

ADULT LEARNING IN NORTHERN IRELAND: AN OVERVIEW OF CURRENT POLICIES AND PRACTICE

A briefing paper for NIACE

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INTRODUCTION

In 2002 the Department for Employment and Learning signalled a new policy for lifelong learning with the publication of *Further Education Means Business*. The main thrust of this document was signalled in the title which subordinated all other forms of adult learning to a narrowly-focused attention to the skills needs of the local economy. When the Leitch Report was issued in 2006 it seemed to provide a vindication for this approach. Now that stable devolved government has returned to Northern Ireland this policy will be up for inspection, but at present there is no indication of a challenge coming from any of the political parties.

1. THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

The return of the Northern Ireland Assembly on May 8th 2007 marked a decisive moment in the history of Northern Ireland. In the eyes of most, if not all, commentators this date is seen to represent the end of what was known euphemistically as “the Troubles”, and to open up a new era where politics will concentrate on those issues that are the stuff of politics elsewhere: health, the economy, social welfare and, of course, education. Before taking up the reins of power, politicians in Northern Ireland enjoyed what might be seen as a surprising degree of consensus on a broad range of policy issues. This is because as opposition politicians they generally blamed the government for the ills of society, and because they all favoured statist solutions the most common approach was to champion policies that involved increased government expenditure.

The responsibility to manage departmental budgets brings with it a change of perspective. For instance, while all parties had initially opposed university tuition fees, the Assembly led by David Trimble from 1999 to 2002 introduced a scheme broadly the same as that in England. A similar pragmatism is likely to determine the creation of budgets for the new administration, but there are some educational policy issues where core ideological differences are likely to break up the consensus. Chief among them is the future of Northern Ireland’s selective education system. Grammar schools are cherished by the two unionist parties, while the two nationalist parties are opposed in principle to selection. In the previous administration the last act of the then Education Minister, Martin McGuinness, was to sign an order abolishing the eleven plus. It now falls to the new Minister, his Sinn Fein colleague Catriona Ruane, to deal with the issue of selection and to find a way to forge the cross-party agreement that will be required for any new system to be adopted.

There is no issue in adult learning that is likely to prove so highly-charged as this one, but then it has long been argued by adult educationalists in Northern Ireland that nothing determines the problems for adult learners so much as the stigma of failure suffered by 65% of the population at the age of eleven. It is also accepted that the weakness of the Northern Ireland economy is likely to remain the main policy focus for the foreseeable future, and that the broad, inclusive social programmes funded by the EU are unlikely to be sustained by the Assembly from its own revenue sources.

2. THE NORTHERN IRELAND ECONOMY

The central truth about the Northern Ireland economy can only be grasped by keeping two facts in balance: firstly, that it is currently undergoing a growth surge; and, secondly, that it is making its way up from a very low base. To deal with the latter problem first, in the 1980s a broken-backed economy had reached a position of almost total collapse. The Troubles, which had turned the region into an investment-free zone, were only a part of a crisis which had its origins in the collapse of the traditional manufacturing industries. Only transfers from the Treasury could keep the economy alive, and against the grain of its policies in the rest of the UK the Thatcher government pumped money into both the private and public sectors. Large government subsidies are more than just a memory: presently, the economy amounts to approximately £22 billion per annum, of which only £14 billion is raised locally. The other £8 billion comes from the British exchequer.

A more positive view comes when the recent performance of the economy is examined. Throughout the 1990s the local economy grew faster than did the economy of the rest of the UK, due in part to the rapid growth of the economy of the Republic of Ireland, and the so-called “peace dividend”. There was a slowing period at the beginning of the new millennium, but there has been renewed bounce in the last two years, and the vibrancy of the economy can be indicated by the following:

- In 2005 the economy is estimated to have grown by 3.2%, almost twice as fast as the UK as a whole, and future growth is expected to continue to outstrip the other regions of the UK (Northern Ireland Office, 2006).
- In April 2007 a Halifax survey found that NI’s house prices, once the lowest in the UK, were fourth highest, being behind only London, the South West and the South East.
- Unemployment is at its lowest for several generations. It is now at 4.5%, down from a peak of 17.2% in 1986 (Labour Force Survey, 2007).

The regeneration of the economy is symbolised by a number of flagship projects now underway. The old docks area, for instance, is now under reconstruction as the Titanic Quarter, which at a total cost of £1,000 million will be 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 Belfast Metropolitan College will open its largest campus alongside. 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 bars and eateries will have more in common with their boho colleagues in Bilbao or La Defense in Paris than they will with the Harland Wolff workers who built ships on that site a century ago.

