



# OPEN COLLEGE NETWORK NORTHERN IRELAND

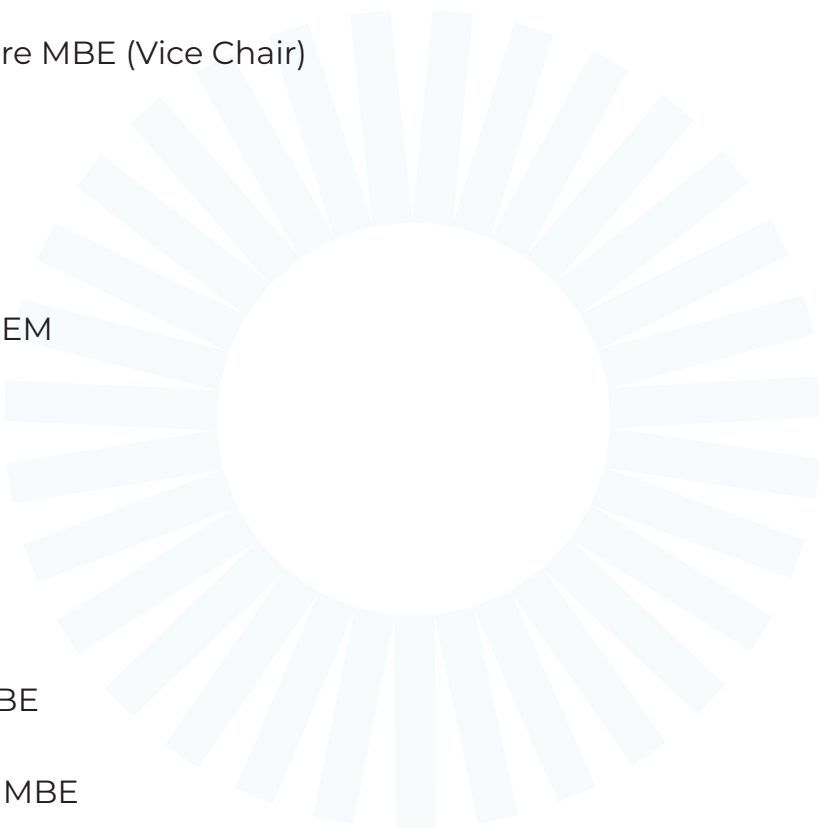
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TRUSTEES ANNUAL REPORT  
YEAR ENDED 31 JULY 2025

# The Trustees

The trustees who served the company during the period were as follows:

- 
- Mr Paul Donaghy (Chairperson)
  - Mrs Anne-Marie McClure MBE (Vice Chair)
  - Mrs Kate Fleck
  - Mrs Edith Shaw
  - Mr Anthony McAteer BEM
  - Mrs Ann McGuinness
  - Dr Ian Walters
  - Mr John D'Arcy OBE
  - Mrs Michele Marken OBE
  - Dr Jonathan Heggarty MBE
  - Mr Ken Webb MBE
  - Mr Barry Neilson OBE



# 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 adults and young people.

## 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 further learning and/or employment.

We are a self-financing organisation and reinvest 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 for individuals, their families and the associated benefits for community transformation.





## 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

It gives me great pleasure to present the Annual Trustees Report for the year ending 31 July 2025. This year has been particularly significant for Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCN NI) as we celebrated our 30th Anniversary, a milestone that reflects three decades of commitment to learning, innovation, and opportunity.

To mark our 30th anniversary, we are proud to reaffirm our commitment to education and skills development through three key pledges:

**Opportunity for All:** Breaking down barriers to learning and promoting access to relevant, inclusive qualifications for learners of all ages and abilities.

**Collaboration at the Core:** Strengthening partnerships with policymakers, providers, employers and communities to ensure our qualifications remain meaningful and impactful.

**Nurturing Innovation:** Leading the way with forward-thinking technical and professional education that embraces sustainability, technology and change.

These pledges reflect our promise to build a more inclusive and dynamic learning environment across Northern Ireland, where learning becomes the golden thread running through all public policy and funding decisions, ensuring long-term impact and inclusive growth.

The achievements outlined in this report are a testament to the dedication of our staff, the vision of our Board, and the invaluable partnerships we have built with centres, employers, and stakeholders across Northern Ireland. Together, we have expanded opportunities for learners, embraced digital transformation, and upheld the highest standards of quality and integrity.

