

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

SUMMARY OF CONSULTATION RESPONSES

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The purpose of the Department for Employment and Learning's consultation document, "The Development of a Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland", was to inform the development of a Higher Education Strategy which aims to pave the way for the establishment of a distinctive higher education sector in Northern Ireland up to 2020.

1.2 This summary document collates the responses to the consultation.

1.3 The consultation attracted responses from universities, university colleges, further education colleges (FECs), student representatives, sector skills councils, trade unions, public sector organisations, individuals, businesses, community groups, local development agencies and charities. The range of organisations and individuals which responded to the consultation demonstrates the impact of higher education on the economy, the community and society in Northern Ireland.

2.0 THE CONSULTATION

- 2.1 The consultation on the development of a Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland was launched on Thursday 20 January 2011 and closed on Friday 15 April 2011.
- 2.3 A total of 40 responses were submitted to the Department. A list of respondents is attached at **Annex A**.
- 2.4 Respondents were asked to provide feedback on a number of questions and proposals linked to the five key themes identified within the consultation document. The five themes were: a learning society; higher education and the economy; internationally connected; higher education and civil society; and higher education finance and governance. The responses to the consultation are summarised in the next section.

3.0 MAIN CONSULTATION FINDINGS

3.1 A Vision for Higher Education: 2010-2020

3.1.1 The Department's vision for higher education (HE) is one of a sector which is vibrant, of international calibre, which pursues excellence in teaching and research and which plays a pivotal role in the development of a modern, sustainable knowledge-based economy which supports a confident, inclusive society that recognises and values diversity.

3.1.2 The consultation document asked:

- **What are your thoughts on the above vision in reflecting an appropriate aspiration for the development of the higher education sector over the next decade?**

3.1.3 All respondents were broadly in agreement with the Department's vision for higher education. A number of respondents noted that, if the Department's aim was to create a flexible, responsive higher education sector, this should also be recognised within the vision. Indeed, some believed that widening access should also be included within the vision.

3.2 A Learning Society

3.2.1 In this section the consultation document examined who is learning in higher education (and who is not), what is being taught and how. It also provided an assessment of the nature of change that is needed to maximise the personal economic benefits that could accrue from higher education in Northern Ireland.

3.2.2 The consultation document outlined seven proposals in relation to the theme 'A Learning Society' which are outlined below.

PROPOSALS
Teaching and learning needs to be flexible, accessible and of the highest quality. More flexible pathways to qualifications need to be developed, with funding arrangements incentivising this change.
The sector should seek to develop "Distinctive Northern Ireland Graduates"; graduates who possess additional skills that will place them at an advantage globally.
A greater emphasis on part-time participation in higher education and on postgraduate research and training is required involving closer collaboration with industry and continuing Government commitment to research and development activities.
The roles of the FECs in the provision and delivery of higher education should be further developed and fostered in partnership with the universities and university colleges.
There is a need to incentivise choices for STEM areas beyond the traditional higher education courses.
There is a need for a greater emphasis on sub-degree qualifications which better meet the needs of local industry and brings Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the UK and Europe.
It is imperative that we build on the success to date of widening participation to ensure access for all those who can benefit from higher education, addressing inequalities of gender and socio-economic grouping at a time of constrained resource availability.

3.2.3 In respect of the creation of a 'Learning Society' the consultation document asked:

- **How should higher education in Northern Ireland be delivered to best support the needs of current and future learners, including those in the workforce?**

3.2.4 A large number of respondents noted the need to ensure that there is a STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) focus at the heart of higher education. This would include greater collaboration with the business sector in relation to workforce planning, economic priorities and curriculum development.

Collaboration in general was a key aspect highlighted by respondents. Many felt that the higher education sector should work closely with, for example, Further Education Colleges (FECs), schools, Government, higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Republic of Ireland and potential investors in the Northern Ireland economy.

The majority of respondents also favoured flexible, adaptable provision for higher education, supported by a recognised credit framework. It is hoped that this would support clear and flexible progression routes to higher education, especially for those with limited qualifications. The vast majority of respondents agreed that the distinction between part-time and full-time students should also be removed.

One response, however, questioned whether the demand for 'traditional' full-time undergraduate provision would decline, preferring flexibility to be built into postgraduate rather than undergraduate courses.