3. LIFELONG LEARNING POLICY DOCUMENTS

In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, the two pillars of lifelong learning policies are social inclusion and economic skills, and in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, the first of these is acknowledged in the prefatory comments of policy documents, and then ignored when the detail of policy is spelled out in subsequent sections. The emphasis on the skills agenda has become more pronounced over the past ten years, and the eclipse of the social inclusion agenda can be traced quite clearly when one studies the main policy documents issued by government. These are:

Lifelong Learning: A New Learning Culture For All (1999). This was issued as a direct response to the radical re-interpretation of adult learning espoused in the early years of the Blair government by David Blunkett and the Fryer Committee, and used many of the same phrases but placed the policy objectives in a local context.

Education and Training for Industry (2002). This was prepared for the Assembly committee on Employment and Learning, and its concern was with the identification of skills deficits and provider responses.

Further Education Means Business (2003). A radical re-orientation of further education was outlined in this report. Previously sixteen colleges had provided a range of functions, including: the opportunity for teenagers to take, or re-sit A levels; certificated courses to provide entry to trades and occupations; and in-service training for particular occupational groupings. In addition, a number of colleges had re-designated themselves as Institutes of Further and Higher Education and taken to delivering degree and sub-degree programmes. This report effectively clipped the wings of the colleges, and provided a simple, if reductive statement of purpose. The colleges were told to withdraw from higher education provision, and to focus on the needs of employers. An organisational reform programme was also begun which resulted in the number of colleges being reduced from sixteen to six.

Success Through Skills (2006) and ***Success Through Skills Progress Report (2007)***. Once again a Ronsell approach was taken to the relationship between the content of the report and its title. The Success Through Skills paper, which now supersedes all previous policy documents, sets out four broad themes for adult learning providers:

- Understanding the demand for skills
- Improving the skills level of the workforce
- Improving the quality and relevance of education and training
- Tackling the skills barrier to employment and employability

