

## **Ministerial Statement: A Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland**

I am grateful for the opportunity to make a statement about the future of higher education in Northern Ireland.

Higher education transforms, enriches and inspires individuals and society. It equips our people with the skills and attributes needed to succeed in employment. The research and development capabilities of the sector help to create an innovative and prosperous economy. The sector also plays a key role in helping to shape a culturally diverse Northern Ireland.

Already the Higher Education sector's achievements are far reaching. The sector has made a positive impact on the local economy by leveraging significant external investment. As such it is critical to Northern Ireland's development as a knowledge based economy, capable of attracting foreign investment in high quality jobs. Internationally, we have an excellent reputation with regard both to teaching and learning and research and development.

Our higher education providers also have a high level of student satisfaction as reflected in the annual National Student Survey. Our participation rates are also the highest in the UK. Representation from students from lower socio-economic groups is higher than the UK average, with 39.1% of young full-time first degree entrants to Northern Ireland higher education providers in 2009/10 coming from age-adjusted Socio-Economic Classification Groups 4-7. This is well above the UK average of 30%.

I therefore recognise the importance of ensuring that we continue to provide all of our people with the opportunity to availing of the benefits of higher education. As you are all aware, this was an issue that the Executive and I addressed last year with the decision to freeze tuition fees for local students at local institutions, and to sustain the level of funding of the higher education sector.

Funding, nevertheless, remains a major issue. The public funding base, on which the sector is dependant, is likely to be constrained for the foreseeable future. With our tuition fees essentially remaining frozen, we as an Executive must ensure that our institutions are not left behind in terms of investment growth.

There are other challenges too. Demographics are changing. The core 18-21 year old cohort of which funding for teaching and learning has been traditionally

based will reduce by 9% by 2020. Student expectations are increasing and their profile changing.

However with challenge comes opportunity.

In seeking to harness the fundamental role higher education plays in helping to secure our future prosperity and ensuring we benefit from the challenges we face, my Department has developed *Graduating to Success: A Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland*.

This document shapes the strategic direction for the sector to 2020 and looks to build upon the successes of the past and present. It looks towards the future with a shared vision for how best higher education can be used in creating the Executive's aim of 'a *shared and better future for all*' supported by a rebuilt and rebalanced economy.

## **The Development Process**

This is the first higher education strategy for Northern Ireland and this document spans all levels of higher education from levels four to eight. In other words, from a higher national certificate to a PhD.

A Steering Group chaired by Sir Graeme Davies, plus a Project Group and five Expert Groups, were established to support the development of the Strategy. These groups comprised a wide range of stakeholders from higher education, the community/voluntary sector, further education, schools, business and student representatives.

The Expert Groups considered and made recommendations on five key themes: Learning; Economy; International; Society/People; and Finance/Governance. The Expert Group Chairs presented their findings and recommendations to the Steering Group in the summer of 2010. Their reports informed the consultation document on the Strategy's development which was published in January 2011. A total of 40 responses were submitted to the Department. Stakeholder engagement events were also held throughout Northern Ireland.

I thank the Employment and Learning Committee, both past and present, for their contribution to the Strategy's development and I wish to take this opportunity to thank everyone for their commitment, support and expertise throughout the process. I have reflected deeply on both the comments made and my own assessment of the future needs of the sector in finalising this Strategy.

It can therefore be seen that my Department has ensured an inclusive approach to the development of the Strategy. Through this, I believe we have achieved a

document that truly captures what we all believe higher education should be like by 2020.

## **Graduating to Success: A Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland**

My Department's vision for higher education is one which is vibrant and of international calibre; which pursues excellence in teaching and research; which plays a pivotal role in the development of a modern, sustainable knowledge-based economy; which supports a confident, shared society; and which recognises and values diversity.

In particular, this is a sector that will be recognised for:

- its ability to equip individuals with a high quality, distinctive range of skills and attributes needed for an ever increasingly competitive international workplace;
- its excellence in research and development and its willingness to work in partnership with industry and business to secure knowledge transfer and drive innovation;
- the professionalism of its teaching and learning and commitment to quality, its support to students and its fairness in maximising opportunities for all who can benefit;
- its flexibility in responding to the needs of learners and other stakeholders, including business;
- its willingness to engage globally; and
- the rigour of its governance.

