qualifications (VRQs)	NVQs, Advanced GNVQs, Vocationally Related Qualifications (VRQs)	SVQs & VRQs
	Diplomas	Welsh Baccalaureate	Work begun on Vocational Enhancement Programme	New General Qualifications & Highers

Data on progression to higher education via these different qualification routes is explored in our tailored briefing note 'Higher Level Qualifications'. For 16–19 year olds, the progression from GCSEs will become all the more important as the Government is seeking to raise the school leaving age from 16 by 2013.

The development of Diplomas for 14–19 year olds in England has received significant media coverage. England is not alone in revising its qualification provision for 14–19 year olds, table 4 below summarises the main qualifications available. Nation-specific issues around 14–19 developments are explored further in Section 4.

**Table 4**  
Welsh Baccalaureates and Diplomas

Welsh Baccalaureate	Diploma	Scottish Highers
<p><b>Foundation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Four key skills at L1, including one of Communication, Application of Number &amp; ICT.</li> <li>– Work related education, team enterprise activities &amp; community participation.</li> <li>– Individual investigation (science).</li> <li>– NVQ L1 &amp; other GCSE. At KS4 four D-G grades at GCSE/ equivalent.</li> </ul> <p><b>Intermediate</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Four key skills, two at L2 and two at L1.</li> <li>– Team enterprise, citizenship &amp; community participation.</li> <li>– Individual investigation at L2.</li> <li>– English, Maths, Science (single), PE, Religious Education, Work-Related Education, Careers Education &amp; Guidance, PSE, Sex Education.</li> <li>– KS4: four GCSE grades A*-C.</li> </ul> <p><b>Advanced</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Six key skills, three at L3.</li> <li>– Work related education, team enterprise activities &amp; community participation, language module.</li> <li>– 1800 word individual investigation or project from the Wales, Europe &amp; the World segment.</li> <li>– Two GCE A levels.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Foundation Diploma</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Principal learning</li> <li>– Project</li> <li>– Additional/specialist learning</li> <li>– Work experience</li> </ul> <p>1 year of learning. Equivalent to 5 GCSEs at grades D-G. Foundation Diploma achievement &amp; attainment table (AAT) points exclude functional skills and personal, learning &amp; thinking skills because these are delivered and recognised in AAT points through the KS4 curriculum.</p> <p><b>Higher Diploma</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Principal learning</li> <li>– Project</li> <li>– Additional/specialist learning</li> <li>– Work experience</li> </ul> <p>1-2 years of learning, dependent on whether it is taken on its own or as part of the Key Stage 4 national curriculum. Equivalent to 7 GCSEs at grades A*-C. Higher Diploma achievement &amp; attainment table (AAT) points exclude functional skills and personal, learning &amp; thinking skills because these are delivered and recognised in AAT points through the KS4 curriculum.</p> <p><b>Advanced Diploma:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Principal learning</li> <li>– Extended project</li> <li>– Additional/specialist learning</li> <li>– English functional skills</li> <li>– Maths functional skills</li> <li>– ICT functional skills</li> <li>– Personal, learning &amp; thinking skills</li> <li>– Work experience</li> </ul> <p>2 years full time. Equivalent to 3.5 GCE A levels at grades A*-E.</p>	<p><b>Access/Intermediate 1/ Intermediate 2:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 7-9 subjects.</li> </ul> <p><b>Highers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Three units depending on the Higher subject.</li> <li>– Optional elements decided by the candidate/centre.</li> <li>– Core skills are built into the courses (communication, IT, numeracy, problem-solving and working with others).</li> </ul> <p><b>Advanced Higher:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– This qualification is largely focused on individual study/ independent learning. It is not a prerequisite for entry into Scottish universities and funding is therefore lower.</li> </ul>

- 8. Scottish Government Statistics
- 9. Keep, E., Mayhew, K., & Payne, J., (2006) *From Skills Revolution to Productivity Miracle: Not as easy as it sounds?* Oxford Review of Economic Policy, Vol. 22, No.4