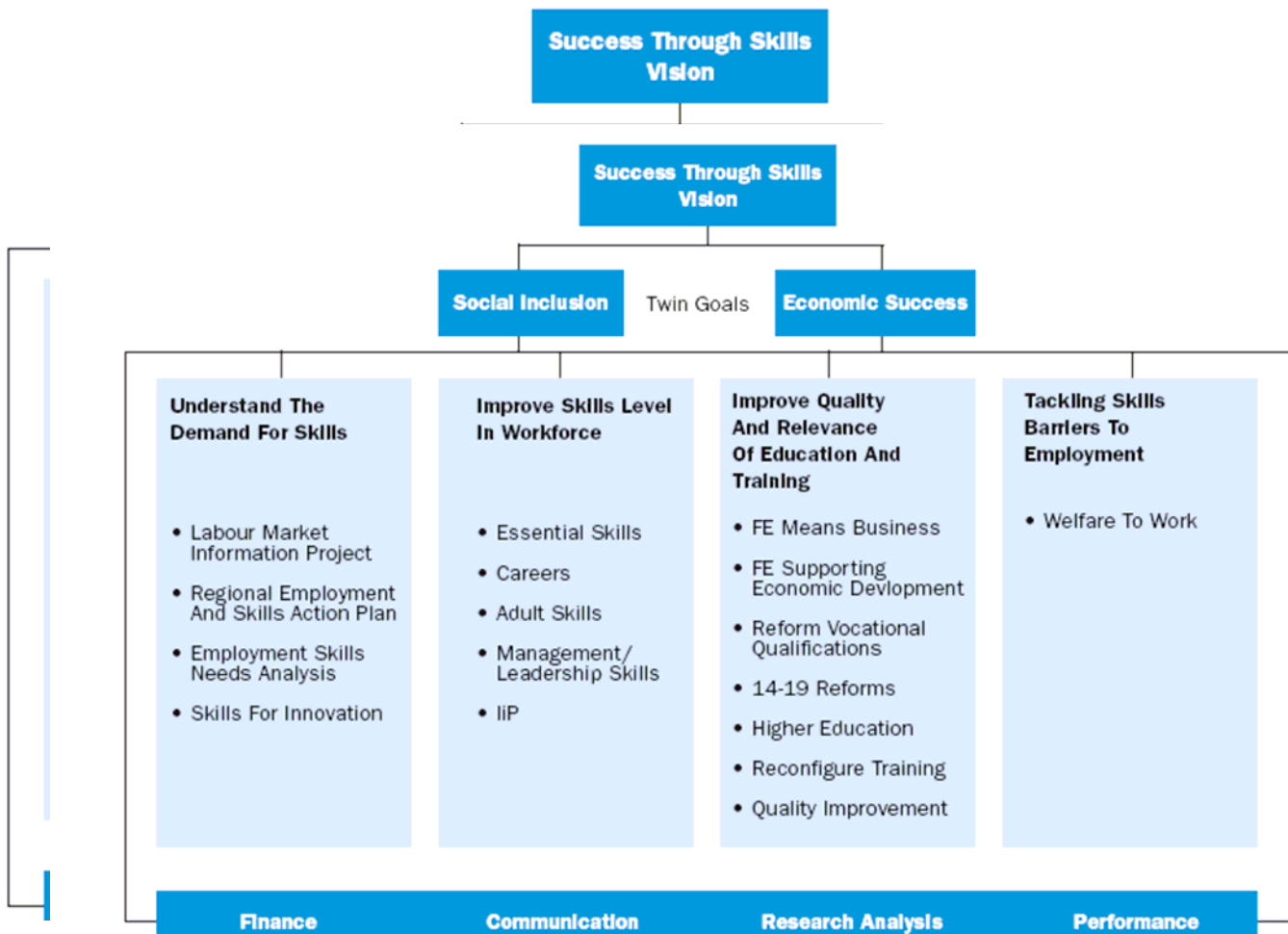


Table One: The Department for Employment and Learning’s adult learning programme as set out in the policy document *Skills for Success*.

There is no imperative other than that of servicing employers, though some loyalty still attaches to the idea of social inclusion, because as Table One shows, the vision is still couched in terms of the twin goals of social inclusion and economic success. The fact that all the programmes under the social inclusion heading are employment-related is simply an illustration of the Department’s belief that if you want to be socially included, the best route is to find yourself a job.

Not all the language of the lifelong learning revolution was retained. The chief casualty in the shift towards vocationalism was the phrase “lifelong learning” itself. For a time the Department had within it a unit which worked under that title, and the phrase had a mantra-like presence in all policy documents and press releases. After the publication of *FE Means Business* the language changed and lifelong learning no longer exists as a category within government.

The *Leitch Report (2006)* is currently under consideration by the Department, but is unlikely to alter its existing policy emphasis in any significant way. This is partly because the new devolved governmental structures mean that Northern Ireland does not have to

follow suit if it does not consider English policies to have relevance to the local situation but largely because DEL feels that its own initiatives anticipated the Leitch findings, and that there is little to be learned. The only public comment to date has been: “Initial views are that at a high level we are likely to agree with the logic and broad thrust of Leitch in relation to its 2020 aspirations” (DEL, 2007:14).

4. THE NEEDS OF LEARNERS

The government is not wrong to point to problems with the skills base in Northern Ireland. There clearly are problems, and we will turn to these shortly, but the causal connection between human capital resource and the flow of inward investment should not be presented in such simple terms. The skills pool could be upgraded significantly without Northern Ireland being able to compete effectively with a competitor on the same island which offers investors a much lower corporation tax. In the Republic the rate is 12.5%, while in Northern Ireland it is 28%, and the 15.5% difference is seen by economists as providing the most compelling reason why foreign companies choose to locate across the border. There are additional factors, such as transport networks and a positive national image, which also serve to advantage the South, and improved educational attainment can not, of itself, offset these imbalances.

The second criticism of government policy that comes from within the adult education community is that the economic success should not be the only policy goal: the idea of education serving social purpose, or older Enlightenment assumptions about the enquiring mind have now been pushed off the agenda in a most decisive way. In order to assess learner needs therefore it may be helpful to first list those that are addressed by current government policies, and then those that are not, which means in effect listing them under these headings:

4.1. Employment skills

The education and training needs of the Northern Ireland workforce are frequently described with reference to skills deficits, and these in turn are linked to poor economic performance in what is presented as a mutually reinforcing spiral of cause and consequence. The following figures lend weight to the argument:

- a) **Low productivity.** This has remained stubbornly the lowest of any region in the UK, barely exceeding 80% of the UK average wage (Office of National Statistics, 2005).
- b) **Low pay.** While those in the public sector enjoy nationally-determined salaries, workers in the private sector earn only 82% of the UK average (DEL, 2007).
- c) **Low skills.** Some 24% of the NI working age population have no qualifications; this is a full 10 percentage points worse than the UK average, and 7 points higher than the next worst region, Scotland (Regional Trends, 2005).