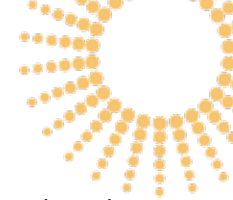
As we look ahead, our commitment remains unwavering: to innovate, to collaborate, and to champion lifelong learning. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to everyone who has contributed to our success this year and over the past three decades. Your support ensures that OCN NI continues to make a real and lasting difference. Together, let's hold no one back, and leave no one behind.

Warm regards,

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 £335,662. 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 £14,498. The liability has been calculated based on actuarial valuation as of 30 September 2024. 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 that 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 by 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 come into contact with the charity, from harm.

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# 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.

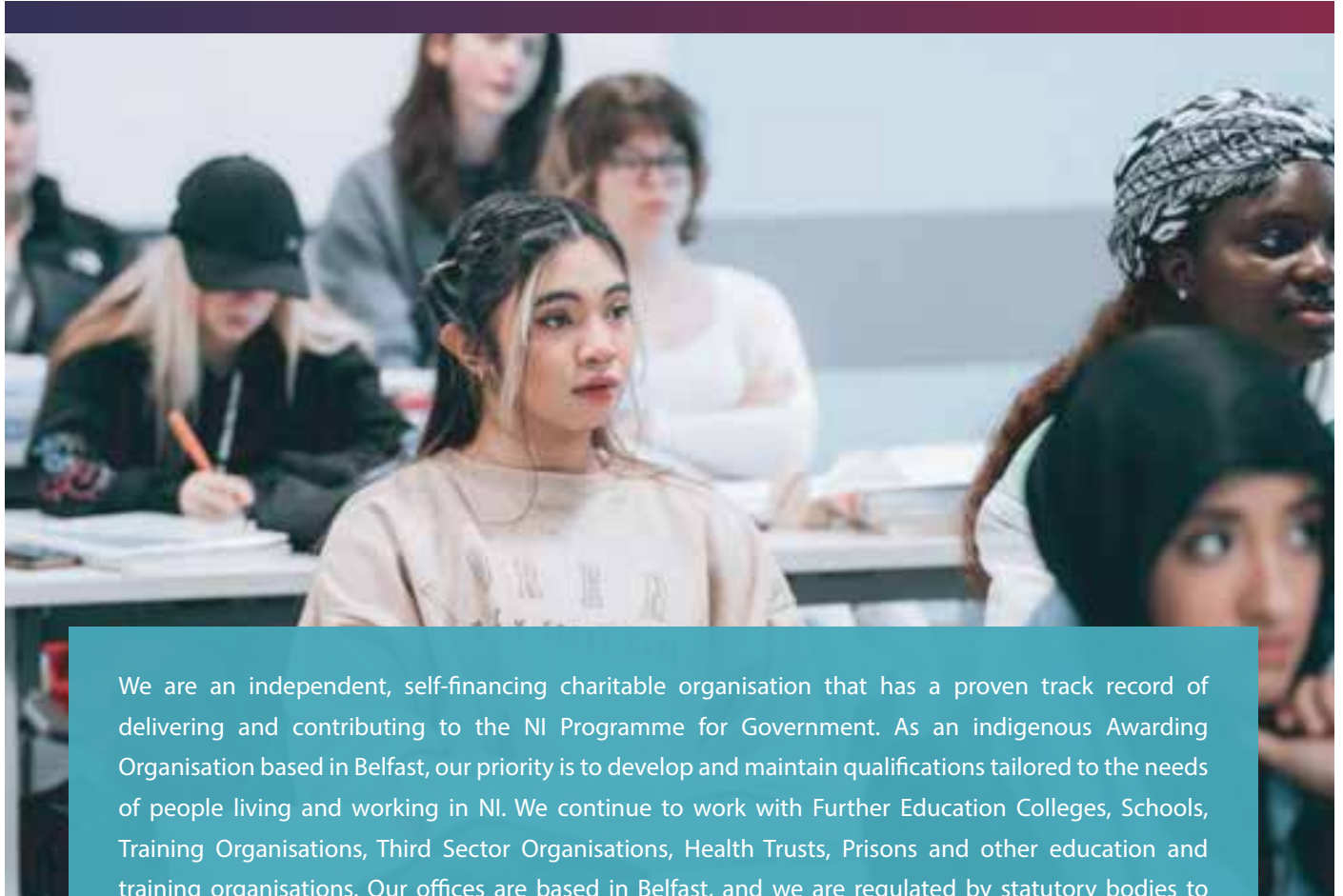




# Who used and benefited from our services?

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 Programme for Government. 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.

