

## UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER'S RESPONSE

### 'BUILDING A UNITED COMMUNITY'

The University of Ulster welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Inquiry launched by the OFMDFM Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly into 'Building a United Community'. The University of Ulster is the largest Higher Educational Institution in Northern Ireland with a long history of direct and indirect engagement with the issues of promoting peace, resolving conflict, division and diversity.

The University of Ulster was established in 1984 by bringing together a number of previously existing institutions of higher education. On its four campuses, the University and its predecessors have successfully educated more than half a million students and employed thousands of academic and other staff drawn from all backgrounds across the community at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, through access courses and lifelong learning and using a variety of technologies including distance and digital learning. The University of Ulster has always been at the forefront of efforts within the higher education sector to ensure the widest possible access to and participation. We are very proud of our record in attracting students from across Northern Ireland and beyond, reflecting the full range of attitudes, experiences and background of the community as a whole.

In contrast to primary and secondary education, the vast majority of Higher Education in Northern Ireland has been delivered through integrated institutions with a diverse staff and student population. Indeed, universities in Northern Ireland have been one of the most sustained examples of shared space and shared services, with few parallels elsewhere. The commitment of the University of Ulster to a safe, plural and tolerant educational environment was maintained during periods of extreme tension in the community and despite incidents of violence affecting both staff and students. Moreover, in recent years we have pro-actively addressed issues of good relations, most recently through a thorough revision and modernisation of the Student Union's good relations policy.

The University's active commitment to pluralism and open access is evidenced in our long record of direct engagement with, and impact on, the issues arising from division, sectarianism and conflict through research, teaching and enterprise. This has been reflected in the teaching curricula of many faculties and schools including Politics, Social Policy, Criminology, Public Administration, History, English, Languages, Theatre, Media Studies, Peace and Conflict Studies, Art and Design, Law, Education, Planning, Social Work, Community Development, Community Youth Work, Business Studies and Sport. In addition, the University has been a centre of research excellence in issues relating to conflict and diversity, establishing highly regarded institutes such as INCORE, the Transitional Justice Institute, the UNESCO Centre and the Centre for Study of Conflict as well as important academic initiatives such as ARK, CAIN website and archive, Future Ways Project and initiatives in Restorative Practices. The University's particular commitment to professional education is reflected in the wide portfolios of educational opportunities offered to professionals charged with working in and addressing issues of political and social conflict including police officers, community workers, teachers, planners and government officials. University staff members have made important contributions to public life through

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their research and through direct participation in key areas of public policy such as human rights, community relations, policing and criminal justice, investigations into the past, public administration, education, housing, interfaces and community and youth work.

The University of Ulster may therefore be considered:

- A unique and unusually successful model of good practice in the provision of shared space and shared services across our four campuses in Northern Ireland,
- a leader in relation to the management of diversity and pluralism in a divided society,
- a centre of excellence in research and teaching in all areas relating to conflict, division and peace-building in Northern Ireland and beyond and
- a centre of academic and practical expertise with considerable impact on wider society.

Far from avoiding this issue, the University of Ulster has a strong record of constructive academic and practical engagement with Building a United Community. The University of Ulster therefore look forward to a long and consistent engagement with the Assembly and Executive in the development, delivery and evaluation of this policy and its goals of extending shared services and shared space.

### **Theory and Practice of sectarianism and peace building**

Among the many contributions of staff and students in the University of Ulster to this important area of work, have been significant contributions to the theory of peace-building and reconciliation adopted by every policy initiative since 1985. The Centre for the Study of Conflict produced much of the research which supported the early development of community relations policy in the 1980s and 90s, work continued today through INCORE. In 1997, academics in the University identified the contests over Equity, Diversity and Interdependence as the core elements defining efforts to promote reconciliation in Northern Ireland. This was subsequently adopted by the Harbison Report (2002) and A Shared Future (2005) to define the scope of community relations policy and had a measurable impact on youth work, local government and the values of the Community Relations Council. In 2002, other academics at the University of Ulster worked closely with all stakeholders to produce a framework to define and measure reconciliation which had five inter-related elements:

- Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society:
- Acknowledging and dealing with the past:
- Building positive relationships:
- Significant cultural and attitudinal change:
- Substantial social, economic and political change.

