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Taking on the skills agenda



Professor Frank Peck of the University of Cumbria's Centre for Regional Economic Development writes for in-Cumbria on the big issues of the day and the economic data behind them. This month, he focuses on high-level skills in the county

The challenge of Brexit and the uncertainties generated by the process of negotiation remain high on the policy agenda and continue to attract attention in the media. The outcome of this process is clearly critical for the future direction of the UK economy affecting investment, technology, skills, labour supply and, critically, the sustainability of supply chains and markets for business. Even so, preoccupation with Brexit can have negative consequences – distracting attention away from aspects of the economy that could, in the longer term, contribute towards providing solutions to some of the challenges created by Brexit.

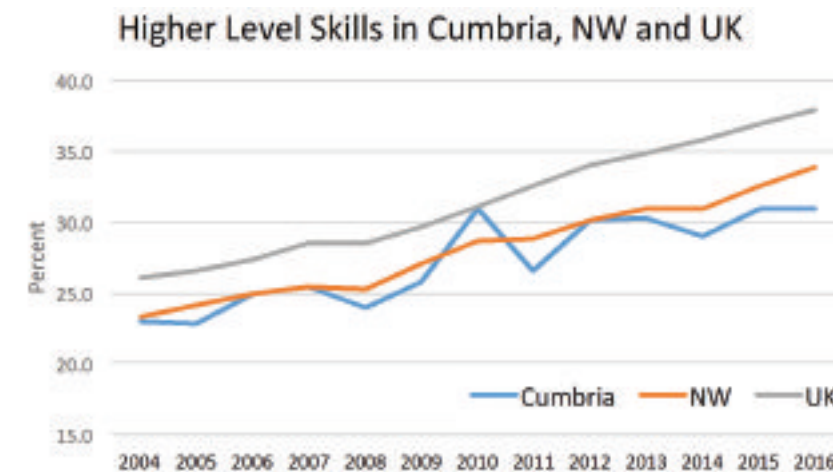
One of these is the skills agenda. Even prior to Brexit, employer surveys in the UK highlighted the need for employees to possess good knowledge of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM). But employers have also noted the need for improvements in social and “work-enabling” skills.

The concept of STEM Plus evolved to capture this idea – many workplaces need workers with high-level technical and scientific skills but also a range of capabilities that make individuals effective in work environments.

These include skills in communication, leadership, teamworking, project management and awareness of how the role of individuals fit within an organization and how their roles contribute to the whole enterprise. It also places a premium on knowledge of management and understanding of business and enterprise.

Brexit does not diminish this skills challenge – indeed, it is likely to make this aspect more significant for sustaining businesses. Local employers will increasingly depend on the supply of well-informed, technically competent and innovative employees who can work at a high level.

Undoubtedly, there are gaps in the evidence in addressing these skills



BASED ON DATA FROM THE UK ANNUAL POPULATION SURVEY. OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS. (ONS). ACCESSED VIA NOMIS

challenges. In particular, it is not simple to gather data to track worker-effectiveness. We do, however, have data on trends in qualifications that can be used as a proxy for levels of skill.

The chart shows trends in the proportion of Cumbria's population of working age that was qualified at least to level 4 (level 4 corresponds to higher national certificate, higher apprenticeships, foundation degree but this data also includes those working above this at levels 5–8 relating to higher diplomas, honours graduates and postgraduate qualifications).

There are some encouraging signs in this data. Higher-level skills have been increasing over the past 10 years in both absolute and relative terms. The number of workers with high-level qualifications has increased from around 75,000 in 2006 to 92,000 in 2016. As shown in the graph, this represents a relative shift in the skills profile towards higher-level skills rising from 25 per cent of the total workforce in 2006 to 31 per cent in 2016.

Attributing this trend to different causes is complex not least because it is affected by patterns of migration by skill level to and from Cumbria. It seems reasonable to presume, however, that recent investment in the skills system (universities, colleges, private skills providers) as well as the recruitment



● Students at the University of Cumbria STEM labs in Carlisle, which opened in 2016 with funding from Cumbria LEP (Cumbria Growth Deal)

and training strategies of key firms across the county have had a significant impact on this process.

The trend is positive, but comparisons with NW and UK averages reveal the scale of the remaining challenge for Cumbria. There is a considerable gap between figures for Cumbria and national averages, and, since 2012, the county appears not to have kept pace with improvements across the NW region as a whole.

The county also currently has high numbers of workers approaching retirement that increases demand for new skills formation to replace those leaving employment. Attempts to address the high-level skills issue have evidently had an impact, but equally evident, there is much more still to do.