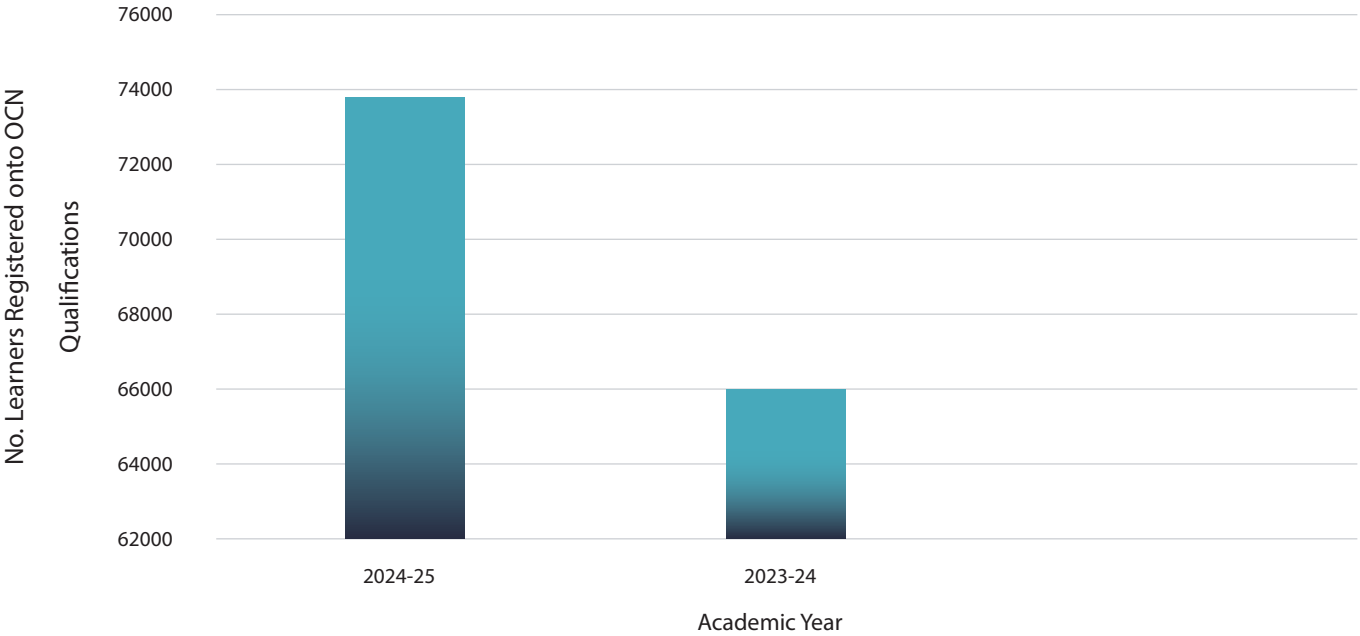
Our flexibility and responsiveness to economic need ensure our qualifications are tailored to the needs of education and training providers, employers, learners and align with the outcomes of the NI Programme for Government.

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.