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This was adopted to assess all applications for financial support under the EU PEACE II programme and endorsed by the Executive in 2007 through the operational plan for PEACE III.

Both the consultation on Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (2010) and the current policy (Together: Building a United Community (TBUC)) drew heavily on the work of the Life and Times Survey which has been conducted and analysed by the Universities through the ARK programme.

In addition to providing an important platform for thorough consideration of ideas and policy, the University has a long history of supporting academic engagement with practical policy- and community-focussed interventions. In many areas, such as education, peace and conflict studies, politics, community youth work, social policy and criminology, the University has been a partner of community and government in developing methods and interventions for change, evaluating and sharing best practice, establishing key networks for the delivery of policy and comparing international best practice.

The University believes that these and other intellectual and academic contributions must continue to play an important role in defining the terms of a policy to address sectarianism and racism and producing frameworks for measuring progress. Together with the detailed studies on a wide variety of aspects of conflict and peace making in Northern Ireland they constitute a considerable body of knowledge which has not yet been fully translated into policy ideas. The University looks forward to ongoing co-operation in research, teaching and professional development in this area and looks forward to practical opportunities to contribute to the development of policy in coming years.

### **Best practice, both locally and internationally, in bringing divided communities together, and in developing shared space and shared services;**

The opportunity to heal and repair the divisions of a society which has been so deeply divided by violent conflict as Northern Ireland is, in many ways, highly unusual. Many societies which experience this kind of enmity do not recover, but instead dissolve into tyranny or recrimination which makes co-operation impossible.

For many years, the University of Ulster has been a repository of knowledge and teaching of both local and international best practice. Over three decades, the University has been the leading centre for teaching Peace and Conflict Studies in Northern Ireland, developing courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level and attracting students, holding an annual summer school for practitioners from Northern Ireland and beyond and attracting students, teachers and guests from across the world. The archives maintained by the University, the research conducted by the University and the teaching offered in the University have been at the cutting edge of developing answers to the most intractable questions. University

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staff have initiated important community interventions, including evidencing problems with investigations under the Historical Enquiries Team, supporting the Department of Justice in advancing plans to remove interface barriers and facilitating talks between Police officers and political leaders held in Cardiff in 2013. Studies in housing, local government, education, policing, planning and community, important investigations into justice, human rights and equality issues and consistent professional development support for people working in complex and challenging situations have made a consistent difference to communities. University staff are also asked to contribute to policy and practice development across the globe.

Through the Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series, the universities and the Assembly have begun to develop more systematic efforts to ensure that policy and practice are informed by the most recent research. These could be extended to ensure that the important focus of transformation from a divided society is given particular attention. Furthermore, University academics will continue to pioneer new practical approaches and theoretical approaches to sharing communities and societies.

In addition to a consistent academic and intellectual output, the University has important experience of developing shared space and shared services. The University was established during the most difficult years of violence in Northern Ireland and has always been dedicated to universal and open education. As a result, all of our campuses are acknowledged as shared space.

This shared physical realm has grown from a consistent corporate commitment to an open, tolerant and plural culture. Universities are founded on the pursuit of knowledge and learning based on rules of inquiry and evidence and a commitment to consider all relevant information. The University of Ulster is guided by principles of fair access, diverse participation and membership, and a commitment to pluralism and dialogue in recognition that a university depends on the organic inter-relationship of many parts.