The vision is supported by four key principles; responsive, high quality, accessible and flexible.

Our institutions play a critical role in addressing our future skill needs, and in developing our knowledge economy through research and development and knowledge transfer.

Accordingly, the Strategy focuses on the need to better align the higher education provision to the needs of the local economy with a greater emphasis on STEM and economically relevant subjects. By March 2013, the universities will bring forward proposals for rebalancing the profile of the learner offering, so that the qualifications offered more closely reflect the needs of the economy.

In support of my Department's Skills Strategy, this Strategy also outlines the need to upskill and reskill the current and future workforce, providing them with the right skill sets to meet employer needs.

Indeed, a major focus is on ensuring that learners undertaking a higher education course are provided with the opportunity to avail of a work related placement whilst completing their studies. I want to ensure that our graduates possess the employability skills they need to succeed in the job market and ultimately benefit our economy. Therefore, by 2020, all higher education students will have the opportunity to avail of a work placement. These additional skills will be recorded by all higher education providers through the Higher Education Achievement Report. All students finishing a higher education course in 2018 will have a Higher Education Achievement Report in addition to their degree so that employers can clearly identify the additional skills and experiences they possess.

The importance of higher level skills is further reflected in my commitment to increase post-graduate places by doubling the number of PhD places to 1000 by 2020. The Strategy also focuses on the important role intermediate qualifications play in strengthening our knowledge base. As supported by my Department's Further Education Strategy, FE Means Business, higher education in further education, or HE in FE as it is often referred, is the key driver of intermediate higher level study in Northern Ireland. I want this to continue and will seek to increase this provision. I have already secured additional funding for the expansion of part-time provision in relation to HE in FE and I will increase the number of intermediate qualifications, for example, in the area of Foundation Degrees, from a baseline of 1,132 in 2012 to 2,500 by 2015.

The work undertaken with local business and industry by the sector is also important and I seek continued collaboration between not only HE and FE with business, but also with the universities.

Research and development is also a key driver of economic success. Our institutions already make a significant contribution to our economy through these activities and I wish to ensure this continues. My Department will, therefore, encourage the higher education institutions to improve their performance post-2014. From the start of the next academic year I will seek to promote world leading and internationally excellent research in my Department's funding model while also ensuring it takes into account the current and future needs of the local economy. The commercialisation of the research base in Northern Ireland has been identified as a critical factor in the stimulation of economic growth and job creation. Knowledge transfer activity will be increased and better links with SMEs will be developed. By 2013 the universities will have undertaken 1,140 business engagements, secured £6.94 million in consultancy and secured £863k in income from intellectual property. In 2014 the universities and further education colleges will have established 14 major sectoral projects with local companies and undertaken 155 projects on behalf of local companies.

However, although the economy is an important strand of higher education, we cannot overlook its foundation as a seat of learning.

I want to ensure that higher education in Northern Ireland remains a world-class, high quality provision. In securing this, the Strategy seeks to improve upon the quality of the sector to date. Teaching excellence will be further rewarded and recognised and the sector will be quality assured in a manner that reflects its needs. By 2016 there will be a single quality assurance framework for all higher education providers in Northern Ireland. Lifelong learning will be facilitated and supported with clear progression routes into, and through, higher education aided by a single, recognised qualifications framework. By 2018 modular learning will be commonplace across the sector and the higher education funding model will be enhanced to ensure that it supports a flexible, lifelong learning environment.

All learners will be kept fully informed and supported as they enter, and progress through, higher education through a standard sector wide process. Student information will be improved and assist prospective learners in making the decision as to whether to enter higher education and what and how to study.

I will also ensure access to higher education is maintained. I recognise that differing fees regime across the UK may create an increased pressure upon local higher education places. So far the level of applications from Northern Ireland students to local institutions has remained steady while it has dropped to institutions elsewhere. I have, however, secured the resources to facilitate an additional 700 places locally through to 2015. These will all be in STEM subjects. My Department will also undertake a review of the current control on full-time undergraduate places, the Maximum Student Number. This review will be published in 2016 and will feed into the creation of a revised funding model that will support a flexible, lifelong learning environment, including how we facilitate the expected increase in part-time students.

