

## Consultation response

### Development of a new Further Education Strategy for Northern Ireland

**Closing date 2 October 2015**

We welcome the opportunity to respond to your consultation, Development of a new Further Education Strategy for Northern Ireland. This response is divided into two parts, one dealing with the substantive strategy and the other with the 'supporting document'. An appendix sets out some information on obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Should you wish to discuss any element of the response further, please do not hesitate to contact us.

#### **Introductory remarks**

The Equality Commission's vision of Northern Ireland is as a shared, integrated and inclusive place, a society where difference is respected and valued, based on equality and fairness for the entire community.

The value of education goes much further than giving an individual the skills to perform a particular job or follow a profession. There is a significant role for education in developing the individual's personality and world-view, which transcends the acquisition of credentials and qualifications.

Education has a role in shaping an individual's views, their conduct, their relationships with others, and it has the potential to counter negative images and views that they can be exposed to outside of a school.

Education plays a key role in determining a person's life chances and opportunities in terms of social and economic mobility. Those with fewer qualifications and skills are likely to be disadvantaged when competing for available employment opportunities. The Government views accessing employment as the most effective way of reducing poverty and the predictive effects of poverty on health, life expectancy, exposure to crime and anti-social behaviour.

Inequalities exist in society for many reasons. As well as discriminatory practices there can be barriers to equality from attitudes, from lack of educational or training opportunities or attainments, from social deprivation or because of personal economic circumstances. It is imperative to work to remove inequalities, changing society so everyone enjoys justice and dignity and has equal opportunity to reach their full potential.

Our remarks set out below are made in the context of the narrative above.

## **Part 1 – Substantive Strategy**

### **Scope of responses**

Please be advised that we have not responded to your individual questions, and have limited our responses solely to those issues which fall within our statutory remit.

### **Policy Commitment 2 – Levels of College Provision**

**Do you agree that colleges should focus on developing provision at level 3 and above in areas that will support the economy and encourage progression for learners to study at higher levels?**

We note the intention to give further education colleges a particular focus on further developing provision at level 3 and above in areas that will support the rebalancing and rebuilding of the Northern Ireland economy. We also note that this is on the basis of declining need for low level qualifications.

However in 2013/14 69% of enrolments on courses with regulated qualifications were at levels 1 and 2<sup>1</sup>. There is clear demand for lower level qualifications which can have a life changing impact particularly for those who may have faced barriers to schooling, including disabled people, minority ethnic groups and disengaged young people.

We therefore recommend that steps are taken to ensure that these groups' needs are met within the education system.

### **Policy Commitment 6 – Increasing economic participation through engagement**

**In what other ways can colleges support those with barriers to learning?  
How can colleges increase participation in further education, particularly those who are hardest to reach?**

Barriers to learning can be financial, physical, social and psychological, including low expectations of learners.

The Disability Discrimination Act places a proactive duty on service providers to make reasonable adjustments to their services, including education, so as to encourage participation. It also places a duty on public bodies to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people and encourage their participation in public life.

Other Section 75 groups encounter barrier to learning which can be tackled through this strategy. For example, the Department of Education's Traveller Taskforce Thematic Group – Further and Lifelong Learning and Skills for Life and Work, recommended the Department: *'actively support Traveller young people and parents to access appropriate funding to stay in education.'*

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<sup>1</sup> page 34 of the consultation document, drawing on [the Further Education activity statistical bulletin](#)

Outreach, working with the community and voluntary sector and in schools, can be used to encourage enrolment by making potential learners familiar with the Colleges and the services they offer. Community and voluntary sector representatives of specific equality groups can provide the link to hard to reach potential learners.

After enrolment, on-going support and contact with such learners can contribute to higher retention rates.

Providing the services required to facilitate retention is a further consideration, and can be determined in collaboration with the individuals / groups.

Disabled people may face a range of barriers which can be tackled through this strategy, for example through:

- Consideration of the views of people with learning disabilities in determining their further education choices.
- Endeavouring to cater for disabled students through mainstream further education provision, as opposed to relying upon discrete provision.