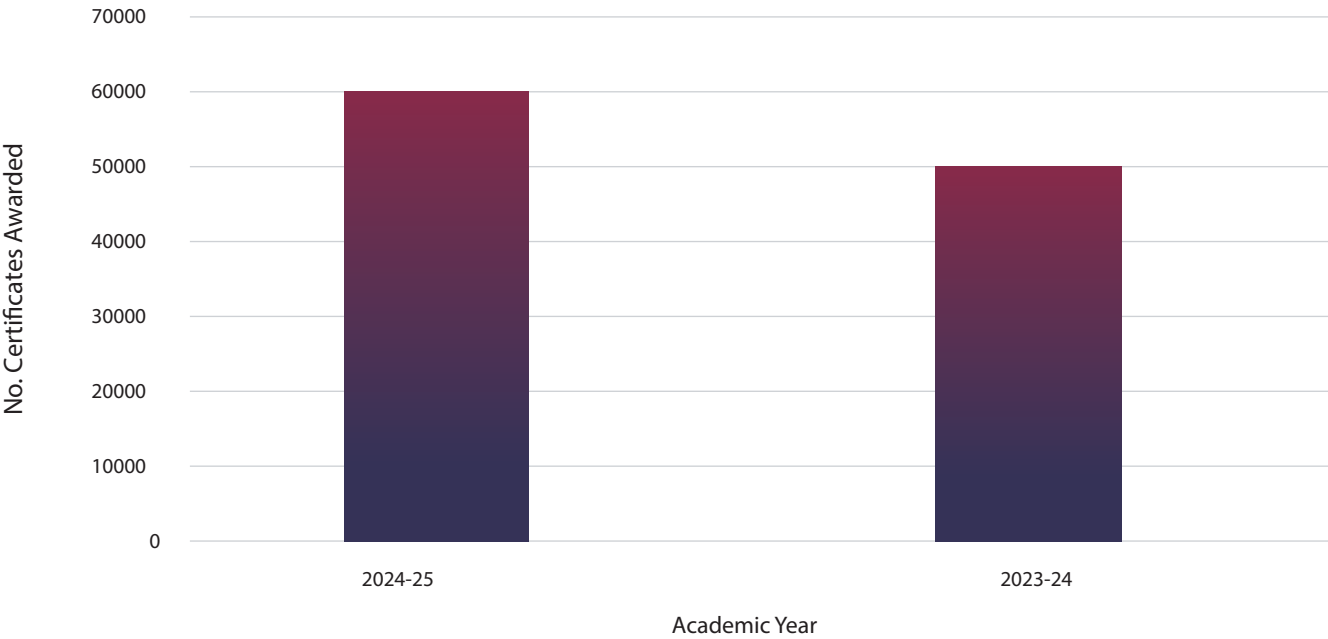
During the academic year 2024/25 a total of 73,779 learners benefited from OCN NI qualifications. This was a 12% growth in registered learners from the previous year.