I strongly advocate the view that students should enter higher education based upon their ability to learn, rather than their ability to pay. I am currently finalising a parallel strategy for widening participation. My commitment is that any qualified individual should be able to gain access to higher education that is right for them, irrespective of their personal or social background.

However, I also want the sector to be accessible in the widest sense. As you may be aware, the issue of widening participation will be addressed separately in a supporting Strategy document. I aim to publish this document in the early summer. Graduating to Success also recognises the need for the sector to widen and deepen its engagement with the community on a local, national and international level. Rural access to higher education will be improved with a pilot scheme for the creation of university bases at further education colleges undertaken by 2014.

Engagement with communities will be increased with a view of such activity becoming deeply embedded within the sector. Higher education providers will also be encouraged to engage with Government on a wide range of policy

issues. Northern Ireland's market share of international activity will increase with inward and outward mobility nearly doubling by 2020. Cross-border linkages will be further enhanced and developed and the sector will have set and met challenging targets by 2020.

Above all, I wish to ensure that whilst maintaining stability and sustainability within the sector, the significance of the contribution made by the taxpayer to the provision of higher education is fully recognised. There will, therefore, be a clear governance and accountability framework that maintains a balance between Government accountability and institutional autonomy at the universities and university colleges.

I believe higher education in Northern Ireland is a multi-faceted being. Although it cannot be all things to all people, I want to ensure it does everything in its power to help secure the future prosperity of Northern Ireland.

## **A Plan for Delivery**

I recognise that the vision for the future of higher education in Northern Ireland is challenging. I believe, however, that the vision can become a reality if all stakeholders work together in creating a responsive, accessible and flexible high quality sector.

The first stage of implementation will be supported by 16 projects which are outlined within the document. Although the majority of the Strategy's aims will be realised in the long term, the projects provide the first steps that need to be taken in achieving my Department's vision for the future of higher education in Northern Ireland.

Implementation will be overseen by an Implementation Committee which will be chaired by a senior official within the Department.

A Project Steering Group will be established and headed by the Senior Responsible Officer for the implementation of the Strategy. The Project Steering Group will be responsible for ensuring delivery of the projects outlined and will be accountable to the Implementation Committee.

Each project will be assigned a Project Manager. The project managers will be accountable to the Project Steering Committee.

The projects focus on a variety of key policy areas and include:

- The importance of building the economy through upskilling and reskilling, research and development, knowledge transfer activities, and engagement with business.

- Ensuring a high quality learning experience for students through timely, relevant information on higher education, high quality provision, increasing employability prospects through work placements/experience and international opportunities.
- Increasing the sector's engagement on a local level through involvement with communities. On a national level through engagement with Government and business. On an international level through increased institutional partnerships and collaboration with the Republic of Ireland, Europe and the rest of the world and increasing Northern Ireland's market share of inward and outward mobility.
- Supporting a lifelong learning environment through a modular based learning approach facilitated by an enhanced funding model for higher education in Northern Ireland.
- Ensuring efficiencies are identified and acted upon within the sector and that the governance and accountability structure reflects the importance of sustainability within higher education, striking a balance between institutional autonomy and public monies.

Outlining a vision for what higher education in Northern Ireland will be like in 2020 is somewhat straightforward; it is actually delivering on that vision which is challenging. I believe that through the delivery of the projects by not only my Department but also the sector, the vision for the future of higher education in Northern Ireland will be achieved.

In conclusion I trust that you welcome the steps that have, and will, be taken in creating a clear strategic vision for the future of higher education.

I believe the steps taken now will no doubt bring substantial benefit to the future economic prosperity of Northern Ireland and help us all to achieve our vision of a shared future for all.

Graduating to Success is now available to download from the DEL website: [www.delni.gov.uk/hestrategy](http://www.delni.gov.uk/hestrategy)

I thank you Mr Speaker for giving me this opportunity to make this statement to the Assembly today and I am happy to take any question.

