

# **Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning: The Northern Ireland Perspective**

By Paul Nolan

### Introduction

*“Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future  
And time future contained in time past.”*

T. S. Eliot, ‘Burnt Norton’

Northern Ireland is a place where, by custom, people are more concerned with re-arranging the past than they are with predicting the future. Those who have made the occasional attempt at long-term vision have been invariably proved wrong: if we look back 15 years to the year 1994, who could have predicted that at the end of that bloody summer the IRA would declare a ceasefire, and set in motion the zigzag process that has finally allowed a functioning local government, a bubble in the housing market, and a consumer boom in the high streets? What we have enjoyed, according to a report prepared for the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) by Oxford Economics has been an unprecedented ‘golden era’, if measured in terms of rising output and falling unemployment, increased wealth and job creation (Oxford Economics, 2009). It is also true to say that, while the threat of violence has never gone away and while there have been additions to the death toll in this period, those who are now in their teenage years can be described as the first post-conflict generation, and that, measured against the experiences of their parents, they have enjoyed a golden era insofar as they have grown up in a period of relative peace.

Golden eras, of course, inevitably belong to the past and when economists invoke the term it can only be in order to explain that the future is going to become much bleaker. As other authors in this report have pointed out, it is hard to predict the long-term weather prospects when the storm is at its height, but the current recession has exposed certain crucial weaknesses in the Northern Ireland economy that are bound to impact upon the future of lifelong learning.

Based on the most recent forecasts (Oxford Economics, April 2009), it will be 2010 before growth returns in any form and 2017 before employment levels return to their peak of early 2008. If that seems bleak it should be pointed out that this is an optimistic scenario, based upon the assumption of 5,000 per annum average net job creation – enough, it is hoped, to offset approximately 25,000 jobs lost in the recession. Whether that assumption proves accurate or not, the emphasis on upskilling the workforce has pushed all other forms of adult learning, not just to the margins, but completely off the page. The two key policy documents from DEL, *Success Through Skills* (2006) and *Success Through Skills Progress Report* (2007), set out the four priorities for government:

- understanding the demand for skills;
- improving the skills level of the workforce;
- improving the quality and relevance of education and training; and

- tackling the skills barriers to employment and learning.

Such a tight control over the curriculum requires an equally tight grasp of organisational structures, and in August 2008 the two main providers of community education, the Workers' Educational Association and the Ulster People's College, had all their government funding withdrawn. As part of the same drive, the six large FE colleges have been given a clear mission to focus all their efforts on the needs of the local economy. The future of state-sponsored lifelong learning, then, is at least clear: for the foreseeable future it will have a narrowly utilitarian function. To describe it thus is not to negate the validity of vocational programmes when taken on their own terms: in fact, it is important to underscore how vital these are to any vision of lifelong learning, so before looking at the wider contexts of adult learning and the ways in which it can develop beyond the reach of government, we will at first consider how education can assist in the re-building of the Northern Ireland economy.

### The skills agenda

Northern Ireland is in fact better positioned than other regions of the UK to ride out the recession: while other regions of the UK, like the Midlands and the North of England, can expect contractions of up to four per cent, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) predict that the contraction in Northern Ireland will be no more than three per cent.<sup>1</sup> That may be good news for the immediate future, but the very factors which offer protection in the short term are the same as those that will make for a major problem in the longer term. The cushion that provides the short-term security is the size of the public sector. A study by the Centre for Economics and Business Research in January 2009 showed that while across the UK, 49 per cent of the economy will consist of state spending, in Northern Ireland that figure rises to 77.6 per cent. To give that some perspective, the State looms larger in the Northern Ireland economy than it did in former Soviet satellite states such as Hungary or Slovakia as they emerged from communism in the 1990s, where state spending accounted for about 60 per cent of their economies.<sup>2</sup> More than a third of the 770,000 people in jobs are directly employed by the public sector (which accounts for nearly two-thirds of economic output), while half a million are officially classified as inactive. The cappuccino bars, festivals and night clubs that so impress the visiting journalists are not the outward shows of a thriving economy so much as the visible manifestations of an unreal and unsustainable state of affairs. Deprived of its economic base in manufacturing and engineering, Northern Ireland finds itself portrayed by *The Economist* as a 'subsidy junkie'.<sup>3</sup> The subsidies cannot continue at this level: the forthcoming reduction in public spending across the UK will impact at just the same time as the European peace funds also run out.