## Section 4 Current Policy Drivers

**Table 5**  
 Summary of current policy drivers

Country	Current policy drivers
<b>Scotland</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consultation on Next Generation of National Qualifications in Scotland</li> <li>- Improving skills levels are not leading to greater productivity</li> <li>- High levels of employer engagement and higher ratio of entrepreneurs than any other UK country</li> </ul>
<b>Wales</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Higher proportion of unqualified adults than the rest of the UK</li> <li>- Low levels of literacy and numeracy</li> <li>- Welsh Baccaalaureate vs Diplomas?</li> <li>- Careers Ladders Wales</li> </ul>
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Political sensitivities ('The Troubles')</li> <li>- Amalgamation of 16 FE colleges into 6</li> <li>- Decline in key sectors: construction and IT</li> <li>- Does taking a lead from English policy best meet the needs of Northern Ireland?</li> </ul>
<b>England</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Will Diplomas meet the needs of young people, their parents, employers and HE?</li> <li>- Vocational Qualification Reform Programme</li> <li>- Initiative and agency overload?</li> </ul>

**Scotland**  
 Scotland is in a very interesting position. Australian vocational education development has been largely informed by the SCQF. There are high amounts of buy-in across the system to improve education and training and employers are readily engaged, rather than just responding to government initiatives. The Smith Group, led by Sir Robert Smith, joined forces with education leaders and the Scottish Executive (now the Scottish Government) to lobby and support pilots in better vocational training, careers advice and entrepreneurship. It is perhaps not surprising given the high numbers of entrepreneurs in Scotland that enterprise should be such a focus. Determined to Succeed has developed a successful strategy for encouraging enterprise in education and Scottish Enterprise has run for the last four years the EDGE programme (Encouraging Dynamic Global Entrepreneurs) which seeks to "promote an entrepreneurial culture" amongst young people.

Approximately 87% of school leavers in 2006/07 year group were in positive destinations three months after leaving school.<sup>8</sup> So the initiatives are, to some extent, working. Yet as Keep et al (2006) have explored in some depth, greater skills levels are not generating greater productivity and economic growth across the UK and especially not in Scotland.<sup>9</sup> Instead Keep argues that for policy change to be effective, skills are only part of the solution and must be embedded within national economic policy.

10. Working Together: Cross-Sectoral Provision of Vocational Education for Scotland's School Pupils.

11. Learning & Labour Market Intelligence for Wales, December 2007

12. *Transitions: Young Adults with Complex Needs*. Social Exclusion Unit, 2005

13. *The Real Level of Unemployment 2007*, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University

### Qualification development and progression for young learners

As per the aims of the Higher Still curriculum for 16+, vocational and academic pathways are combined into a single framework. Higher Still has met with a mixed reception and according to a 2005 HMIE report, pupils who follow vocational courses in S3 and S4 rarely had the appropriate progression opportunities to related provision in S5 and S6.<sup>10</sup> The Scottish Government is currently consulting on the Next Generation of National Qualifications in Scotland. This proposes developing the new Curriculum for Excellence and largely is in response to the OECD report: Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland. It also strongly plays to the Scottish Government's strategy for a "wealthier and fairer, healthier, safer and stronger, smarter and greener Scotland".

The Curriculum for Excellence suggests a more "coherent and inclusive curriculum from 3 to 18 years old" with a strong focus on literacy, numeracy, health and the wellbeing of all young people. Key proposals:

- To reduce complexity and improve understanding, the current Standard Generals and Intermediate qualifications will be replaced by new 'Generals' and 'Advanced Generals'.
- Highers will be retained as the "gold standard".
- A 'winter diet' of examinations is proposed rather than concentrating the exam season in summer. Stakeholders will be encouraged to consider other methods of assessment, alongside pre existing examinations. These will be considered in more detail after the consultation.
- Children will be encouraged to learn at an appropriate pace – ensuring that all young people are sufficiently challenged.
- New Scottish Certificates in literacy and numeracy at SCQF levels 3 to 5. Other Maths and English qualifications will be revised in light of these new qualifications.
- Two new Scottish Baccalaureates: in Science and Languages. These will be consulted on at a later date.
- Education will emphasise Scottish culture and heritage.

### Scotland's Skill Strategy

In September 2007, Scotland also published its skills strategy: *Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy*. The strategy talks about ensuring 'parity of esteem' for vocational and academic learning and it is this document that proposed the Curriculum for Excellence. Simplicity and clarity are at the heart of the skills strategy. It therefore recommended the collapse of learndirect Scotland and Careers Scotland into one body, recently launched as *Skills Development Scotland*. Employers and individuals should not only understand the system but also be part of it so that it best meets their needs.