# Our Year in Numbers

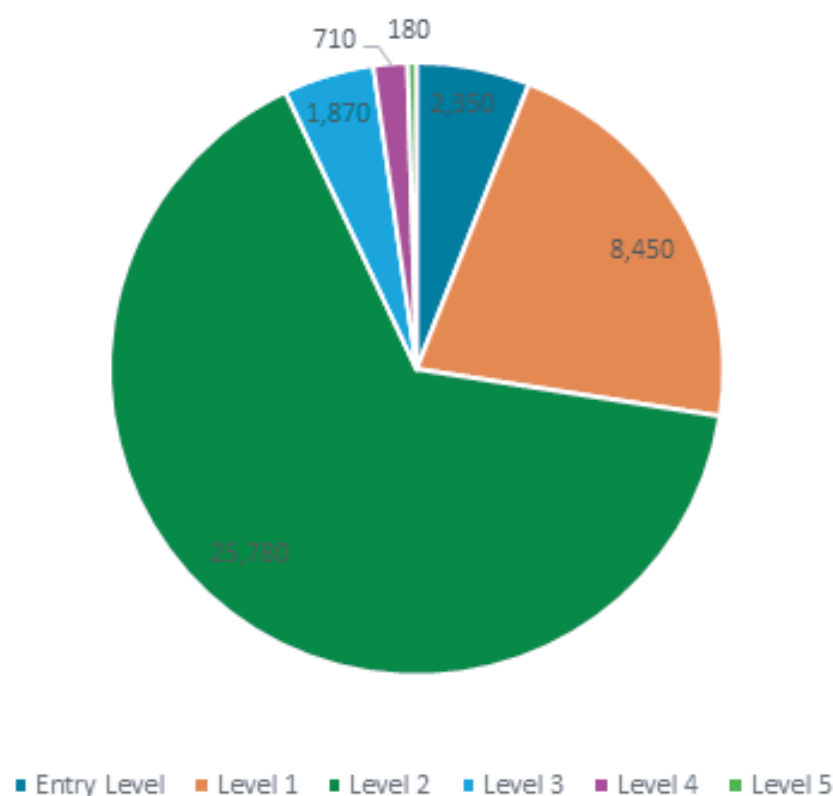
Learner Registrations



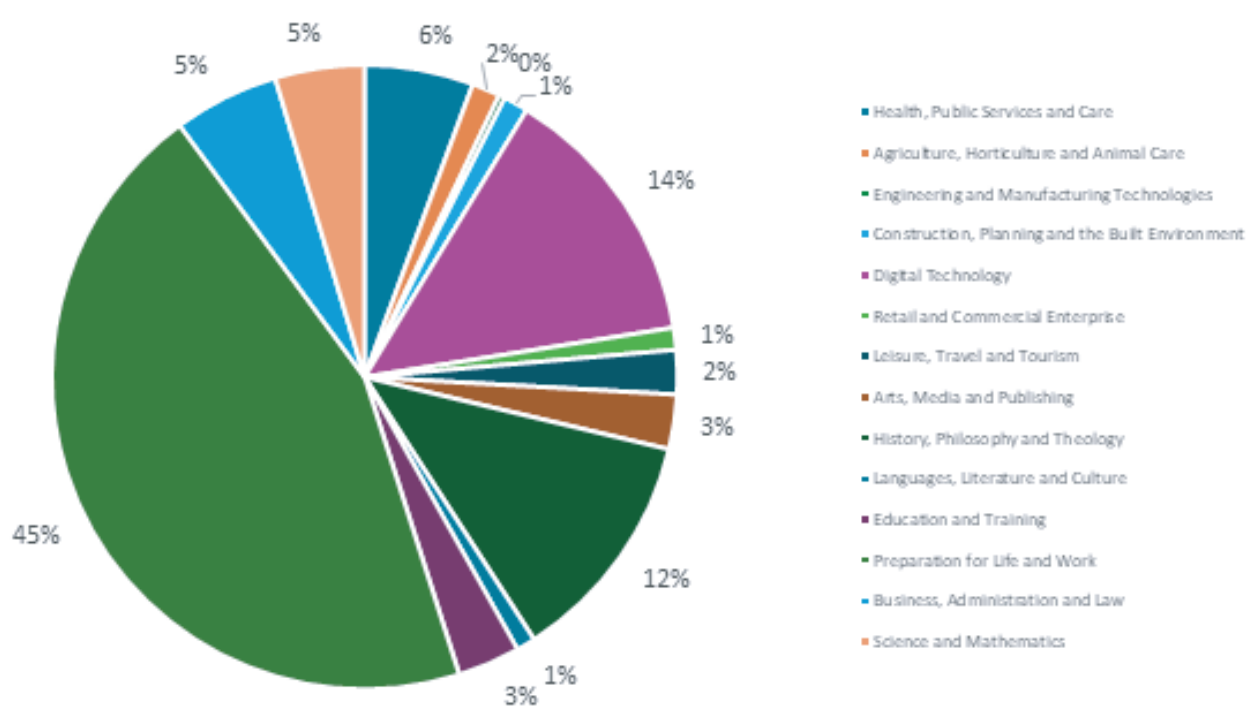
Certificates Awarded



### No. Certificates Awarded by Qualification Level



### Certificates Awarded by Subject Area



# Accreditations

During the academic year 2024/24, 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 97 training events and reached over 1,958 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 139 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 2024/25 OCN NI awarded 15,281 Essential Skills Qualifications to learners throughout NI.

# Learning Endeavour Awards 2025



Over 350 learners, teachers, tutors, and special guests celebrated the OPEN COLLEGE NETWORK NI (OCN) Learning Endeavour Awards 2025 at Titanic Belfast (24 June 25).

The annual awards, now in their 7th 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 Matthew Bell, the former Ireland international hockey player who shared his remarkable story after being given a day to live by medics back in 2019 when they discovered he had a brain tumour.

A total of £16,000 was awarded to learners and education and training providers through learning bursaries from across the province who have achieved extraordinary results, with some learners overcoming numerous personal hurdles to achieve their technical and professional 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. Economy Minister Dr Caoimhe Archibald gave the opening speech at the awards ceremony.

Martin Flynn, Chief Executive OCN, said: "This year's awards ceremony had an extra special feel to it given it's our 30th anniversary year. I am delighted that once more OCN was able to provide a unique platform for learners to take centre stage, sharing their inspiring stories of achievement."

Martin added: "I would like to thank Economy Minister Dr Caoimhe Archibald for attending. The Minister commented on the positive alignment between the Department and OCN in relation to the key role learning plays in economic growth. I would also like to thank our guest speaker, Matthew Bell, for sharing his remarkable story. His brain tumour recovery journey is a true inspiration and a great example of what can be achieved with the right support and motivation."