- d) **Low qualifications.** NI has the highest proportion of its working age population without any formal qualifications, nearly 25%, compared with 14% in the UK as a whole (DEL, 2007).
- e) **Low uptake of training.** Again NI presents a worse picture than any other region: the most recent figures show only 10.8% of male and 12.8% of female employees received job-related training in the past month – compared with 14.25 and 18.3% respectively in the UK (Office of National Statistics, 2005).

Government strategy is built upon the foundational belief that a renewal of skills will attract the inward investment that the economy needs. A virtuous spiral can be created where higher skills attract better-paid jobs, thus helping Northern Ireland become a knowledge economy. To balance this argument two factors need to be taken into account. Firstly, the new jobs that have come to Northern Ireland in the past ten years have been in the retail, hotel and hospitality sectors – which means, in effect, low skills and low pay. Secondly, to explain the Northern Ireland workforce with reference only to the lower end of occupational groupings and educational attainment is to ignore the fact that the region also boasts a highly educated workforce.

The difficulty that has attended this has been the conservatism of the graduate population. Since public service salaries have been higher on average than those in the private sector, and since the public sector is so large it has tended to absorb the best and the brightest. In the words of a recent Economist editorial the North is “addicted” to state subvention, and since this has become the most common criticism made by consultants to government the policy response has been to launch a series of initiatives such as the *Skills Through Innovation* and the *Management and Leadership Network*. In 2006 a document called *Leading...to Success* was launched to show how government would lend support to initiatives.

4.2. Beyond employment skills

There should not be any opposition to the skills agenda; in most of the lifelong learning policy documents produced by the OECD countries in the 1990s it was seen as the natural complement to education for a social purpose. The one-eyed view of the Department for Employment and Learning however has tended to see only the economic imperative as having any validity, and to act as though any other claim was a threat to the coherence of the plan. The economic and the social are not seen as two sides of the one coin but rather as though they were in a zero sum equation, where support for one must automatically invalidate the claims of the other. Accordingly, any form of education that does not contribute to economic success will no longer form part of the government’s educational estate.

The educational needs of the adult population are of course much broader than this, and are in fact no different than those of people elsewhere. Participation, which was the lowest in the UK ten years ago, has now improved, but with only 37% of the survey reporting current or recent participation (Aldridge and Tuckett, 2005) it still lags behind

both England and Wales, and is in fact only one percentage point above Scotland which at 36% has the lowest participation in the UK. The differentials however are not huge (the average across the UK regions is 42%) and the profile of participation is not therefore particularly distinctive. To move from what people choose to do, to what we think they *need* is of course something of a speculative leap, but for most purposes there is no reason to imagine the needs of the Northern Ireland people are in any sense unique. They could in fact be described in the formulation used in the Delors document *The Learning Within*, where the four pillars are listed as: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together. It is the last of these that takes on a special emphasis in Northern Ireland, where adult community education played a very important role during the Troubles and, if allowed, could continue to play a very important role in building the peace. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide any detail on that (see Nolan, 2003 for a fuller account), but suffice to say that community-based learning helped significantly to introduce new thinking in both republican and loyalist communities and also helped to create bridges between them. At the point where the new political climate would allow further explorations and further linkages funding is to be removed.

The Procrustean bed that has now been assembled will cut off more than that. Arts education, special provision for the elderly, women's education, local history: all of these, and many other forms of adult learning, now face the type of threat reported in the NIACE report, *The Case for Adult Learning*. If Northern Ireland has been distinctive in the general field of adult learning, it is simply due to a time lapse that means the dismantling of the funding arrangements has been delayed for a year or two. There is no doubt now that the serious cuts are now about to begin.

5. CUTS IN PROVISION

Taking this sector by sector:

- (a) **Higher Education.** Ten years ago the two universities, Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster had departments of continuing education. The University of Ulster department had as its head at different times during the 1990s Tom Lovett and John Field and was known for its willingness to engage with local communities. That department has now been liquidated and in its place is an e-learning unit which specialises in finding global niche markets for UU products. The Queen's unit is now part of the School of Education (following large-scale re-structuring) and continues to offer open learning programmes alongside part-time degrees, certificate and diploma courses.
- (b) **Further Education.** When Northern Ireland still had sixteen colleges they followed quite diverse pursuits but some, most notably the Belfast Institute for Further and Higher Education, were extremely active in community outreach programmes. Last year there were 70,423 students enrolled on provision below Level 2. The prescriptive nature of the FE Means Business document and the funding arrangements which follow on from it, will not allow for such generosity

