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PURPOSE AND AIMS

Welcome to the Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCN NI) annual trustees' report. OCN NI exists to advance the provision of education and lifelong learning for the public benefit. We are an educational charity and an Awarding Organisation that advances education by developing nationally recognised qualifications and recognising the achievements of

OUR MISSION

To develop and award qualifications that engage, enrich and equip learners for life.

OUR VISION

A successful, inclusive society where every learner matters.

We work with centres such as Further Education Colleges, Private Training Organisations, Voluntary & Community Organisations, Schools, SME's and Public Sector bodies to provide learners with opportunities to progress into

We are a self-financing organisation and re-invest all of our resources back into the development of new qualifications and educational resources. OCN NI works to highlight the positive impact of educational achievements

CHARITABLE OBJECTS

Our charity's purpose as set out in the objects contained in the company's Memorandum and Articles of Association is to:

- Advance the provision of education and lifelong learning for the public benefit.

The charity aims to promote the education and training of adults, children and young people in such ways as the directors think fit. These include:

- Promoting lifelong learning for the wider community through the development of individual capabilities, competencies, skills and understanding in areas of educational value.
- Working with stakeholders and partners to promote and provide access to learning and accreditation opportunities that facilitate lifelong learning and work-related skills.
- Providing an opportunity to those who have least benefited from traditional education.
- Recognising achievement, accrediting learning, awarding qualifications and supporting continuous improvement in lifelong learning and work-related skills.

ENSURING OUR WORK DELIVERS OUR AIMS

This report looks at what we achieved and the outcomes of our work over the previous 12 months. The review looks at the success of each key activity and the benefits they have brought to those groups of people we are set up to support. The review also helps us ensure our aims, objectives and activities remain focused on our stated charitable purposes. We have referred to the guidance contained in the Charity Commission's general guidance on public benefit when reviewing our aims and objectives and in planning our future activities. In particular, the trustees consider how planned activities will contribute to the aims and objectives they have set.

FOREWORD FROM OUR CHAIRPERSON



As we close the academic year 2024, I am honoured to reflect on the remarkable strides made by Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCN) in advancing education, supporting communities, and empowering learners across Northern Ireland. This year has seen significant developments in our organisation's outreach, impact, and commitment to providing inclusive and accessible learning pathways that meet the ever-evolving needs of Northern Ireland's diverse communities.

Our mission to develop and award qualifications which engage enrich and equip learners for life remains as steadfast as ever. In the past year, OCN has expanded its offerings to adapt to new educational needs, introducing more flexible learning options, enhancing digital resources, and supporting our partners in delivering relevant, high-quality education that empowers learners from all backgrounds and abilities.

As the educational landscape continues to shift, we are proud to be at the forefront, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to develop the skills they need for a brighter future. This year, we have reached thousands of learners, including young people, adult returners, and those from underrepresented communities, helping them achieve qualifications that pave the way for personal and professional growth.

Our progress would not be possible without the dedication and expertise of our incredible team, whose commitment to excellence drives OCN's impact each day. Additionally, I extend my deepest gratitude to our Trustees, Recognised Centres, and Government Departments, whose support is invaluable to our shared vision. As we look to the future, OCN remains committed to driving innovation in accessible learning and strengthening partnerships that will allow us to further our reach and deepen our impact.

Thank you for being part of our journey. Together, we are creating pathways for success and transforming lives.

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Paul Donaghy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending from the end.

Chairperson

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT



Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCN NI) is a company limited by guarantee governed by its Memorandum and Articles of Association and registered as a charity with the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland. OCN NI is the leading Professional and Technical Awarding Organisation in Northern Ireland. Regulated by CCEA Regulation and Ofqual, we develop and award Professional and Technical Qualifications. OCN NI is governed by 12 trustees, who are also responsible for setting the pay and remuneration of the charity's senior management personnel.