Economy Minister Dr Caoimhe Archibald said: "I was delighted to open the OCN Learning Endeavour Awards. OCN help people build confidence, gain recognised skills, and progress into meaningful employment. I offer my warmest congratulations to all the award nominees and winners and want to pay tribute to their commitment and inspiring stories."



The Third Sector Learner of the Year winner was Siun McCarthy, Bolster Community taking home the Schools Learner of the Year award went to Leon Callaghan, St Patrick's College, Maghera; OCN Provider of the Year category winner was Clanrye Group, and the Inspiring Tutor/Teacher of the Year award went to Peter Knox, Rossmar School, Limavady.



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.

Sam Welsh, Northern Regional College won Further Education Learner of the Year category, with Mustafa Alshowely from People 1st, collecting the Essential Skills Learner of the Year category.



The Health & Well-being Learner of the Year went to Gavin Boyle, Action Mental Health; and South Eastern Regional College – Truffle Shop won the Advancing Learning Through Innovation category; Traineeship/Apprenticeship Learner of the Year was won by Eugene Prunty, South Eastern Regional College.



The final Award of the 2025 ceremony, the Hilary Sloan MBE Learning Endeavour Award, in memory of the



former OCN Chair who was a powerful advocate of life-long learning, was announced by OCN Vice Chair Anne-Marie McClure, the award went to Eugene Prunty winner of this year's Traineeship/Apprenticeship Learner of the Year category.





OCN NI Chairperson Paul Donaghy commented: “The Hilary Sloan MBE Learning Endeavour Award is richly deserved by Eugene Prunty from South Eastern Regional College (SERC). Eugene will receive an additional £1,000 learning bursary award. His story of commitment and dedication was truly inspiring, and his accolades are richly deserved. I would like to congratulate all of our shortlisted finalists and category winners and everyone who attended this year’s awards ceremony, one of the OCN’s highlight events in our 30th anniversary year.”

## OCN NI Centre Learning Grants

The OCN NI Centre Learning Grants were established by the OCN NI Board of Trustees in 2022 to enhance the educational experiences provided by our centres. Centre Learning Grants are funded by us as a reinvestment of the previous year’s surplus and are a unique way to help us achieve our charitable mission. Centre Learning Grants provide an opportunity for education, voluntary, private and charitable training providers to apply for additional funding to help them innovate and enhance their teaching provisions. Centre Learning Grants are intended to help the most vulnerable populations in Northern Ireland, and our goal is to help centres provide transformative learning experiences to the most disadvantaged communities, equipping them with valuable skills and experiences for the future.

Since 2022, OCN NI has granted over £347,000 for 133 projects across Northern Ireland. Our projects have provided transformative educational experiences to 5,000 learners, helping some of the most disadvantaged communities in Northern Ireland, including refugee populations, SEN learners, single parents, young people from the most deprived areas and more. In May 2025, we launched our “30 at 30” Centre Learning Grants programme, making £90,000 available for 30 OCN NI Centres to apply for funding on our 30th Anniversary. We commit to continuing the Centre Learning Grant programme and continuing to fund innovative, transformative and essential projects across Northern Ireland.



Left to right: Paul Donaghy (OCN NI Board Chair), Wendi Stevenson (Rosstulla School), Cheryl Ball (NOW Group), Ed Hanna (Utopian Learning)



# Impact of OCN NI Centre Learning Grants

Our centres deliver new and unique educational opportunities to our learners through the OCN NI Centre Learning Grants. Centres have taught qualifications across multiple disciplines, including construction, tiling, hospitality, building resilience, understanding mental health, creative arts, youth leadership, youth work, and employability skills. The impact of OCN NI Centre Learning Grants is wide-ranging and has real, transformative results for our learners.

Our centres are at the heart of communities in Northern Ireland and work with a variety of populations. Schools have used OCN NI Centre Learning Grants to improve the provision for OCN learners at school. This includes special schools, integrated schools, controlled schools and grammar schools, all of which have used Centre Learning Grants to provide new and exciting opportunities for their learners. These projects have focused on cross community relations, extra study skills classes, funding for extracurricular activities and more.



