**DfE public consultation on the principles for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland**

**Purpose – For comment**

**Background**

The principles for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland hope to provide an underlying foundation to ensure learners are provided with high quality vocational education and Northern Ireland’s industry can access the highly skilled and resilient workforce it needs. The currently open consultation is seeking feedback from all relevant stakeholders to ensure the strategy has the correct ambitions for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland.

**Aim**

The aims of this paper are:

* To gather feedback from the NI construction industry and stakeholders to be incorporated into a CITB NI response on behalf of the industry.
* Provide the NI construction industry and stakeholders with a sufficient summary of the consultation, principles expressed and draft answers to the questions posed by DfE (which can be found in appendix one),
* Encourage all stakeholders to individually respond to the consultation.

**Responding to the consultation**

There are several ways to respond to the consultation; CITB NI encourage feedback to this paper and will be submitting a response on behalf of the industry and its stakeholders.

Complete the online questionnaire or provide general feedback directly to [DfE](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/consultations/principles-vocational-qualifications-northern-ireland) online by the deadline of the 9th March before 5pm (Click on this [DfE](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/consultations/principles-vocational-qualifications-northern-ireland) link to be directed to the web portal).

**Extracts from the draft consultation**

***Purpose of consultation***

- To present a set of underpinning principles.

- Support programmes including apprenticeships.

- Delivery of the skills strategy.

- Provide appropriate learner pathways.

- Adapt to changes and unexpected events.

***Context***

* In 2022, 90% of businesses in NI had less than 10 employees.
* Fewer job opportunities for individuals with low or no qualifications.
* Priority to support micro businesses, achievement of high-quality qualifications.
* Overall number of graduate and post graduate qualifications is undersupplied.
* Vocational qualifications equip learners with knowledge, skills and behaviours needed by the labour market.

***Purpose of Vocational qualifications***

* Provide practical learning and a competent, technically skilled workforce.
* Improve productivity and work readiness, anticipating future skills needs.
* Instil lifelong learning and opportunities to reskill/upskill.
* **Note: GCSE & A Levels are not in scope of this consultation.**

***Six Principles proposed to be applied to all vocational qualifications***

1. Should present opportunities for development & demonstrate relevant transversal skills.
2. Must reflect economic need & support inclusive growth.
3. Must be appropriately assessed.
4. Must be based on recognised standards allowing portability & progression.
5. Should embrace innovation.
6. Must support flexible delivery & access to all.

***Key information on the six proposed principles***

* Individual qualifications may not be able to offer opportunities to develop all transversal skills to the same level.
* Vocational qualifications should reflect the wide range of digital systems/software used across a range of sectors and occupations.
* Digital skills depend on determining factors (concept of digital citizen/worker/maker, 1.16. of full DfE report) and this principle should be applied appropriately across all groups.
* Design & development of vocational qualifications should involve early engagement with relevant stakeholders, such as sector partnerships, FE colleges, industry links etc.
* Important employers & industry stakeholders continue to highlight current/ potential skills gaps or new requirements.
* Work experience placements & work-based projects should be an integral part of vocational qualifications where possible. These are vital to offer learners the opportunity to apply their skills in an authentic workplace environment.
* Opportunities to sample a range of occupations may offer a first step in reengaging a learner in education.

***Professional & technical qualifications***

* Should prepare students to enter, progress in, skilled employment. Assessment should reflect competence in relation to the occupational area. The method used must be suitable to the sector.
* Should be based on the national occupational standards (NOS) or recognised professional standards.
* It is important employers across the UK have the opportunity to influence the development of standards for their industry.
* Should be delivered by appropriately qualified staff with up-to-date experience in the sector relevant to the qualification. Education settings must have the facilities and equipment to deliver the full specification. (Both of which are challenges for the construction sector)
* Vital learning in this area reflects the skills needed by employers working in the sector.

**Conclusion**

The consultation on vocational qualifications addresses known challenges and proposes objectives and priorities to combat these.

**Recommendations**

To encourage NI construction industry members and stakeholders to:

* feedback to CITB NI on the proposed responses,
* respond to the consultation from their organisation’s perspective.

The link below is to the DfE web portal where the consultation along with the various methods of engagement are available.

[**DfE Web Portal**](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/consultations/principles-vocational-qualifications-northern-ireland)

**For further details, queries or to relay your feedback please contact ryan.booth@citbni.org.uk**

**Appendix 1. Consultation questions and draft CITB NI answers**

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

**A1.** CITB NI agrees with the three purposes of vocational qualifications which are; Providing practical learning and a competent, technically skilled workforce. Improving productivity and work readiness, anticipating future skills needs and instilling lifelong learning and opportunities to reskill/upskill. We believe there is a strong necessity for closer engagement with employers to ensure provision is fit for purpose in the future and to incorporate meeting the needs of the employer and sector. This is a role we believe CITB NI could help contribute towards and provide for the industry.

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

**A2.** CITB NI believes the three categories mentioned in the previous question adequately cover vocational qualifications for the construction industry for now. CITB NI recognises there is a requirement to develop the leaders of the future. Developing the next generation who will act as key influencers, will encourage the next wave of young people to pursue the construction industry as a viable career choice in the future. With an ageing workforce, and earlier retirement, putting a strain on many industries, this could be paramount to bridge the very possible worsening skills shortages in the near future.

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

**A3.** CITB NI is unaware of any vocational qualifications, based on our knowledge of the construction sector, that wouldn’t fall into these three categories. We do however strongly believe there could be a greater focus placed on bespoke management training and leadership development within the construction industry.