### Wales

#### The drive to improve

Since devolution, the Welsh Skills Strategy reports that Wales has succeeded in up-skilling the population but it remains the UK country with the lowest level of qualified adults. The December 2007 Learning and Labour Market Intelligence for Wales report demonstrated **284,600 people had no qualifications at all (16.2%)**<sup>11</sup>. 53% of the Welsh population do not have adequate numeracy skills and 25% are without literacy skills. Other socio-economic factors may be contributing or a resultant of these low levels of education, for example drug use amongst 20–24 year olds is nearly three times higher than it is for the rest of the UK population.<sup>12</sup> The closure of the traditional mining industries and associated economic decline means that regions in Wales have some of the highest unemployment rates of the UK. The Real Levels of Unemployment Report found that government sources often underestimate the numbers of economically inactive. Based on this study, in 2002 Merthyr Tydfil had an unemployment rate of 28% - nearly one third of the local population. In 2006, this stood at 15.3%.<sup>13</sup>

#### Basic Skills

The Deputy Minister for Skills, John Griffiths, has recently announced £7.5 million of funding for schools and early years to improve basic skills. This forms part of the *Words Talk - Numbers Count* Basic Skills Strategy. Employers have been encouraged to sign the Basic Skills Pledge (the target is 50% of employers to sign up by 2010, it currently covers 10% of all employees in Wales) and 80% of working-age adults should have basic literacy skills (Level 1) and 55% to have level 1 numeracy skills by 2010. In addition to this, DCELLS (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills) have recently been discussing the need to develop their own functional skills programmes in English, Maths and ICT.

14. Exert from Stanton, G., (2008) Stanton, G., *Learning Matters: Making the 14–19 reforms work for learners*, for CfBT Education Trust

15. Learning & Labour Market Intelligence for Wales, December 2007

16. The Learning Country – Vision into Action, Welsh Assembly Government

### Debate on the Welsh Baccalaureate

Trialled since 2006, the Welsh Baccalaureate qualification will be available across Wales at all three levels from September 2010 and is an opportunity for learners to combine academic and vocational study with personal development and key skills. Meanwhile, England is pressing on with the development of Diplomas in 17 subject areas. The Welsh Baccalaureate is made up of a compulsory core, then optional elements just like the Diplomas. Last August, first results for the Baccalaureate were posted – 75% of learners completing were awarded the Foundation Bac, 57% of completers were awarded the Intermediate Bac and 73% of completers were awarded the Advanced Bac. The *Welsh Baccalaureate website* states that over 90 centres are now ready to deliver this qualification from 2008/09, meaning at least 18,000 students have access to the qualification (with the aim of 40% of post 16 learners to be on a Welsh Bac programme from 2010, up from original targets of 25%) – approaching the 20,000 students due to start the Diploma from September 2008.

The Webb Review in December 2007 brought the differences between these two qualifications into stark contrast by asserting:

**“We do not wish to advocate the adoption of the Diplomas as they currently exist, where there is a greater emphasis on classroom learning about the world of work, rather than on practical learning and real experience. This should not be acceptable: we need instead to enlarge the current vocational and practical learning choices with the Bac in a manner appropriate to Wales.”**

From Promise and Performance (the Webb Review), Welsh Assembly Government, December 2007<sup>14</sup>

Since the Webb Review, there are reports that Wales is currently consulting on how to adapt the content of the principal learning of Diplomas in order to meet Welsh needs. It remains to be seen whether this will pave the way for a hybrid qualification that combines the best of both systems. The review of both Diplomas and Baccalaureates in 2013 will perhaps be the key time to review progress of both systems.

### Skills strategy – better guidance

The picture in Wales is certainly not bleak and there are ever more initiatives to continue to engage young people and adults in education. Unemployment (5.4%) is in line with the rest of the UK and 1.1 million adults participate in some form of learning (69.2%), a strong foundation to build upon.<sup>15</sup> Skills that work for Wales: A skills and employment strategy advocates that a more integrated approach to skills development and employment would help Wales meet its targets. With this in mind, ‘Careers Ladders Wales’ is to be created which, led by the DWP and Jobcentre Plus, will develop a central advice and guidance facility for work and training. It is hoped that this will help Wales meet its goals for full, sustainable employment. By 2010, there is a target for 93% of 16–18 year olds to be in employment, education or training; completion rates for Modern Apprenticeships should stand at 40%.<sup>16</sup> *Careers Wales Online* will also be enhanced to provide better support. It is also interesting to note the emphasis given to seeking European funding (from the European Social Fund) for initiatives that promote these goals.

