

25 Oct 2011

Universities and Education Imbalance

*View from the Chair, Business Newsletter, Tuesday 25th. Oct. 2011.
Bob Collins, Chief Commissioner, The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.*

Statistics were published last week showing the community background of Northern Ireland students enrolled at our local universities, and they highlighted again an issue I have commented on frequently over the past six years.

In overall terms, 40.7 per cent of the 35,405 Northern Ireland domiciled students who stated a community background to the Higher Education Statistics Agency were Protestant. This figure is below what would be expected given the proportions of Protestants and Roman Catholics in the community, even after adjustments for the considerable increase in Catholics within the 16 to 24 age-band is factored in.

As with most issues of under-representation, there can be a number of reasons for the discrepancy in University attendance; and no easy assumptions can be made about why students make the choices they do about where and what they want to study. They will be influenced to varying degrees by academic, social, and financial factors, as well as by family or peer-group choices and the desire for “fresh fields”.

Imbalance in educational outcomes is a crucial issue, one that goes well beyond the composition of University student bodies. It has the capacity to deprive Northern Ireland of a great reserve of potential talent and skills. It is welcome that it is receiving increasing attention from elected representatives. It must engage the urgent concern and action of all who can influence these matters.

At the heart of any statistics about participation in education are individual young people whose lives will be permanently influenced by the choices they are able to make and by the extent to which those choices will enable them to fulfil their own potential. It is difficult to overstate the importance of education – in itself, as a preparation for life, and as a powerful influence on access to and advancement in employment.

Performance in education is not a race but since I came to this position more than six years ago, I have constantly emphasised the evidence of differing success rates. Boys do less well than girls. And Protestant working class boys do

less well than others. These facts have consequences - for the individuals, for their families and for their communities.

Any economic recovery should be enjoyed by all in Northern Ireland. The enduring educational under-attainment of so many must be tackled. There is a great risk that those who are already disadvantaged will now face further disadvantage due to increased competition for scarce jobs from those who have secured greater benefit from their education. Equality of opportunity will be hard to find in these circumstances.

There has to be an appreciation of the real consequences for Northern Ireland of a growing number of people whose chances of realising their full potential are consistently diminished by educational disadvantage. Here is an opportunity to set aside partisan focus and, instead, genuinely to share the task of finding solutions. Here is a challenge for all in politics, in business, in trades unions, in education at every level to commit to sustained action to address a problem that will otherwise continue to grow.