Staff and students share an experience that the University is open to all, and that all aspects of the University are open without discrimination. This applies to the classrooms, where all classes proceed on the basis that every student is to be treated on a fair and equal basis, to the curriculum where all students are encouraged to consider, analyse and evaluate arguments and evidence from every theoretical and social angle and to the public spaces of the University which are welcoming, accessible, of good quality and safe. The University's commitment to widening access ensures that we are constantly focussed on extending participation. Graduates of the University of Ulster are to be found in every corner of the political, professional and community leadership of Northern Ireland. Every political party and every significant social group has had direct access to the University on a fair and equal basis.

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While the University of Ulster is strongly committed to promoting a harmonious working environment, we are also, and perhaps unusually, committed to fostering healthy, diverse and open debate about the most complex and difficult of topics.

The University is actively engaged with both Universities UK and Universities Ireland. Our students participate actively in both the National Union of Students and the Union of Students in Ireland. Perhaps most importantly of all, our commitment to pluralism extends far beyond the binary polarity of Northern Ireland to include students and staff from across the world. Indeed it may be no exaggeration to claim that universities in Northern Ireland represent the most important single mechanism to establish an outward and forward looking region.

The commitment of the University of Ulster to civic engagement, widening access and participation and shared space is now being extended through our most recent plans to open our new campus on one of the most important strategic interfaces in Belfast by 2018 and by our important plans to expand the number of student places at Magee. The scale of these investments and their location demonstrates the importance placed by the University on close relationship with the whole community in Northern Ireland and evidence of our determination to optimise our contribution to social, economic and cultural life. The University has already established active mechanisms for liaison with government and the local communities to ensure that the benefits of its innovative shared space has maximum benefits for those in the immediate surroundings.

The University of Ulster recognises that some of this experience is restricted to the specific context of higher education. However the clarity of purpose and values, the determination to manage and protect tolerance and the establishment of a normative culture that presumes sharing over segregation represents a body of experience which could be examined for wider lessons.

### **Addressing Sectarianism**

The University is committed to tackling sectarianism and racism in all of its activities. While the University has no corporate policy on tackling interfaces, the skills, knowledge and capacity of many of staff in this area can be of significant value to policy development, implementation and evaluation. The University of Ulster would be keen to co-operate with those responsible for the policy to develop a significant research agenda and to ensure maximum impact on policy, especially through the Institute of Research in Social Sciences (IRiSS).

### **Action to remove interfaces**

Three members of staff in the University recently won the support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to support the Department of Justice in developing a firm research base in their goal of removing interface barriers by 2023.

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This builds on previous work in the University and represents a clear vote of confidence in the intellectual, policy and practical expertise of academic staff. This and other proposals will enable to make evidence-based contributions to the development of policy in coming years.

### **Conclusion**

Finding ways to move practically from division and conflict towards sustainable good relations remains a continuing commitment for the Northern Ireland Assembly. This makes the development of a peaceful and shared society a programme in which the University of Ulster continues to play a leading role based on decades of proven commitment. We look forward to further co-operation in the practical aspects of this work in coming years. Representatives of the University would welcome the opportunity to meet with the enquiry team or to provide further detail.

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#### ToR of the Inquiry

##### The Inquiry will:

- Explore perspectives on sectarianism, division and good relations including:
  - an examination of theory and practice with regard to good relations, shared space and shared services;
  - consideration of best practice, both locally and internationally, in bringing divided communities together, and in developing shared space and shared services;
- Seek views on what good relations means and how sectarianism and division can be addressed, with a particular focus on the challenges at interface areas, both urban and rural. This might include:
  - seeking views on what issues need to be addressed in order for interface barriers to be removed;
  - examining the role of communities in policy and decision making in relation to community integration and particularly, the removal of interface barriers; and
  - consideration of the effectiveness of the Good Relations Indicators in monitoring and measuring the progress of government interventions.
- Make recommendations in order to support and enhance policy and decision-making with regard to building a united community, including on actions to tackle sectarianism, racism and other forms of intolerance, and to help deliver the Executive's commitment on removing interface barriers.