### **Policy commitment 8 – Using technology to enhance learning**

**Do you agree that colleges should use technology to support and improve their teaching and learning?**

**What are the main barriers to achieving this and how could these be overcome?**

The use of technology can provide beneficial outcomes by enhancing the learning experience and allowing learners to work at their own pace. However, there is potential for it to exclude those who cannot afford the equipment required, or who do not feel competent to use it. We note that 43.6% of regulated enrolments in 2013/14 were from the two most deprived groups of the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure.<sup>2</sup> Adequate supports should be put in place, as well as consideration of how learners can access the required equipment.

While welcoming the flexibility technology provides, we emphasise the need to ensure it does not create a barrier to participation.

### **Policy commitment 10 – Embedding high quality teaching**

We recommend that within the suggested minimum standards for pedagogy and continual professional development, an equality component is mandatory covering legal obligations and good practice.

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<sup>2</sup>DEL (2014) [Further Education activity statistical bulletin](#) at page 62

## **Part 2 – Supporting document**

### **Promoting social inclusion and social cohesion**

We note that the *Promoting social inclusion and social cohesion* section at page 5 does not include reference to race and people with dependents as groups which it has a 'proud and often unrecognised tradition of attracting'. If such groups are not attracted to further education, the Department may wish to consider the reasons for it and actions it could take to address it.

We further note the absence throughout the document to specific reference to Travellers and, apart from ESOL courses, to newcomers. We reiterate our point at policy commitment 6 above.

#### Transition planning

The draft strategy does not address transition planning. The Commissioner for Young People has highlighted<sup>3</sup> concern in relation to the lack of statutory transition support at the end of further education to assist people with learning disabilities into employment. This means that these young people tend to remain in further education settings for overly long periods of time and / or fall back into day-care services rather than pursuing employment options.

#### Collection and monitoring of data

Sound decision-making is dependent upon accurate and fitting data being available in relation to the protected characteristics of enrolees. We note that monitoring data concerning student participation rates until 2013 was limited to age and gender, and currently includes disability. It is suggested that broader monitoring may be beneficial in relation to determining how elements of the strategy are working, particularly those in relation to social inclusion. For example, disaggregated disability data may show areas where further action is required.

### **STEM**

Page 25 of the draft Strategy supporting document notes the challenges of encouraging more young people to study STEM, and that enrolments had decreased between 2009/10 and 2013/14. We further note that in 2013/14 a gender breakdown shows predominantly male enrolments with 68% of broad and 71.52% of narrow STEM enrolees being male<sup>4</sup>.

The strategy could more clearly reflect the Commission's recommendations for the education sector generally that steps are taken to tackle gender inequalities and challenge gender roles in education, including through gender mainstreaming in subject choice. This includes to ensure barriers to the current non-traditional career paths are removed for girls.

ENDS

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<sup>3</sup> NICCY (2012) [Review of Transitions to Adult Services for Young People with Learning Disabilities](#)

<sup>4</sup> DEL (2015) [Further Education Statistical Bulletin 09/10 - 13/14 revised version](#)

## **Appendix 1 – United Nations on the Convention for People with Disabilities (UNCRPD)**

In preparing this response, our views have been shaped and informed by our engagement with disabled people, their representative organisations and wider civil society. The Equality Commission is, with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, responsible for monitoring the Executive's progress in implementing the UNCRPD. In this regard, we draw your attention to specific obligations relevant to the Department.

1. Article 24(3), 'the right to education' requires States to enable people with disabilities to "learn life and social development skills to facilitate their full and equal participation in education and as members of the community."
2. Article 24(5) requires States to "ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others".
3. In terms of understanding the collective experience of disabled people and their situation, Article 4(3) requires public authorities to closely consult and actively involve disabled people, including young people through their representative organisations in the development and implementation of legislation and policies.
4. Article 7 requires the Department to take measures to ensure that disabled young people have the opportunity to express their views on all matters affecting them, giving due weight in accordance with their age and maturity on an equal basis with other children and young people.
5. Article 31 of the CRPD requires that the collection of appropriate information, including statistical and research data, to enable the formulation and implementation of policies to give effect to the Convention.