What is to be done? Having diagnosed the illness, *The Economist* explained the cure in the last line of its article: 'What Northern Ireland needs now is an economic miracle of the kind achieved in the south'. That must have made perfect sense in 2007, but there is a warning here for all those who want to write prescriptions for the future: as the economy of the Republic of Ireland moves into freefall, the most unlikely people are now to be found quoting from the Communist Manifesto in order to describe the contemporary crisis of capitalism: 'All that is solid melts into air'. In a world of such dangerous uncertainties, education would seem to represent the safest way to invest in the future, and skills training would seem to be the best way to help make an economy less dependent upon subsidy. In Northern Ireland it is an absolute necessity. That cannot wait for the new generation to come through: here, just as much as other parts of the UK, the calculation of the Leitch Report holds true: 70 per cent of those who will make up the workforce in 2020 are already in employment.<sup>4</sup> What distinguishes the Northern Ireland workforce most is the percentage who possess no educational qualification of any kind: 22 per cent as

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<sup>1</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers (2009).

<sup>2</sup> *The Sunday Times* (2009).

<sup>3</sup> *The Economist* (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Leitch Review of Skills (2006).

opposed to 13 per cent in Scotland, 16 per cent in Wales and 13 per cent in England. These figures present a clear message: upskilling this bottom quartile of the workforce has to be a major priority. While that is a necessity, it is not in itself sufficient: Northern Ireland has to find a way to leapfrog out from being a low skills/low value economy, which is where it languishes at present. The new jobs that have come in with the peace process have tended to be in the retail, catering and hospitality sectors – which means in effect, low skills and low pay. Productivity remains stuck at 81 per cent of the UK average for Gross Value Added per capita (DETI, 2008). This shortfall cannot be explained with reference only to the lower end of occupational groupings and educational attainment. The uneven distribution of educational attainment at school level works its way through to third-level study: if Northern Ireland has the highest levels of underachievement, the region is second only to Scotland in its participation rates in higher education. The report by Oxford Economics argues that the local universities are not producing graduates with the right skills: there are too many broad-brush degrees and not enough to create niche markets in science or technology, or – another gap in the economy – in creative design and arts subjects.

What would it look like then if skills training were aligned with a vision of Northern Ireland's longer-term future? One flagship project may serve as an illustration. The skyline of the old shipbuilding area of East Belfast is still dominated by the two giant cranes of the Harland and Wolff shipyard, symbols of the city's industrial past, and symbols too for some of the days when a major centre of employment was also known as a bastion of sectarian privilege. It is now being redeveloped under the name of the Titanic Quarter, something that links it with its most famous – if least successful – product. At a total cost of £1 billion this is currently the largest mixed-use development in Europe. It will take seven years to complete and is expected to employ over 20,000 people. Queen's University will base its technology centre there and the largest FE provider, Belfast Metropolitan College, will move its campus to be alongside it. The mix of education and technology is intended to mark the shift from a manufacturing to a knowledge-based economy. The IT wizards, accountants and real-estate developers who gather in its waterfront eateries and bars may have more in common with their 'boho' colleagues in Bilbao in Spain or La Defense in Paris than they will with the Harland and Wolff welders, joiners and yard managers who worked there a century ago. If it succeeds though, it will not only show how a successful economy can repay the investment in skills, it will also show how much more can be achieved by a workforce not divided on sectarian lines.

### Exploring other futures

The lifelong learning agenda that was rolled out across Europe in the period that dates from the International Year of Lifelong Learning in 1996 had two main pillars: the skills agenda and learning for social inclusion. The latter soon became tokenistic as the emphasis shifted towards the need of the economy, and in Northern Ireland it is now played out as a zero sum game where the success of the skills agenda seems predicated on the withdrawal of support for all other forms of adult learning. This one-eyed view is at odds with other developments in the broader society, and with the needs of Northern Ireland as a post-conflict society in 21st century Europe. The dysfunctional nature of politics in this part of the world can sometimes lead outside observers to transfer the problem onto the *people* as though they are somehow abnormal. In fact, the lifestyles, ambitions, hopes and fears of the people here are very much the same as other parts of the UK, and the adult learning choices made by students here are also very similar. As the annual NIACE participation surveys show, Northern Ireland is 'within the pack' in terms of participation: lower than England but much on a par with Scotland and Wales.<sup>5</sup> Here, as elsewhere, the cuts in funding have placed at risk the same diversity of provision: crafts, languages, women's education, third age groups, local history classes, ICT training, and all those other activities now diminished in policy terms by the use of the category of 'leisure' education. Again, the situation here, as elsewhere, requires the type of imagination that breathes through this report by the Inquiry, the imagination that allows us to expand rather than contract our understanding of lifelong learning.

