



Proposed discontinuance of Stranmillis University College (SUC) and its proposed merger with the Queen's University of Belfast (QUB)

Consultation Response

June 2011

Introduction

- 1 The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland ('the Equality Commission') is an independent public body established under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Commission is responsible for implementing the legislation on fair employment, sex discrimination and equal pay, race relations, sexual orientation, disability and age. The Commission's remit also includes overseeing the statutory duties on public authorities to promote equality of opportunity and good relations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the disability duties under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.
- 2 In addition, the Equality Commission, along with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, has been designated under the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ('UN Disability Convention') as the independent mechanism tasked with promoting, protecting and monitoring implementation of the UN Disability Convention in Northern Ireland.

- 3 The Commission's general duties include:
- working towards the elimination of discrimination
 - promoting equality of opportunity and encouraging good practice
 - promoting positive / affirmative action
 - promoting good relations between people of different racial groups
 - overseeing the implementation and effectiveness of the statutory duty on relevant public authorities
 - keeping the legislation under review
 - promoting good relations between people of different religious belief and/or political opinion.
- 4 The Commission welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposed merger of the Stranmillis College and QUB School of Education. We understand from the consultation paper that this consultation is part of an agreed process that has been endorsed by both the existing governing body of SUC and QUBSE, and is driven by a business case which reflects changes in demographics throughout the education sector in Northern Ireland.
- 5 Both institutions have endorsed in principle the merger of the College and the School of Education into a centre of excellence for Initial Teacher Education, Professional Development and Research, a proposal which should prove mutually beneficial and which we support.
- 6 The Commission has expressed its views previously on the desirability of increased sharing of education in Northern Ireland and its concerns about the impact of separate education^{1 2}. While we have expressed concern that the formation of teachers has also been separate (with the consequence of limited engagement across the community in a sequence that replicates itself continually) we have also recognised and supported the many worthwhile efforts being

¹ [Equality Commission Northern Ireland - Every Child an Equal Child](#)

² <http://www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/EnsuringGoodRelationsWorkinourSchoolsCounts.pdf>

made to introduce school students to colleagues from other traditions (including Area Learning Communities and the Shared Education Project).

Proposed Merger

- 7 We welcome and encourage the vision of a cross-community School of Education.
- 8 We are however concerned that the EQIA consultation that was carried out into the merger did not anticipate any negative impacts on any of the nine equality grounds.
- 9 We have reservations in relation to the potential impact on the availability of training places for teachers from the Protestant / Other communities, the ethos and proposed governance arrangements for the new structure. Further, while the Stranmillis / Queen's merger can deal only with issues within its competence, the merger cannot be seen in isolation from the overall provision of initial teacher education across Northern Ireland. As such, the merger must take account of this wider context and potential implications.

Potential Impact on Students from Protestant/Other communities

- 10 Stranmillis College had been established by the Government of Northern Ireland to provide teachers primarily for the state sector of the educational system. Historically a large number of the schools within the state sector had been transferred 'in' from the Protestant churches.
- 11 There is the real possibility that the outcome of the merger may mean that fewer places will be available for training teachers from the Protestant community. This is partly because positions in the merged Stranmillis University College / School of Education at Queen's may be increasingly sought by applicants from across the community, in particular from the Roman Catholic Community; and partly because prospective teachers from the Protestant community are unlikely to apply to

- attend St Mary's. As the number of overall places appear to be subject to a quota per college, this may limit the opportunities for prospective Protestant students to train as teachers.
- 12 The proposed merger will continue the process of modifying the equilibrium that previously existed in the training of teachers in Northern Ireland and the governance structures of teacher education. While the Commission welcomes an increasingly integrated teacher training system, the outworking of this change in equilibrium must be considered both now when assessing the potential impacts of the merger, and in any subsequent evaluation. This is not an argument against a merger but rather a factor which should be borne in mind.

Ethos considerations

- 13 We are conscious of the sensitivities around protecting the ethos of Stranmillis University College and note the additional concerns in relation to ethos that were raised in the EQIA responses. We do not consider that a legislative protection for the ethos of the merged school beyond guaranteed representation on the governing body would be necessary or appropriate.
- 14 The Commission is mindful that new teachers will increasingly enter a world where greater diversity among those they teach will be more evident than before. It is important that recognition of this increasingly diverse environment finds greater expression within the ethos and governance structures of those providing initial teacher training.

Stakeholder Forum

- 15 The proposed governance arrangements will include a 'Stakeholder Forum' on which 'interested parties will have guaranteed representation. The proposal is that this Forum will have a direct advisory and consultative role in the governance of the new school.

- 16 We note from the summary of responses to the consultation on the EQIA for the merger³, that it is intended that the four main Christian denominations will have representation on the consultative forum for the new school. While this provides more clarity than the current consultation document, we are mindful also of the increasingly diverse nature of our society and believe that provision should also be made for representation from those groups that reflect the increasingly diverse population of Northern Ireland's schools.

14 June 2011

³ <http://www.stran.ac.uk/media/media,216057,en.pdf>