A number of respondents highlighted the need for Northern Ireland to increase its language provision; however, all noted that this needs to be developed from an

early stage in the education cycle. Indeed, work-based learning and the need to 'upskill' and 'reskill' the current and future workforce were also key points put forward by respondents.

A large number of respondents from the North West supported the idea of expanding higher education provision in that region, in line with the conclusions and recommendations of the ILEX Regeneration Plan.

The FECs favoured the expansion of higher education in further education, with FECs to be used for technical/vocational higher education courses. They also seek to develop working relationships with universities throughout the UK, not just in Northern Ireland. They welcomed the creation of a mixed environment to aid learning.

Some respondents believed that FECs should be directly linked to workforce development in regard to higher education, intermediary higher education and as a 'progression route', ensuring partnership with the universities and having a defined and complementary role.

3.2.5 The consultation document then asked:

- **How can learning at higher education institutions in Northern Ireland be made distinctive from the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland and Europe, leading to graduates with greater employability potential?**

3.2.6 The majority of respondents agreed with the creation of a flexible, modular, credited learning environment. A minority also said that the Qualifications Credit Framework (QCF) and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications: England, Wales, and Northern Ireland (FHEQ-EWNI) should be better aligned in order to make progression routes clearer.

Several respondents welcomed the concept of foreign language 'bolt-ons' and the further development of entrepreneurial modules within the higher education curriculum. Employability is also a key priority; respondents believed that students should be supported to undertake accredited work placements and internships by their institutions, government and business.

One response proposed the creation of a web-based learning community between all higher education providers in Northern Ireland. Another response suggested that the teacher demand model is flawed and that Northern Ireland should seek to contribute to teacher education throughout the UK, rather than being distinctive. Some respondents believed that research should be a central and aspirational aspect of teaching and learning in Northern Ireland.

However, several respondents stated that there was no need for Northern Ireland graduates and the sector to become 'distinctive'. Rather, the sector should learn from best practise elsewhere and maximise collaboration where possible. Indeed, one response said that the distinctiveness between Northern Ireland's HEIs should be regarded as a strength rather than seeking uniformity across the sector.

3.3 Higher Education and the Economy

- 3.3.1 This section discussed how the higher education sector contributes to the goal of growing a dynamic and innovative economy and considered how that contribution could be maximised in the future.
- 3.3.2 The consultation document outlined six proposals in relation to the theme ‘Higher Education and the Economy’ which outlined below.

PROPOSALS
Research should continue to be funded at an appropriate level to enable our universities to fulfil their central role to develop and sustain a world-class research base in Northern Ireland.
Increased employer engagement with higher education and the continual development of knowledge exchange activity with businesses, the public sector and with the third sector is required.
The promotion of entrepreneurship in the local economy through the higher education sector, including the development of graduates with the right set of skills necessary to compete in a global economy.
Working more closely with local industry, particularly SMEs and potential investors to ensure that skills gaps are identified and addressed, putting in place flexible client-focused approaches to do so.
Northern Ireland must play to its strengths, ensuring the development of a high quality skills base and a willingness to respond to investors.
Cross-departmental co-operation to promote interest in, and the study of, priority subjects from an early age, achieving the right balance between these and other subject areas, whilst respecting academic freedom.

- 3.3.3 In seeking ways in which higher education can aid the growth of a dynamic and innovative society the consultation document asked:

- **How can the higher education sector maximise its contribution to Northern Ireland's economy, particularly in relation to research and development?**

3.3.4 Nearly all respondents emphasised the important role of higher education research and development (R&D) in Northern Ireland and the need to maintain, or indeed enhance, the research base, so that it compares well with the rest of the UK. Some respondents also believed that further research collaboration on a North-South basis will help to enhance the research base in Northern Ireland.

There were, however, differing views as to how R&D funding should be allocated. Some believed that an aggressive, prioritised, targeted economic approach should be taken, while others favoured a 'pure' approach. There were also contrasting views as to whether a short-term approach to R&D to assist, for example, local Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) should be adopted; or whether a long-term focus would be best.

One response outlined the need for Northern Ireland R&D Centres of Excellence to be developed, with all institutions working together under a single umbrella, utilising joint resources for the benefit of Northern Ireland as a whole. Others welcomed the Department's research initiative, with the SMEs believing it should be retained, and emphasising the need to maintain innovation funding.