FINANCIAL REVIEW



OCN NI has developed strong financial management and control systems to support its work. During the year the company continued to deliver high levels of customer service with a strong emphasis on value for money. OCN NI continues to generate income from its annual centre and learner registration fees. During a successful accounting period, we finished the year with a healthy surplus of £425,405. The excellent financial results for this accounting period were achieved through the hard work of the Chief Executive and his team in tightly controlling costs, managing existing centre accounts and diversifying into new areas of work.

OCN NI previously contributed to a growth pension scheme 1-3 with TPT retirement solutions. This scheme has a pension deficit liability of £12,716. The liability has been calculated based on actuarial valuation as of 30 September 2023. To mitigate this risk the Board of Trustees set up a Pensions Committee and sought expert advice which routinely assessed any potential financial risk to the organisation.

RESERVES POLICY

The Board of Trustees has examined the charity's requirements for reserves in light of the main risks to the organisation. It has an established reserves policy that requires OCN NI to hold free reserves equivalent to 18 months of recurrent overhead expenditure (by recurrent overhead expenditure we mean the revenue costs associated with running the organisation, which includes the direct service delivery costs). This will ensure if the worst happens and the organisation needs to be closed down, there will be sufficient funds to meet all of its obligations and liabilities as part of a managed exit.

This policy is closely monitored by the Board of Trustees. Any call upon the use of reserves will be at the approval of the Board of Trustees which will examine the rationale for doing so and agree on an amount as appropriate.

RECRUITMENT AND APPOINTMENT OF TRUSTEES

The Directors of the company are also Charity Trustees for the purposes of charity law and under the company's Articles are known as members of the Board of Directors. All members of the Board of Directors give their time voluntarily and receive no financial benefits from the charity. Each Director is required to sign a Conflict of Interest Register annually. Two committees are established to support the work of OCN NI with relevant Terms of Reference and standing orders to govern the conduct of meetings. The committees are Finance and General Purposes and Compliance and Audit.

Trustees are recruited and appointed according to the Memorandum and Articles of Association. All new board members undergo induction training to brief them on their roles, responsibilities and legal obligations under charity and company law. Further training is provided to the Board on our decision-making, strategic and operational planning, organisational structure and key activities. Areas of training and development are identified annually and provided to the Board of Directors, as appropriate.

RISK MANAGEMENT

OCN NI has a robust risk management policy and processes which report potential risks and their management to each Committee and the Board. Each department maintains an operational risk log. A risk register has been established and is updated monthly. Where appropriate, systems or procedures are put in place to mitigate the risks the charity faces. Financial risks of the organisation are assessed through the Senior Leadership Team every month and findings are presented to the Board of Trustees quarterly. In addition, the Board of Directors has processes in place to report any serious incidents to CCNI.

