

Expert seminar in Northern Ireland 9 September 2008

Summary of discussion

This note summarises the key points and issues for further consideration by the Inquiry that were raised during the seminar.

1. A new language for lifelong learning The Inquiry needs to find a vocabulary for talking about lifelong learning which encompasses the full spectrum of learning and is meaningful across a wide range of audiences. The importance of developing a common language that is both relevant and fresh has been identified as a key challenge for the Inquiry generally, but achieving this is even more significant in the Northern Ireland context. Whilst current policy acknowledges the role that learning can play in building social cohesion, its emphasis is overwhelmingly on skills development for economic ends. Experiential and informal learning, culture and unwaged work, for example, need to be embraced within the lifelong learning framework.
2. Political context and legacy The history of the conflict provides the context for understanding the current situation in Northern Ireland. In spite of the peace, it remains a deeply divided society, and has been described as a nation where the future is not so much shared as shared out. Deloitte estimate the cost of sectarianism at £1.4bn. Segregation on the grounds of gender, religion and intellect is enforced through the school system, and the impact of this is apparent in the life chances of different socio-demographic groups.
3. Sustaining learning beyond skills Substantial European funding has been available to support diverse forms of learning in the post-conflict context. This is soon to end, and the prioritising of funding on learning for employment and economic development means that providers that might have been able to fill the gap (e.g. WEA, Ulster People's College, EGSA) are facing cuts. There is a continuing need for social and political education.
4. Learning and skills strategy Key aspects of *Success Through Skills*, the Northern Ireland skills strategy, are: the need to enable progression, especially for those who appear stuck at Level 1; outreach work for those furthest from the labour market, of all ages, with a possible expanded role for the voluntary and community sector; a unified and unitised qualifications framework (which can only happen within the broader framework of UK-wide reforms); and a focus of public funding on learning that leads towards qualifications.

5. Economic and social inequalities Levels of economic inactivity are high in Northern Ireland (although it should be borne in mind that economic contributions are made by those working outside the cash economy e.g. in caring roles), and concern to address this drives current learning and skills policy. There is a polarised distribution of educational attainment, with high levels of progression to HE alongside large proportions of the population with low or no qualifications (20%) or low literacy levels (24%). This bimodal pattern is begun in the school system and not challenged by lifelong learning. Economic and educational disadvantage are strongly linked to gender, class and religion, with working-class Protestant men registering high levels of exclusion.

6. Joining up policies Making the connections at policy level between the economic development, social justice and social cohesion agendas will be critical. Much has been done to address Northern Ireland's democratic deficit, and it could be argued that 'over-government' is now a risk. Considerable challenges are evident in achieving the effective communications across different levels and departments of government that are necessary to connect economic and social policies and provide a platform for lifelong learning.

Inquiry Secretariat
September 08

Annexe: Top Propositions

The following is a selection from the ‘top propositions’ suggested by participants at the seminar.

- Lifelong Learning should be underpinned by accessible, independent all age careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG).
- Forums for both operation and policy development need to be considered for dialogue across schools/ FE/HE/WBL, to articulate and develop meaningful progression routes.
- That the N. Ireland Assembly discharges its responsibilities through its Depts. of Education and Social Development to facilitate the development of a culture of learning through life in N. Ireland’s disadvantaged communities.
- Everyone should have a volunteer learning coach.
- Create a Department for Education, Employment and Culture.
- Make Belfast the mode “reading city”, through a concerted strategy involving city, government, voluntary sector and education establishments.
- The deployment of finite public resources should be based on learner characteristics (e.g. employment status), not course-based criteria.
- Want to see DEL recognise that the community sector can deliver quality learning. Current marketplace is too narrow: only FE funded to deliver learning.
- Civil servants need to consult with adult learners and adult educators before coming up with initiatives to develop learning and skills.
- Equality of entitlement.