Respondents from the North West also believed that a Science Park should be established in the North West.

One response suggested that funding mechanisms should be created to allow HE staff and students to take placements within industry at an undergraduate and postgraduate level. In return, industry staff should be provided with the opportunity to undertake research at the universities.

Many believed that there was a definite need to align graduate skills to the needs of the Northern Ireland economy, with incentives in place for students wishing to study STEM related subjects. It was agreed that the importance of STEM subjects should be articulated at school level, This would ensure that students, especially at pre-GCSE level, are aware of the impact that their choices can have on their future, particularly in respect of higher education and employment. Caution was urged, however, on growth across all disciplines, especially within the humanities, and that emphasis on STEM should not become all-consuming. A number of respondents said that our HEIs should produce graduates to meet local skill needs; others felt that we should develop graduates with the global skills required to work internationally, moving away from insularity.

Several respondents felt that enterprise should be encouraged within higher education and that the benefits of student placements should be better articulated to local business and to students.

The FECs, as well as other respondents, emphasised the important role that further education plays in 'upskilling' and 'reskilling' the current workforce. In addition, they also felt that they should have an opportunity to develop short, focused, higher education programmes to meet the needs of local businesses.

3.3.5 The consultation document then asked:

- **How can higher education, Government and business work more effectively to identify research and development needs and improve the knowledge and skills of the current, and future, workforce?**

3.3.6 Greater communication among stakeholders was a key issue for many respondents. Many also believed that there was a need to improve on existing mechanisms; for example, the work of the Sector Skills Councils.

Many felt that more encouragement was needed to enable interaction between business and higher education, especially regarding curriculum development. This would help to ensure that local skills needs were met.

The FECs felt that they would be best placed to meet local business needs. They suggested that curriculum planning may be improved by analysing the skills needs of the Northern Ireland economy. The importance of high quality careers advice was also highlighted by respondents; this included advice for those progressing through the education system and also for those who are currently in, or out of, work.

Overall, many believed that Northern Ireland's size could be an advantage in terms of encouraging co-operation between higher education, Government and business.

3.4 Internationally Connected

3.4.1 This section of the consultation document assessed the benefits of internationalisation and how Northern Ireland could reap these benefits.

3.4.2 The consultation document outlined four proposals in relation to the theme 'Internationally Connected' which are outlined below.

PROPOSALS
Expansion of Northern Ireland's market share within the UK in respect of international activity and overseas student enrolments through the development of a unique Northern Ireland higher education selling point.
Encouraging, incentivising and supporting Northern Ireland students to avail of the opportunities for international mobility.
Institutions should seek to further develop their portfolio of well managed overseas institutional partnerships that benefit not only their students and institutions but Northern Ireland as a whole.
Healthy and substantial international research links should continue to be fostered, for overseas trade and inward investment. In particular, HEIs should continue to work with SMEs to ensure they are well placed to reap the benefits of internationalisation.

3.4.3 In relation to the theme 'Internationally Connected', the consultation document asked:

- **As higher education becomes increasingly globalised, how can Northern Ireland's institutions further expand their international portfolios, to assist not only the higher education sector, but Northern Ireland as a whole?**

3.4.4 The majority of respondents believed that a collaborative, strategic approach to Northern Ireland's international activity should be developed, utilising niche

markets as one 'entity'. In regard to the curriculum, a large number of respondents believed that courses should have an international dimension.

Some respondents felt that cross-border links should be maximised. However, it should be noted that the issue surrounding UK Border Agency (UKBA) visa restrictions would have an impact on student mobility between the two countries. A number of respondents highlighted the need to oppose these restrictions.

Respondents also noted the opportunities that distance learning could create internationally in addition to shorter courses designed for overseas students.

3.4.5 The consultation document then asked:

- **How can Northern Ireland students be encouraged, incentivised and supported to become more internationally mobile?**

3.4.6 The majority of respondents believed that internationalisation should be embraced and become embedded within the sector. Suggestions put forward by respondents to encourage, incentivise and support Northern Ireland students to become more internationally mobile include targets; financial incentives; funded international internships and placements; utilising partnerships with institutions and companies overseas; and credit recognition for time spent abroad.

The FECs emphasised the importance of World Skills International in regard to vocational education and training.