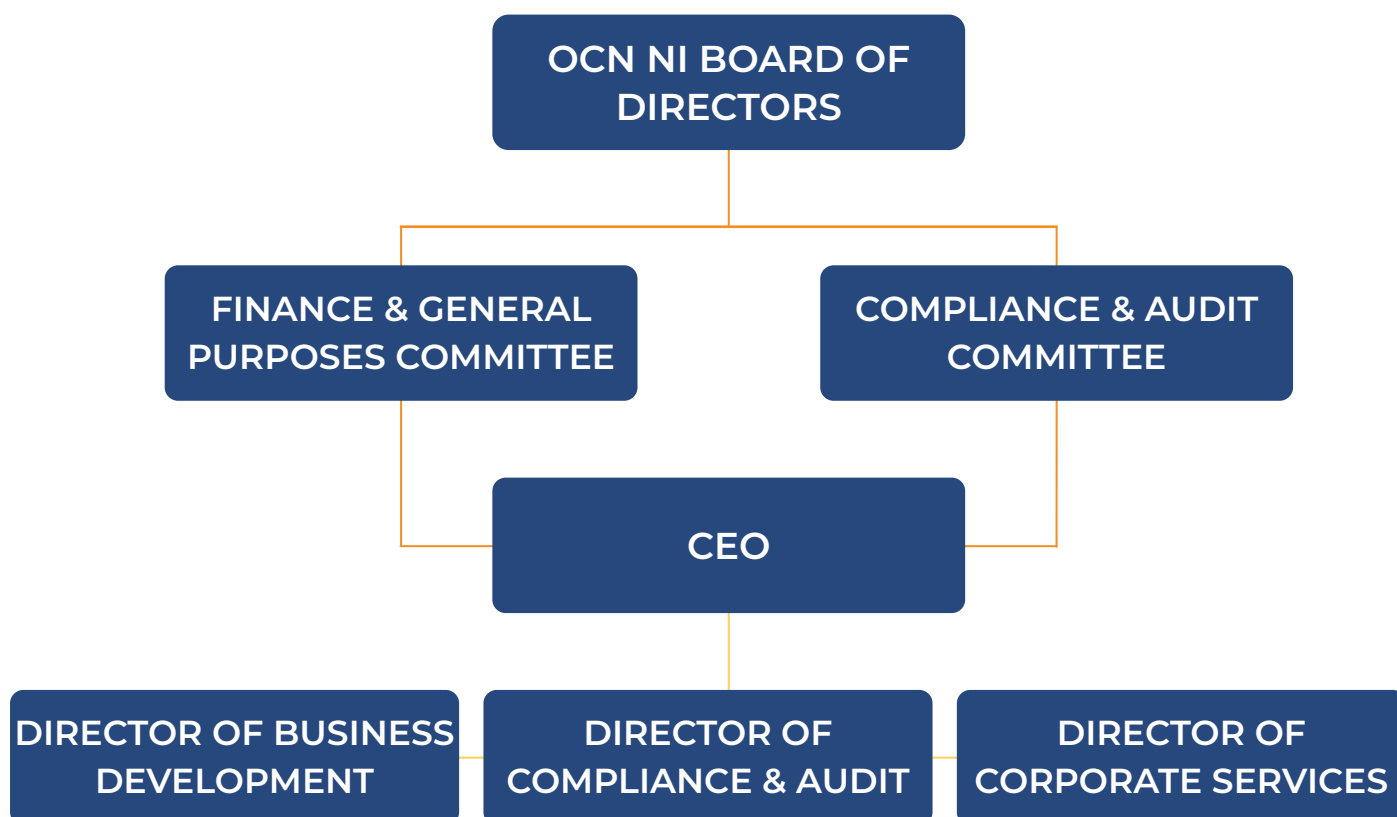


SAFEGUARDING

The Board of OCN NI takes all reasonable steps to protect beneficiaries, staff and all those connected with the activities of the charity and who

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

The Board of OCN NI ensures the good governance of the organisation, by setting its strategic objectives and policies. The Board and its Committees monitor progress against objectives at each meeting. The Chief Executive appointed by the Board has delegated authority and accountability for operational matters which include the achievement of agreed objectives as set out in the strategic and operational plans. The Senior Leadership Team, which is responsible for monitoring progress against the operational objectives, comprises the CEO and three departmental directors: the Director of Business Development, the Director of Compliance & Audit and the Director of Corporate Services.





WHO USED AND BENEFITED FROM OUR SERVICES?

OCN NI continues to be the leading Professional and Technical Awarding Organisation in Northern Ireland. As a registered charity, our purpose is to advance education.

We are committed to ensuring that learners of all ages and abilities maximise their full potential. Since OCN NI was established, we have developed economically relevant and learner-engaging curricula, which have benefited the lives of over half a million people living in NI.

