

Further Education in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

The Further Education sector in Northern Ireland consists of 6 regional colleges operating across 40 campuses, spread geographically across the region. The sector employs over 4000 staff and has a turnover of around £250 million per year. The colleges are the main providers of vocational and technical education and training in Northern Ireland (NI) although there are now a growing number of private training providers entering the market. The curriculum offered is broad and diverse extending from A levels and GCSEs to BTECs, HNCs and Apprenticeships. They also offer higher education provision with 8% of students undertaking degree level awards. In 2014/15 there were just over 140,000 total enrolments with 78% of those obtaining recognized qualifications (CollegesNI 2017). This sector is of significant importance to the NI economy working directly with over 7500 businesses and a range of private, public and community organisations.

Policy Background

The Further Education Means Business Strategy (DEL, 2006) signaled an important shift in FE policy in Northern Ireland positioning the sector firmly at the forefront of economic and workforce development of the region. The stated aim was to ensure that the curriculum offered met the needs of employers in NI, particularly those small to medium sized employers (SMEs) which dominate the local employment market. The strategy also set out to provide much greater support to employers in areas such as business development and ideas generation as well as providing a well-qualified workforce necessary for foreign trade and investment. Prior to this strategic development 30-40% of the FE provision was in recreational areas rather than in areas that supported the economy but with the introduction of a more economic curriculum through the strategy, 97% of Government funding is now directed into provision that leads to qualifications on the regulated qualifications framework with a significant vocational focus (NIAssembly 2014).

The Success through Skills Strategy (DEL, 2010) and more recent FE Means Success Strategy (DfE, 2016) maintain this focus on employability and business development. The 2016 document sets out 8 strategic themes which will be explored in the remainder of this briefing paper.

Theme 1: Economic Development

The Northern Ireland Skills Barometer (DfE, 2015) was conducted to identify the key and priority skills necessary to rebalance and rebuild the NI economy up until 2025. Using this research going forward FE colleges will have a crucial role, working with employers and other key stakeholders to ensure that these skills gaps can be bridged with individuals supported to access and gain appropriate skills. This barometer also is intended to act as a driver for the further development of careers education, information, advice and guidance for future student intakes. Another area of interest is the Apprenticeship levy which was announced by the Chancellor in 2015 budget statement. To date, this has not been introduced in NI under the devolved arrangements, but represents a potential challenge for colleges as they work to implement a new more economically focused apprenticeship system.

Theme 2: Social inclusion

NI is a society emerging from conflict and the second strand in the FE Means Business Strategy (DEL, 2004) was to enhance social cohesion. The educational system in NI, like the province itself is divided in many ways with most children attending predominantly Protestant (controlled) or Catholic (maintained) schools. With academic selection still in place within the region they are also divided by ability and in many cases, by gender (see Smith 2010 for a further discussion of educational division). The FE sector therefore is often the first opportunity many individuals may have to work with those from a different community background and this is something the NI Assembly seeks to encourage.

The multi-campus nature of the sector with over 40 FE campuses regionally allows those from rural communities to access appropriate qualifications whilst one of the key features of the FE sector is the diversity of the learners it attracts, ranging from those with no or very few qualifications to those who are following HE options. It is viewed therefore that the colleges have a critical role to play in developing social cohesion.

Theme 3: Curriculum delivery

This theme emphasizes the importance of flexible and innovation methods and modes of delivery including expanded utilization of technology. Once again this developmental theme is aligned with the needs of employers and focused on economic drivers.

Theme 4: Excellence

NI is ahead of other regions in their arrangements for teacher training in the FE sector requiring and supporting all permanent lecturers to obtain recognized teaching qualifications. This has been extended to those in the private training sector who are funded to run government training programmes. However this emphasis on excellence may be seriously compromised by the loss of 500 lecturer posts initiated in 2015 due to government budget cuts. This loss of expertise and the increased workload borne by the lecturers still in employment has the potential to undermine excellence within the sector (UCU 2016). The recent trend to employ lecturers on term-time and zero-hour casualised contractual arrangements also has the potential to seriously impact on quality and development within the sector.

Theme 5: College Partnerships

One of the key themes of the current strategy is that of college partnerships. As well as the business partnerships envisaged by the strategy, the FE sector also has developed links with the school sector, through Area Learning Communities where local schools, colleges and industrial partners work together to share resources, disseminate best practice and link cohesively to enhance the learning opportunities and experiences of individuals within their geographical areas.

The introduction of the Entitlement Framework in 2013 (DE 2011) was also designed to develop links from post-compulsory education to Further Education by offering learners a wider curriculum of up to 27 options with a balance of academic, vocational, applied and general subjects. The challenge will be to continue to maintain these partnership arrangements going forward.

Theme 6: Governance

Given the many challenges identified for the FE sector, the governing bodies and Chief Executives face significant challenges in steering the sector through budget cuts, technological developments, the loss of expertise through job cuts and developing the college mission and policies going forward.

Theme 7: Funding and college sustainability

In 2015 many public sector organisations in NI were faced with substantial budget cuts leading to the introduction of a voluntary severance scheme rolled out across all of the FE colleges. Over 500 lecturers left their posts under this arrangement. The loss of this expertise coupled with continued financial uncertainty across the sector remains a significant challenge going forward.

Theme 8: International dimension

In line with the other UK regions of England, Scotland and Wales, Brexit has dominated the political narrative in recent months and given that the sector currently accesses significant European funding through the Erasmus, Horizon 2020 and European Social Funds this will clearly have an important impact for the FE sector. Given that post Brexit NI will have the only direct land border with another EU country, the implications are ever greater for the region.

Internationalisation is one of the newest and most ambitious strands in the FE strategy (2016) and the challenges are immediate.

Challenges and the way ahead

'Change in the FE sector is constant (and still gathering speed) meaning leaders face a daunting set of challenges' (C&G, 2017, p.1). The FE sector in NI is subject to the same changes facing their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales. In

addition to these common challenges – of funding, keeping up with new technology and with ensuring that the needs of the economy are prioritized – the FE sector in Northern Ireland faces additional challenges due to the collapse of the NI Assembly which broke down in January 2016. The FE sector therefore, at the time of writing continues to address these challenges from within a political vacuum.

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