The importance of well-informed careers advice was again highlighted by respondents, as was the need to inform students at school level of the benefits of internationalisation and the importance of language skills.

3.5 Higher Education and Civil Society

3.5.1 This section of the document outlined existing relationships and interfaces between the higher education sector, the individual and the community and looked at how these relationships and interfaces could be further developed in the future.

3.5.2 The consultation document outlined three proposals in relation to the theme 'Higher Education and Civil Society' which are outlined below.

PROPOSALS
Increasing opportunities for learners to enter higher education and assist in the development of initiatives and programmes at the HEIs to ensure the establishment of an open and diverse society.
Promoting the creation of sustainable outreach links between the HEIs and the local voluntary, community and local Government sectors, supported by external engagement committees in which all stakeholders are represented.
HEIs working in partnership with FECs to encourage and promote the provision of higher education in enabling those from geographical 'cold-spots' to benefit from a higher education experience.

3.5.3 Under the theme 'Higher Education and Civil Society' the consultation document asked:

- **How should the already established relationships and interfaces with local communities and civic society be developed further to maximise their effectiveness?**

3.5.4 Many respondents believed that best practice in regard to established relationships and interfaces should be utilised and developed throughout Northern Ireland, with duplication being reduced where necessary. The FECs

highlight the need for greater collaboration and the targeting of resources to further develop established relationships.

The FECs were described as a fundamental gateway to higher education by some, especially in regards to individuals' re-engagement with higher education. One response highlighted the importance of programmes such as the Social Entrepreneurship Programme and the INTRO graduate development scheme in enhancing interfaces and relationships with local communities.

Some respondents believed that new initiatives should be developed to target new audiences: widening access, for example, to adult learners, returning learners and business.

One respondent highlighted the need to recognise voluntary and community work experience/placement through a recognised credit framework for students. Another respondent stated that synergy between strategies across institutions, government and wider society is necessary in order to ensure commitment from all parties.

3.5.5 The consultation document then asked:

- **If new relationships and interfaces need to be established, what should they look like?**

3.5.6 Closer collaboration, through transparent, accountable mechanisms, was cited by most respondents as a necessary element of any relationship or interface. However, respondents were divided on the issue of how this could be achieved. Some felt that there was a need for new relationships and interfaces to be established, building on what is already in place; others were of the opinion that more creative ways to engage with the community and wider society should be explored.

One response underlined the importance of the following: a commitment to volunteering within institutions; the development of specific mentoring programmes, and institutional support for staff and students to develop entrepreneurial solutions to social problems.

3.6 Higher Education Finance and Governance

3.6.1 This section provided an overview of the funding and governance structures in the higher education sector in Northern Ireland. At the time of publication, the implications of Lord Browne's review were being considered by the UK Government. Therefore, the proposals and questions within the consultation reflected the financial situation at that time.

3.6.2 The consultation document contained four proposals in relation to the theme 'Higher Education Finance and Governance' which are outlined below.

PROPOSALS
Changing the funding model for higher education to a simplified system that better reflects the need for part-time, modular study to ensure flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness in higher education.
Assessing the extent to which MaSN, as a means of controlling expenditure, is still fit for purpose.
Considering whether the Financial Memorandum between the Department and the universities and university colleges takes account of the UK-wide HEI Financial Memoranda and also reflects the appropriate degree of assurance.
Striking a clear balance between HEI autonomy and the role of the Department through a renewed funding and governance framework to ensure clarity in roles and responsibilities.

3.6.3 Under the theme 'Higher Education Finance and Governance' the consultation document asked:

- **How can we ensure that government funding is being used effectively to support learners and respond to economic priorities?**

3.6.4 In respect of funding mechanisms, some respondents supported the implementation of a competitive funding mechanism; others favoured a flexible funding model. Several respondents believed that funding should follow the

student. Those affiliated to the FECs felt that the same higher education funding model should be applied to all institutions, whether they are HEIs or FECs. A large majority of respondents stated that funding should be ring-fenced for specific courses, such as STEM. An economic demand-driven funding model was also suggested by some respondents.

A few respondents stated that there was a need for better evaluation of degree content. Others thought that public funding should be linked to economic priorities, with funding weighted accordingly. However, several respondents said that any change in the balance of funding between Government and the student would cause a shift in influence within higher education.