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

**A4.** CITB NI strongly agrees with the six general principles listed above which should be applied to all vocational qualifications within the construction sector. The 6 principles are outlined in the summary above, paragraph 4 from the extracts section. We also believe there is an opportunity to add an additional principle that promotes opening up access routes to the development for sectors to attract a more diverse range of participants. For example within the construction industry alone there is a real opportunity to tackle skills shortages, though providing more opportunities for females who are vastly underrepresented in the industry accounting for only around 11% of the workforce. Making a career in construction more appealing and inclusive to all could make a real difference to the future skills landscape.

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

**A5.** CITB NI agrees that where possible vocational qualifications should present opportunities to develop transversal skills. However, where targeted skills relevant to a technical or professional function are required to allow personal or organisational development, the technical content and delivery must have priority. A greater range of diverse skills should be developed to encourage the free-flowing movement in and out of industries that have become saturated where work has become stagnant, into sectors that are constricting and in need of a growing workforce.

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

**A6.** CITB NI would tend to agree that professional and technical qualifications should be economically focused within the construction industry. However, this depends greatly on the definition of economically focused. Many critical technical and professional skills fall outside of the areas identified as “priority skills” within economic policy but are essential to the overall economy. The vocational skills within the construction sector (not defined as a priority) are essential to the economy as they underpin the development of the built environment and infrastructure that facilitates all economic activity.

**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?

**A7.** CITB NI agrees that the identified needs of NI’s economy should be a main driver for publicly funded vocational qualifications in relation to the construction sector. However, this depends on the definition of ‘identified needs’. Economic strategy focusses on a narrow selection of ‘priority sectors or skills’. The economy requires the entire skills eco-system to be working in all sectors to provide the support and infrastructure to allow the priority sectors to flourish. A narrow focus means some skills and qualifications essential to the general economic wellbeing of NI are not supported, so a more balanced approach will be more successful economically over time. Ongoing consultation with employers is vital to ensure that all vocational qualifications are meeting the identified needs of the industry. Also, greater focus is needed on the impact of the provision that is funded and for providers to demonstrate the impact.

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

**A8.** CITB NI believe the DfE proposals can ensure vocational qualifications react to meet the needs of the NI economy through, meaningful engagement with relevant stakeholders such as industry employers, training providers and awarding bodies etc. There is also a greater need for assessment of the impact of the funded provision and requirement for providers to demonstrate impact as mentioned above.

**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?

**A9.** CITB NI agree that for applied general qualifications, at least 40% of the overall contribution to the qualification should be externally assessed. However, the outcome should remain the focus and not the process. The process should reflect both the nature of the qualification (Level & rigour required) and the nature of the candidate, in terms of a true assessment of competence rather than a purely academic process.

DfE define external assessment as; “A form of assessment in which question papers, assignments and tasks are specified by the awarding organisation, then taken under specified conditions and marking or assessment judgements are made by the awarding organisation.” (DfE 2015, p.18).

This concerns the setting and marking process of an assessment. It does not specify the type of task. They suggest several types of tasks for vocational qualifications: “External assessment need not be limited to paper or on-screen tests. It may include digital recordings of students, external examiners viewing and assessing artefacts made by students etc., or other effective means made possible by developing technologies” (DfE 2015, p.18).

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

**A10.** CITB NI believes there should be a minimum threshold set for external assessments, in professional and technical qualifications, in the construction sector, to ensure a rigorous learning and assessment process. This refers to the evidence of the criticality of transversal skills for the future of our workforce and a growing demand for higher-order general cognitive skills which are transferable across jobs. CITB NI

agrees vocational education should ideally guarantee a minimum threshold of transferable cognitive skills and higher-order skills. 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 correct knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviours to thrive in life and work.

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

**A11.** CITB NI strongly agrees that assessment methods should be more flexible and adaptable to life skills and work qualifications, widening participation for provision as indicated previously in response to Q9.

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

**A12.** CITB NI strongly agree vocational qualifications should continue to be based on National Occupation Standards (NOS) or other appropriate clearly recognised functional standards within that sector.

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

**A13.** CITB NI agrees with the approaches set out in this section in question. We are also of the opinion that within the construction sector it can be at times, hugely challenging to ensure that those working within the sector have the relevant up to date experience, with suitable equipment for a specific role or function for example. It can vary widely from learner to employer or even from employer to employer, the techniques, tools, methodology, used to complete tasks and is not always possible or safe to provide the required training and learning necessary on live site conditions. It is therefore vital trainers engage with employers to ensure a seamless transition from vocational learning and teaching to successfully contributing in the workplace.

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

**A14.** CITB NI does believe vocational qualifications can support social inclusion into the construction industry. This is due to the flexibility this type of learning supports in the methods of delivery and the assessment of competence. Many individuals do not thrive within the school environment due to personal learning styles that are not accommodated within main-stream educational practices. Vocational qualifications provide various routes for those leaving school with little or no formal qualifications a route to personal and economic development. They provide an active learning environment based on competence and practical application of skills and knowledge that many will be more receptive to. More research needs to be undertaken to expand how to make provision more inclusive based on the skills shortage in the sector.

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

**A15.** CITB NI agrees vocational qualifications can support lifelong learning though as previous mentioned, the flexibility in the methods of delivery and the assessment of competence are key factors in this. The ability for learners to complete training and assessments at their own pace is paramount. Restricting the availability of training and learning to an academic calendar and timetable is not conducive or suitable to many learners for example those in full time employment or those working away from home or even remotely. Once individuals start to learn in a way and at a pace that suits them, they will continue to learn to meet the demands of employment and their own ambition.