Community groups tackling societal issues have been awarded Centre Learning Grants. ASCERT, Northern Ireland's leading drugs and substance misuse charity, has successfully applied for grants for the last three years, working with young people and support groups to train workers at the heart of tackling substance misuse with OCN NI qualifications.

Housing Rights has used OCN NI Centre Learning Grants for four years to help provide expert training using bespoke qualifications to workers on the front line of tackling homelessness in Northern Ireland.

Youth groups such as Youth Action NI, Youth Link, Extern and Include Youth have received Centre Learning Grants to help empower our young people through extra-curricular educational activities. This includes residentials, work experience opportunities, meeting local employers and hosting sporting events to build confidence and embolden future generations, all while contributing to their OCN NI studies in a practical way.



We have funded groups promoting and developing the arts in Northern Ireland, including the North

West Play Resource Centre, The Nerve Centre and Oh Yeah Music Centre. These groups have trained young people interested in music, production and theatre using OCN NI qualifications, hosting musical shows, providing expert training and producing showcase events with the help of Centre Learning Grants.

OCN NI is extremely proud of the projects we have funded so far and looks forward to continuing to fund exceptional educational projects.

# Strategic Plan 2024-2027



As the leading awarding body for technical and professional qualifications in Northern Ireland, Open College Network NI (OCN) recognises the vital role that skills development plays in driving economic growth and promoting social mobility. For over 30 years, we have worked tirelessly to ensure that our qualifications are relevant, up to date, and most importantly, aligned with the ever-evolving needs of the labour market. This commitment has enabled over 500,000 learners to progress in their education, secure meaningful employment and contribute positively to their communities.

In February 2024, the Economy Minister set out a bold and ambitious vision for the Northern Ireland economy, focusing on four key objectives: creating good jobs, promoting regional balance, raising productivity and reducing carbon emissions. These priorities represent not only a blueprint for economic renewal but a clear call to action for the education and skills sector.

At OCN, we are fully committed to supporting this vision. Our 3-Year Strategic Plan outlines how we will develop and deliver qualifications that equip learners with the right skills to build sustainable careers in a rapidly changing economy.

By working closely with our partners across education, industry and government, we will continue to provide inclusive, flexible and responsive learning pathways that meet the demands of employers and the aspirations of individuals.

We look forward to the opportunities and challenges ahead as we strive to make a lasting, positive impact on Northern Ireland's skills landscape.

**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:**

- 01 To be the awarding organisation of choice
- 02 To promote learning as a tool for transformation
- 03 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.

# Contributing to the Programme for Government: Doing What Matters Most

Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCN) is proud to align its Strategic Plan with the core priorities of the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government, particularly iGrow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy and Shaping a Better Tomorrow. Over the next three years, we are committed to ensuring that our qualifications play a central role in driving economic growth, improving employability and creating a fairer, more inclusive society.

To support the goal of growing a globally competitive and sustainable economy, OCN is focused on developing qualifications that reflect the skills employers and workers need both now and in the future. We are expanding our range of qualifications in key growth areas such as digital technology, green energy, advanced manufacturing and health & social care. Through strong collaboration with industry, government, and education providers, we will ensure our qualifications remain relevant, future-focused and responsive to the evolving labour market. Our commitment to promoting lifelong learning will support people at all stages of their careers, enabling upskilling and reskilling opportunities in line with economic demands. We are also embedding principles of sustainability and innovation across our qualifications to help build a workforce ready to meet the challenges and opportunities of a green economy.

In contributing to the priority of shaping a better tomorrow, OCN is committed to improving access to good jobs through high-quality technical and vocational qualifications. We are enhancing learning pathways that support transition into employment, further education and traineeships/apprenticeships. Our work places particular emphasis on providing opportunities for those who are returning to the labour market, such as parents, carers and individuals who have experienced economic inactivity



By working closely with community and voluntary organisations, we aim to reduce barriers to learning and widen participation, particularly among underrepresented groups. Our qualifications are designed to be accessible, flexible and focused on real-world outcomes, helping individuals to build confidence, gain employment and achieve their personal and professional goals.

Through our work, we will develop qualifications that not only support a competitive economy but also foster inclusion, opportunity and resilience across Northern Ireland



## Contact Us



028 90 46 3990



[info@ocnni.org.uk](mailto:info@ocnni.org.uk)



[ocnni.org.uk](http://ocnni.org.uk)