A number of respondents welcomed the idea of creating a Higher Education Funding Council for Northern Ireland, similar to those in Scotland, England and Wales. Several of these called for transparency and more effective governance in Northern Ireland's higher education sector.

3.6.5 The consultation document then asked:

- **What are your views on a review of the higher education funding model in Northern Ireland?**

3.6.6 The vast majority of respondents believed that the funding model for higher education in Northern Ireland was complex, inflexible and no longer fit for purpose. Many felt that the distinction between part-time and full-time students should be removed in terms of funding. Again, those affiliated to the FECs believed that the same higher education funding model should be applied to all institutions, whether they are HEIs or FECs.

3.6.7 Following on from this the consultation document asked:

- **How could government funding, including student support, be revised to support modular and flexible study?**

3.6.8 Some respondents suggested that a recognised credit system in Northern Ireland should be adopted in order to help support modular study and funding. However, the vast majority of respondents did not elaborate on how government funding, including student support, could be revised to support modular and flexible study, though many supported the adoption of such a model.

One respondent urged caution on the concept of flexibility within undergraduate provision, and stated that flexible provision should be progressive in nature and assessed for potential risks.

3.6.9 The consultation document then asked:

- **What are your views on the cap on student numbers (MaSN)?**

3.6.10 There were mixed views regarding MaSN. The majority of respondents believed that MaSN should be removed. In addition, one respondent stated that Northern Ireland should seek to increase its graduate numbers in line with those in England and Scotland, as they felt that Northern Ireland had an undersupply of graduates.

Some thought that MaSN would be rendered obsolete by the implementation of a credit-based or mode-free learning system.

Several respondents felt that, if MaSN were to remain, it should be used as a tool to support higher education priorities. They suggested that, for example, it should be relaxed for students studying specific subjects, and obsolete for those coming to study from the rest of the UK. Some believed that there should be an

institutional funding cap rather than a cap on student numbers, or that MaSN should be re-balanced across all HEIs.

A minority of respondents were not in favour of removing the cap on student numbers.

3.7 Implementation

3.7.1 This section of the consultation document asked:

- **What are your views on the establishment of a strategic implementation body to oversee implementation of the strategy when it is finalised?**

3.7.2 The responses to this question varied. Some respondents believed, as previously stated, that a Higher Education Funding Council for Northern Ireland should be established. A few respondents supported the need for such a body, with an appropriate blend of stakeholders, tasked with the implementation of the strategy within a key timeframe. Others felt that controls were already in place and that there was no need for the creation of another body. In this instance, it was suggested that the Department should review its objectives at relevant intervals to facilitate the implementation of the Strategy.

3.8 Additional Comments

3.8.1 Respondents were invited to provide additional comments to the consultation document if they wished; however, these reflected the main themes already discussed in previous sections of the consultation and within this document.

4.0 NEXT STEPS

- 4.1 In developing a Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland, the Department will take into account the issues raised in the responses to the consultation, including from the Departmental Committee and, in co-operation with Sir Graeme Davies and the Steering Group, develop a framework for the future of the higher education sector in Northern Ireland up to 2020. It is anticipated that this will be published in Autumn 2011.

ANNEX A: List of Respondents

A

Adult Learning NI
Alliance Sector Skills Council

B

Belfast City Council
Belfast Metropolitan College
British Council

C

Careers Academy
Confederation of British Industry
CITB – Construction Skills NI
Colleges NI

F

Foyle Learning Community

H

Higher Education Academy
Higher Education Authority

I

ILEX
Individuals from the North West Joint Response
Institute of Acoustics Irish Branch
Institute of Directors
Institute of Physics in Ireland
Invest NI

L

Londonderry Chamber of Commerce
Letterkenny Institute of Technology

M

Momentum NI

N

National Union of Students-Union of Students in Ireland
NI Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders
NI Adviser on Employment and Skills
Northern Regional College
North West Regional College
North West Workforce Development Forum

O

Open University

Q

The Queen's University of Belfast

S

Skillset

South Eastern Regional College

Southern Regional College

South Western College

St. Mary's University College

Stranmillis University College

U

University College Union

The University of Ulster

University 4 Derry

Individuals:

Doreen Bell

Professor M.Y. Larkin

Vincent Murphy