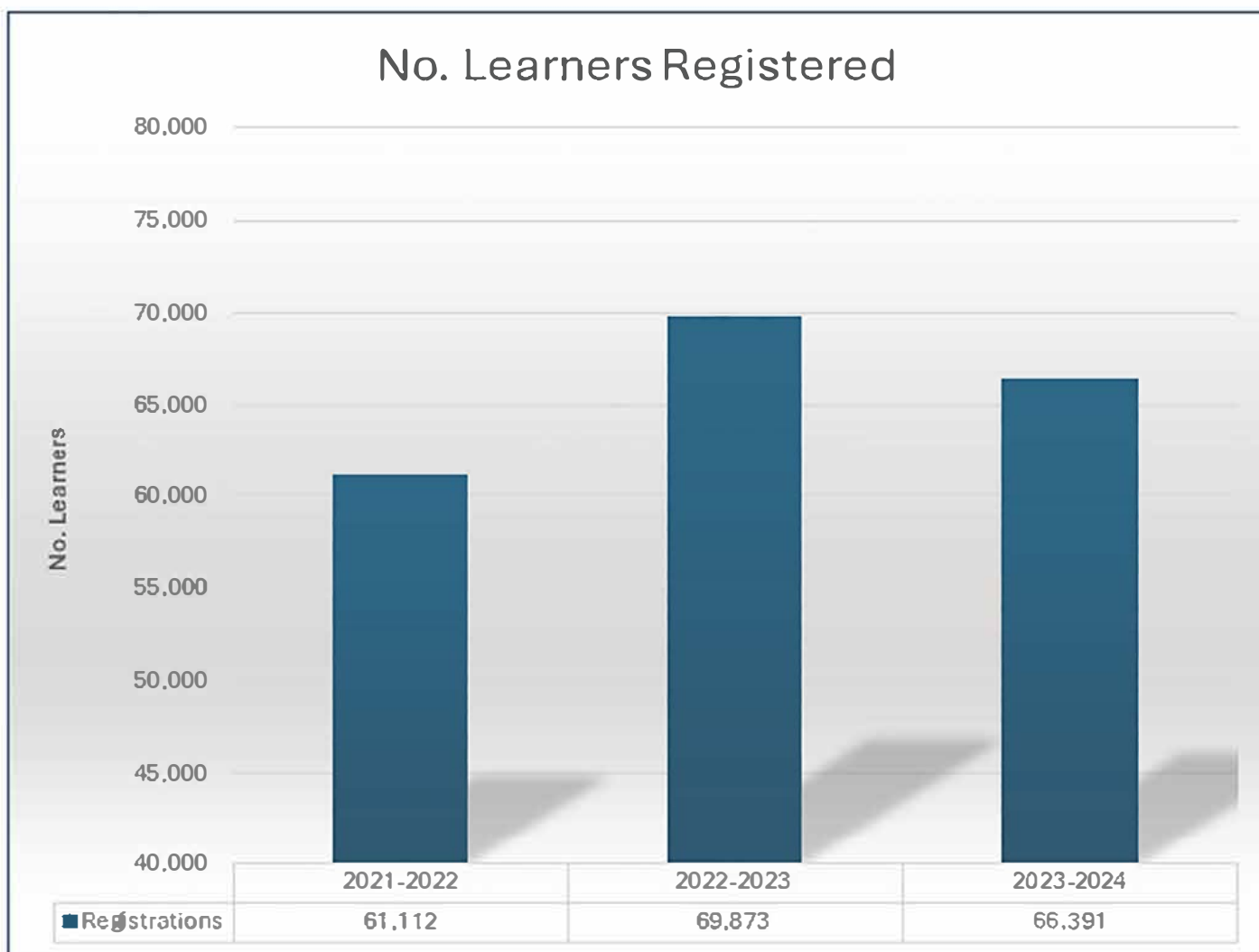
We are an independent, self-financing charitable organisation that has a proven track record of delivering and contributing to the NI skills agenda. As an indigenous Awarding Organisation based in Belfast, our priority is to develop and maintain qualifications tailored to the needs of people living and working in NI. We continue to work with Further Education Colleges, Schools, Training Organisations, Third Sector Organisations, Health Trusts, Prisons and other education and training organisations. Our offices are based in Belfast, and we are regulated by statutory bodies to develop professional and technical qualifications from Entry Level up to and including Level 5 across all subject areas.

Our flexibility and responsiveness to economic need ensure our qualifications are tailored to the needs of education and training providers, employers, learners and align to the outcomes of the draft NI Programme for Government.