**‘We need to enlarge the current vocational and practical learning choices.’**  
**Welsh Assembly Government**

17. A survey by Millward Brown Ulster found that 81% of people support integrated schooling in Northern Ireland

18. Michael Wardlow, *An end to selection brings more choice in the classroom*, Education Guardian, February 2006

19. Northern Ireland Executive, November 2007

20. Leeds University, *National Report – Higher Education Today*

## Northern Ireland

### Striking out on your own?

Northern Ireland views itself as very different from the other nations and yet, a number of policy initiatives in Northern Ireland have their origins in England. Northern Ireland is a participant in the Qualifications and Credit Framework (Wales is also a participant but unlike Wales, Northern Ireland does not have its own credit framework). A decision has yet to be taken on whether Diplomas will be made available in Northern Ireland. A statement on the Department of Education's website signals that discussions around a new Vocational Enhancement Programme have begun but little else is known about these developments at this stage. Likewise Sector Skills Councils are not always seen as the representative body of employers. *Workforce Development Forums*, which bring together business leaders with education on a regional basis, have had differing degrees of success but the best ones, like the Northern Workforce Development Forum, are seen as industry leaders. Nonetheless, Northern Ireland has its own Skills Strategy (the first of the four nations to produce such a strategy) and has recently launched (in September 2007) a revised curriculum for Key Stages 3 and 4 which signals an intent to give learners the best start in life by making them economically and socially aware and most importantly, work and life ready. It is perhaps unsurprising to find that religious education is seen as a key 'area of learning' and tolerance towards others comes through in every aspect of the curriculum.

### Political debate

Some of the difficulty in moving forward with any rapidity may lie in the political structures and intense political history of Northern Ireland. Like England, there is more than one government department with a stake in education and training: the Department of Education (for school age education) and the Department of Employment and Learning (DELNI) but there is also the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI NI) which works on training within industry.

In many areas and increasingly since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, there has been growing favour for more integrated schools in Northern Ireland, instead of the continuation of separate Protestant and Catholic schools.<sup>17</sup> Where both types of schools continue to exist, classes are not full and current debate surrounds the need to develop a more viable school system for the future, as highlighted by the Bain Review of 2006. Since then, DENI has issued its vision for *Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools*. The document gives targets for minimum (as opposed to optimum) enrolment numbers in all schools but parents having the right to choose the type of school their children attends (including single faith schools) is central. The debate over the end to the 11 plus examination in Northern Ireland has underlined the problem: some Catholic schools have even responded with their intention to become independent schools since the policy announcement.<sup>18</sup>

### Preparing for the future

Official figures for unemployment in Northern Ireland stand at a very low 3.8%<sup>19</sup> but many people dispute these figures, claiming that those who have been imprisoned or arrested during 'The Troubles' and now are employed are not included in these statistics. More importantly, there has been a noted decline in sectors that were of prime importance in Northern Ireland, particularly in the construction and IT sectors. A recent report by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors demonstrated how a reduction in house building was having the greatest effect in Northern Ireland. This was, until recently, a booming sector for the nation and if jobs in these industries are to go, not only are there concerns about national economic decline but also for the destination of young learners. 40% of Northern Irish students have to study outside of the region if they are to find a university place.<sup>20</sup> Therefore a high proportion of young people choose to study in Scotland or England. Without the guarantee of a job or affordable housing in Northern Ireland, the impetus to return home and contribute to the local economy will be far less. DELNI are on the cusp of publishing their latest Careers Strategy, hopefully this will seek to tackle this problem in greater depth.

For more information  
or to discuss the 6 Steps  
to Change manifesto  
please contact:

**Edge**

10 Golden Square  
London  
W1F 9JA

**Telephone**

020 7734 6414

**Fax**

020 7734 8328

**Email**

[centre@edge.co.uk](mailto:centre@edge.co.uk)