- in the future. Community outreach will be governed by the same imperative as any other form of provision: it must contribute to employability and all learners must be on accredited programmes that are linked to key targets within the qualifications framework (bar an allowance of 5% of students who will be funded for non-accredited study in areas yet to be specified).
- (c) **Voluntary providers.** The WEA is to lose its core funding from August 2008. After that point it can bid for sub-contracting arrangements to the six colleges to deliver programmes in their local areas. The colleges may or may not choose to contract work in this way, but the internal complexities thrown up by the mergers have not allowed college management to even engage with the issue. The Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA) which has grown considerably in recent years, finds itself in the same situation. Its core funding is also set to be removed in August 2008, and it too will have to seek its funding by bidding for contracts. There is some hope that EGSA may be rescued, at least in part, by a new strategy for careers education, information, advice and guidance which is expected shortly; a review of adult careers guidance is also expected. The latter may provide some hope of support for province-wide activities, otherwise EGSA, like the WEA, will have to depend on contracts from individual colleges. There is of course no guarantee that the colleges will not prefer to make their own provision.
- (d) **Informal community learning.** The EU Peace Programme, together with other EU Structural Funds packages, provided a massive injection of cash for locally-based community activity. Approximately £500 million pounds went into the Peace 1 programme from 1995 to 2000; this was followed by a further £500 million for the Peace 2 programme which ran from 2000 to 2006; the final programme, Peace 3, will run from 2007 to 2012 with a spend of approximately £300 million. There has been no sectoral analysis of how this money has been sent to date, but a survey done by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action in 2003 estimated that 28% had gone to education and training (Scope, 2003:9). It would not be unusual therefore for a local history group to employ two or three workers, or a for a community association to employ a couple of women's education organisers or a literacy coordinator. The days of such largesse are ending, and when the tide of European money pulls out these structures will crumble.

6. FUTURE SCENARIOS

There are some hopeful signs. The long-range forecast shows that some clouds will lift if selective schooling is finally abolished, and with it the second-rate status of those who fail to secure grammar school places. At the more immediate micro level, a recent circular from the Department has left open the hope that FE colleges may, in the short term at least, be able to continue with what is classified as "recreational education". And, whatever the reservations one might have about the dominance of the skills agenda, it will raise many adults, particularly young adults, out of the trap of no skills and no qualifications.

The gloom really descends when one looks for signs that adult education, as a self-directing arena for personal development and fulfilment, has any hope of surviving. The fact that the agenda set out by the Department of Education and Learning is now in lockstep with the direction set nationally by the Leitch report gives hegemonic power to the new vocationalism. One possible *deus ex machina* is the return of local government. In theory at least it could point a new course; in practice this is very unlikely. The reasons for pessimism are:

- a) the Members of the NI Assembly differ from their colleagues in the other three parliaments in this way: none of them come from occupational backgrounds in further or higher education. While the Westminster parliament and the Welsh and Scottish Assemblies contain a small percentage of former lecturers – and one can therefore call upon a certain residual loyalty to adult learning – the backgrounds of NI’s MLAS are altogether different.
- b) The Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey, has, as far as the public record shows, lived a life untainted by any radical or original thought. Like many of his colleagues he is from a business background and his public sympathies are very much with the world of business and enterprise.
- c) Localism is a strong distinguishing characteristic of the new political culture, and on a number of occasions has even trumped sectarianism, as when, for example, the siting of new hospital facilities has become a matter for debate. This is likely to be a very important consideration in the future, because the demographic downturn is likely to lead to a swinging programme of school closures and one can predict, with equal certainty, some very determined save-our-schools campaigns. Adult education, and anything else that is not a statutory service, is likely to get elbowed aside in the scramble for educational resources.

On top of all this, it has to be said that, after two decades of marketisation and privatisation, the political culture of Northern Ireland has adjusted to the ruling orthodoxies. Here, as elsewhere, what were once seen as public goods and services have been moved into the sphere of private purchase and consumption, and those things that were part of the post-1945 welfare settlement are now part of a market economy. There may have been some delay in making this adjustment as public spending has remained higher than in other parts of the UK, but the market ideology has been absorbed and internalised within local political discourse – even within what is now dubbed “New Sinn Fein”. Policies on adult education are unlikely to be shaped by any other mould.

7. CONCLUSION – BREAKING OUT OF THE ECHO CHAMBER

A national commission on adult learning is to be welcomed. The narrow utilitarian definition is hardening into a rigid orthodoxy, and its various iterations at local and national level are echoes of each other. This means that Northern Ireland’s vibrant and diverse culture of adult and community education, which was such a sustaining force in

the dark days of the Troubles, is now to be replaced by a truncated form of provision. A radical initiative is required if the new discourse is to be opened up to challenge.

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