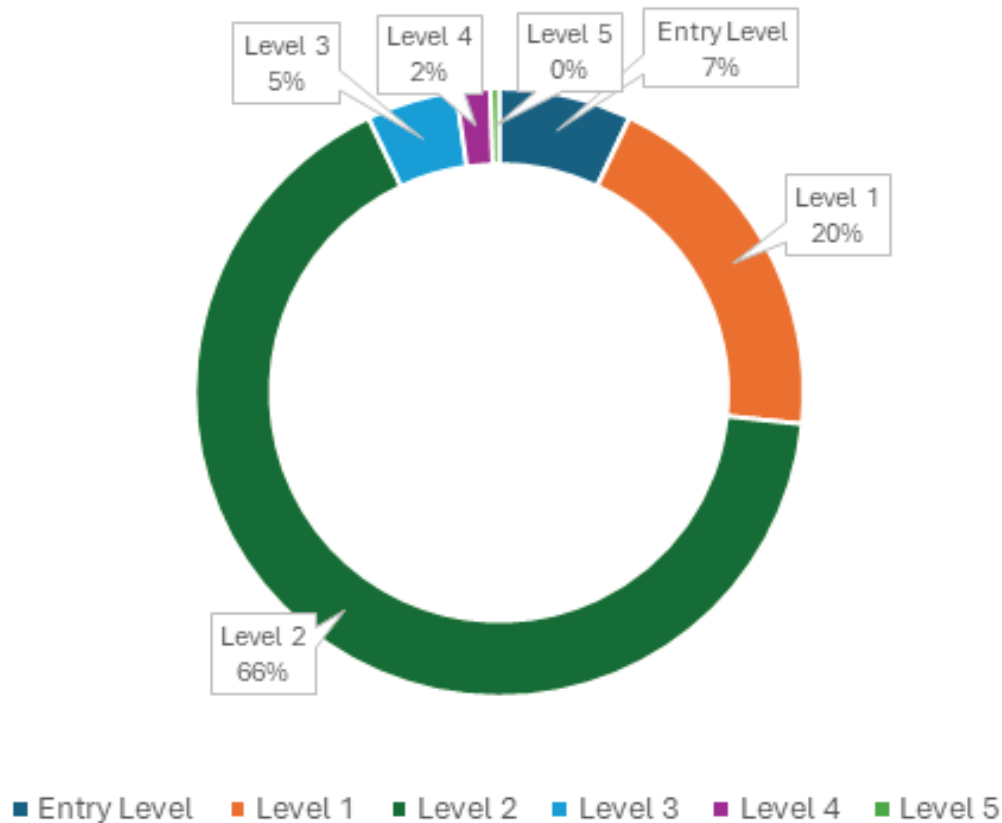
Through our recognised centres we provide access to meaningful, accessible, and affordable qualifications, which play a key role in improving life opportunities. This empowers learners to realise their full potential and make a positive contribution to our society.

During the academic year 2023/24 a total of 66,391 learners benefited from OCN NI qualifications.