Instead then of the two pillars of lifelong learning mentioned above, it may be better to begin with the four pillars used in the Delors report, *Learning: The Treasure Within*: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together.<sup>6</sup> It is the last of these that takes on a special significance in Northern Ireland, where ethnonationalist antagonisms managed to sustain a violent conflict for over thirty years, a period known euphemistically as 'the Troubles'. That political crisis can also be seen as a crisis of learning, just as the political developments that led to a settlement can be seen as a move from a conflict society to a learning society. The future of Northern Ireland as a polity is in fact very much tied up with the continued momentum of that move towards a learning society. The term 'learning society' must be used advisedly, since it has been captured so successfully by government and made to fit within the lexicon of employer need. However, in its original formulation, the potency of the term had to do with its meaning across a range of contexts, and Michael Welton traces its genealogy to the first UNESCO conference held at Elsinore in Denmark in 1949. The delegates from the 47 countries who gathered in the ruins of a Europe devastated by war pledged to see education become part of the process of safeguarding tolerance and the building of democratic

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<sup>5</sup> Aldridge and Tuckett (2009).

<sup>6</sup> International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century (1996).

societies. When Delors invoked the learning society ideal in 1996 and incorporated as the fourth pillar the idea of 'learning to live together', it was at a time when ethnic genocide was once again being attempted on the borders of Europe, and the safeguarding of cultural difference was very much back on the political agenda.

If one looks for exemplar models of what a learning society might look like, empirical real-life case studies are hard to find. This is one of those concepts that is easier to elucidate by pointing to negative examples. One can safely say that, whatever definition is used, Northern Ireland has traditionally presented itself as a negative example, the very opposite of what it means to be a learning society. Rather, the impression has been of a people who, as Robespierre remarked on the return of the Bourbons, had learned nothing and forgot nothing. The learning cycle models put forward by writers like Kurt Lewin and David Kolb show how transitions are made from experience to reflection, and from reflection to theoretical understandings that come to inform more sophisticated forms of action. In the case of Northern Ireland's prolonged agony, the various parties – not just the Catholic and Protestant communities, but the British and Irish governments – failed to gather the learning experiences, and so the wheels spun hopelessly in the sand. What then proved to be the key to unlocking the problem?

The shape of the final accord reached on Good Friday 1998 was in fact little different to that first advanced as the Sunningdale Agreement in 1974. This led the nationalist politician and former school principal, Seamus Mallon, to describe the new settlement as 'Sunningdale for slow learners'. This much-quoted jibe has more than a tinge of bitterness, but it also recognises a fundamental truth: learning had taken place. The immediate targets Mallon had in mind, the local politicians, were only some of the subjects involved in the learning process: as conflict resolution theorists like Jean-Paul Lederach have emphasised, agreement by political elites is dependent upon accommodation being built at other levels, particularly at the grassroots. These slow and patient processes have been facilitated by the forms of community education undertaken by women, by church groups, trade union educators and others. The same processes that helped with the *peace making* leading to the settlement will be just as important for the next generation as we move towards the *peace building* essential to allow us not just to live with our differences, but to use the diversity of cultures to enrich our lives in the ways suggested by Professor Bob Fryer in his thematic paper on citizenship and belonging.<sup>7</sup>

In short, the path to the learning society will be a long one, and it must also be a wide one. There must be room for learning for skills, for arts and culture, for resolving conflict, for developing the fabric of community as well as facilitating the mobility of individuals. It may be that we cannot describe that mission in terms better than the Delors model. The four pillars still stand. We need learning that will help us to know more, to do more, to become more and we need above all to be able to live together. And it may also be the case that this vision is itself no more than a re-fashioning of the original dream of Albert and Frances Mansbridge,

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<sup>7</sup> Fryer (forthcoming, 2009).

## Exploring other futures

Archbishop Temple and all those others who, a century ago, began to spell out the potential of adult education to create a more free, more generous, and more equitable society. If so, then it is appropriate to conclude as we began, with a quotation from T.S. Eliot:

*“We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.”*

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