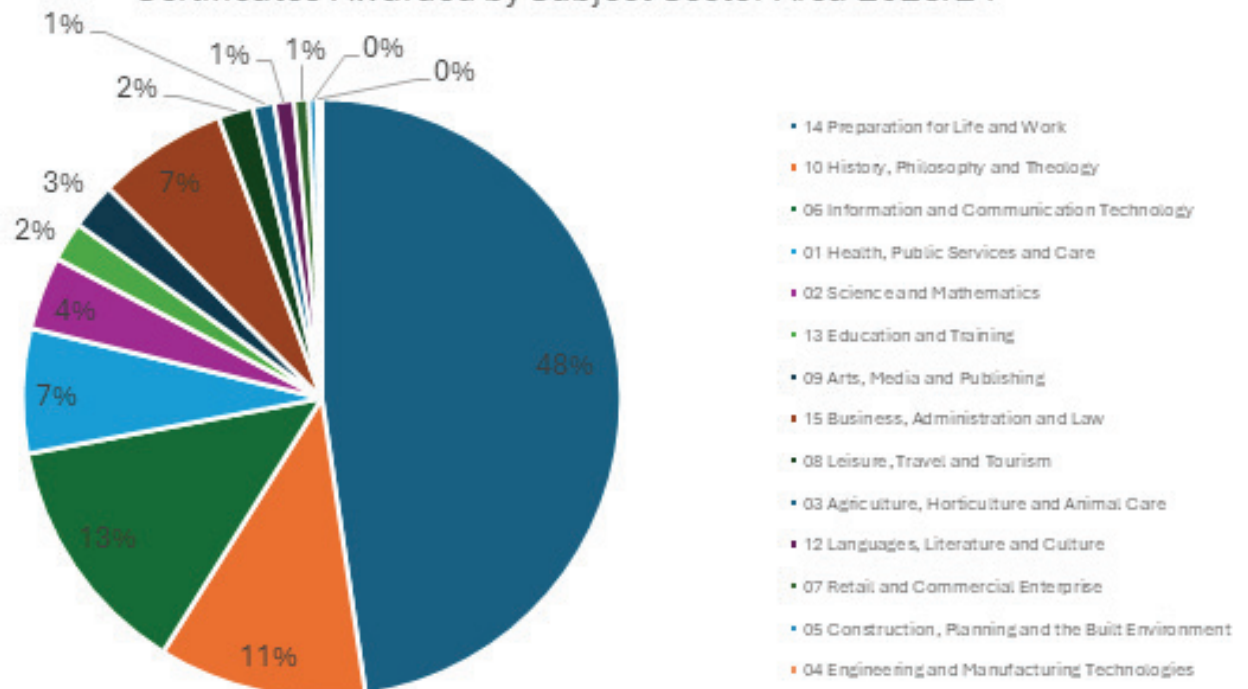
OUR YEAR IN NUMBERS



No. Certificates Awarded by Qualification Level



Certificates Awarded by Subject Sector Area 2023/24



ACCREDITATIONS

During the academic year 2023/24, OCN NI demonstrated its unwavering commitment to excellence and continuous improvement by securing several prestigious accreditations. These include the **Investors in People Gold** award, reflecting our dedication to valuing and supporting our staff; **ISO 9001** certification, recognising the quality and efficiency of our management systems; and **Cyber Essentials** accreditation, underscoring our robust approach to cybersecurity. These achievements highlight our determination to uphold the highest standards across all aspects of our operations, ensuring confidence for our stakeholders and delivering exceptional value to learners and partners alike.

INVESTORS IN PEOPLE™
We invest in people Gold

ISO 9001 Certified

**CYBER
ESSENTIALS**



TRAINING DELIVERY

As part of our commitment to advancing education in Northern Ireland, we provide free support and training to all our recognised centres. Throughout the year we delivered 75 training events and reached over 1,691 tutors/teachers. This includes both assessment and internal verification training and provides anyone new to teaching with a better understanding of what evidence is required and how to build a learner portfolio.

It also provides opportunities for centres to share best practices and experiences of assessment and internal verification with others.

ESSENTIAL SKILLS PROVISION

In Northern Ireland, there has been a great deal of progress in improving literacy and numeracy skills in recent years. However, our current literacy and numeracy proficiency is still some way behind the top-performing countries and is below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average. For Northern Ireland to compete globally we must continue to improve our proficiency in literacy and numeracy skills.

OCN NI is now the largest provider of Essential Skills Qualifications in NI, with currently 132 centres approved to deliver Essential Skills Qualifications. Our qualification suite supports the outcomes in the '3 Year Economic Strategy' and can be truly life-changing for some learners. They have helped people to read a newspaper for the first time to find out what is happening in their community, fill in an application form and, as a result, get a job, read notes from their children's school, help their children with their homework for the first time and/or use the internet to keep in touch with family and friends.

During the academic year, 2023/24 OCN NI awarded 12,015 Essential Skills Qualifications to learners throughout NI.



LEARNING ENDEAVOUR AWARDS 2024

Over 350 learners, teachers, tutors, and special guests celebrated the OPEN COLLEGE NETWORK NI (OCN NI) Learning Endeavour Awards 2024 at Titanic Belfast. The annual awards, now in their 6th year, were hosted by Denise Watson and aim to celebrate the achievements of learners who have gone to exceptional lengths to achieve their learning goals. This year's special guest was Clodagh Dunlop MBE who gave an inspirational talk on her remarkable journey of overcoming 'locked in' syndrome following a stroke in 2015.

Through our learning bursaries a total of £16,000 was awarded to learners and providers from across the province, who have achieved extraordinary results, with some learners overcoming numerous personal hurdles to achieve their professional and technical OCN qualifications. The learners and providers recognised at the OCN Learning Endeavour Awards are a powerful reminder of the profound impact that education can have on individuals and communities.

Martin Flynn, CEO, of OCN, said: "Once more we have been able to provide a unique platform for our learners to showcase their achievements, sometimes against impossible odds, and provide recognition for the tremendous commitment and determination they have shown to achieve their qualification. Our guest speaker and newly awarded MBE Clodagh Dunlop added greatly to the sense of achievement on the day with the remarkable story of how she overcame debilitating adversity following her stroke. Her story illustrated the powerful message of just what can be achieved if you are determined enough to succeed."

The Third Sector Learner of the Year winner was Luke Jennings, Start 360, taking home the Schools Learner of the Year award was Ethan McKee, St Louis's College, Belfast; OCN Provider of The Year category winner was Belfast Met Supported Learning and the Inspiring Tutor/Teacher of the Year award went to Paul Mercer, South Eastern Regional College.

Daniel McCann, South Eastern Regional College won our Further Education Learner of the Year category, with Mantvydas Kizauskas from People 1st,

The Health & Well-being Learner of the Year went to Christine Chambers, Action Mental Health; and South Eastern Regional College - Hospitality and Culinary Arts School won the Advancing Learning Through Innovation category. And a new award category for 2024, Traineeship / Apprenticeship Learner of the Year was won by Ryan Phelan from North West Regional



Clodagh Dunlop MBE said: “As someone who has had to deal with many personal challenges and setbacks over recent years, it was inspiring to hear many of the stories from the learners on how they were able to focus on their learning goals, despite the numerous hurdles placed in their path. Even during the darkest times, I never lost hope in my determination to overcome the condition I developed, so hearing these other life experiences is a powerful testament to what each of us can achieve when we are determined to succeed.”

The final Award of the 2024 ceremony, the Hilary Sloan MBE Learning Endeavour Award, in memory of the former OCN Chair who was a powerful advocate of lifelong learning, was announced by OCN Vice Chair Anne-Marie McClure. For the first time, joint recipients were announced – Christine Chambers, Action Mental Health & Luke Jennings, Start360.

OCN NI Chairperson Paul Donaghy said: “The Hilary Sloan MBE Learning Endeavour Award winners for 2024 Christine Chambers and Luke Jennings will each receive an additional £1,000 learning bursary. Both had incredibly impressive stories of commitment and dedication and it was impossible to separate them. Massive congratulations to Christine and Luke, and to all of our shortlisted finalists and category winners.

Our Awards Ceremony gives prominence to the accomplishments of individuals who have overcome significant social, economic and educational barriers that previously prevented them from realising their full potential. OCN NI qualifications are making a real difference in the life choices of individuals, their families and our community.



OCN NI CENTRE LEARNING GRANTS

This Grants Programme was initiated by the OCN NI Board of Trustees and assists in the fulfilment of our charitable purpose, with the focus of the programme to assist and support OCN Centres and their learners undertaking and/or working towards an OCN qualification. Particular emphasis has been given to helping those who may be particularly disadvantaged and would not otherwise have had the opportunities to engage in education. The objectives of the grants are to encourage innovation, enhance learning and progression while supporting learners.

The grants are a reinvestment of the previous year's surplus and help fulfil our charitable mission. In 2023, the Board approved funding of £93,819 to 33 successful applicants, a 10% increase in funds from the previous year.

Centre Learning Grants helped over 1,400 people in 2023/24. Projects used the money to fund various activities such as music events, residentials, travel, specialist tutors, improved equipment and more. Some projects were large, for instance, Oh Yeah Music Centre used their Centre Learning Grant to fund Volume Control's end-of-year music event – Clash of the New Breeds – which is used as evidence of the learners' assessment because they organise and manage the event.



Bryson Energy used their OCN NI Centre Learning Grant to create a football team – Bryson United – for a cohort of their learners. The learners’ experiences on the team helped forge friendships within the group and developed positive relationships between the learners and the Bryson staff. Bryson reported that this has led to a decrease in disruptive behaviour and classes are more productive as a result.

Another example of a centre funding a large-scale project is Youth Action NI, which used the Centre Learning Grant to run ‘big skills days’ for their learners and to host outdoor activities for three groups of learners across NI, providing additional training and experiences for over 100 learners. The big skills days had specialist training for job search and interview preparation skills and gave the young people the opportunity to communicate with local business owners to gain an understanding of what is expected of young people in employment.

The projects have provided a multitude of experiences and opportunities that have enriched the educational journeys of OCN NI learners. Many of the projects provided hands-on experience in industry, provided extra-curricular activities that enhanced the learners’ experiences or improved the quality of the equipment and facilities used to teach OCN NI qualifications.

These experiences have made a significant positive impact on our learners, many of whom reported improved knowledge and mental health from the experiences they had. Therefore, the Centre Learning Grants have improved the quality of the provisions available from successful centres and have enhanced the educational journey of over 1,400 learners in the 2023/24 academic year.

“We could not run this youth project without the OCN fund.”
Oh Yeah Music Centre

“Without this opportunity, many of the young folk would have never had the opportunity to enrich their own lives and the lives of others.”
Utopian Learning



STRATEGIC PLAN 2024-2027




This plan has been developed with the purpose of ensuring that we continue to provide high-quality qualifications and services to our centres, learners, and other stakeholders.

OCN NI has been a leading provider of educational services in Northern Ireland for nearly 30 years, and we are committed to continuing to deliver excellence in the years to come. The strategic plan sets out our vision, mission, and values, as well as our key priorities and objectives for the next three years.

We have come a long way since our inception, and we are proud of the role we have played in shaping Northern Ireland's education and training landscape. With this strategic plan, we intend to build on the strong foundation that we have established to drive growth, innovation, and excellence.

The Northern Ireland Economic Strategy, which was launched in 2021, aims to transform the skills landscape in Northern Ireland and position the region as a leader in skills development. The strategy sets out three strategic goals which, cumulatively, aim to address the skills imbalances in our economy and improve social inclusion and wellbeing across our society.

Our mission is to develop and award qualifications which engage, enrich and equip learners for life. To achieve this mission, we have identified three strategic priorities:

-  **To be the awarding organisation of choice**
-  **To promote learning as a tool for transformation**
-  **To be innovative, creative and continuously improve**

OCN NI is fully committed to supporting these goals. As the leading provider of professional and technical qualifications in Northern Ireland, we recognise the importance of skills development in driving economic growth and promoting social mobility. We are committed to working closely with employers, educational institutions, and other stakeholders to deliver high-quality qualifications and services that meet the changing needs of learners and employers.

We are confident that with the right focus and efforts, we can achieve our goals and build a stronger, more resilient Open College Network in Northern Ireland.

“

Education is the foundation of opportunity, and vocational education plays a vital role in equipping individuals with the practical skills they need to thrive. At OCN NI, we are committed to making qualifications accessible to all, breaking down barriers, and empowering learners to unlock their full potential. Together, we can create a future where everyone has the chance to succeed.

Martin Flynn, CEO”





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OCN NI is registered as a company limited by guarantee in Northern Ireland No. NI050863 Registered Charity No. 100241