

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Employment and Learning

LAUNCH OF CONSULTATION ON NEW FURTHER EDUCATION STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Published at 11.00 am on Friday 10 July 2015

Dr Farry (Minister for Employment and Learning): I wish to inform the Assembly that I am today publishing a consultation on the development of a new further education strategy for Northern Ireland.

Background

Through the implementation of “Further Education Means Business”, the current strategy for further education in Northern Ireland, colleges have undergone a remarkable transformation in terms of the support they provide to employers, and the quality and economic relevance of the provision they deliver to individual learners.

The main achievements in recent years were the restructuring of the sector from 16 colleges to the current six large regional colleges; the provision of a curriculum that is more focused on the needs of the economy; colleges working closely with employers to understand their needs better and, more broadly, to support economic development; supporting social inclusion, for example through widening participation measures and the provision of programmes to increase levels of literacy and numeracy; and improved quality in all aspects of college provision.

As a result of this, the colleges are key players in the implementation of the Programme for Government, and in particular delivering on the Northern Ireland Economic Strategy, Skills Strategy, the STEM Strategy and the Innovation Strategy.

Future Direction of Further Education Colleges

However, in light of the unprecedented level of change that we now face, for example in terms of digital technologies, global mobility, increased economic competition and challenges to government funding, I decided to develop a new strategy for further education. This is not to say that the current strategy, with its strong economic focus, is not correct. Quite the reverse. But I want to ensure that our colleges build on their many achievements and their much good practice to become the genuinely world class sector that I know they can be.

In June 2014 I launched ‘Securing our Success: The Northern Ireland Strategy on Apprenticeships’, and last month I launched ‘Generating Success; The Northern Ireland Strategy for Youth Training’. These strategies will be instrumental in determining the nature and content of a significant proportion of the provision to be delivered by the further education colleges in the future.

The skills barometer, the strategic advisory forum and the sector partnerships that will be established as part of the implementation of the apprenticeship programme and the youth training system will be instrumental in identifying skills demand and in ensuring that professional and technical qualifications meet the needs of employers and the economy. Further education college staff will have a critical role to play in working with employers and other key stakeholders with regards to qualifications and programmes of learning. They will be representatives on the strategic advisory forum, and will have a particularly prominent role in working with employers and other stakeholders on the strategic partnerships to design and develop high quality and economically relevant qualifications and curriculum.

These qualifications will not only form the basis for apprenticeships by occupation, but will also be the basis for professional and technical qualifications that are delivered at level 3 through mainstream further education provision. Importantly, this will ensure that further education colleges and other training organisations deliver qualifications that are valued by employers and learners, and other users of qualifications, particularly in terms of their high economic relevance.

As the youth training system will prepare 16 to 24 year olds to progress into Level 3 apprenticeships or level 3 further education provision, the programmes of learning and qualifications offered through youth training will have to facilitate that progression. The youth training strategy envisages that the mechanisms described above to design and develop qualifications and curriculum for apprenticeships will also be used for provision at level 2, again with vital involvement of further education colleges. The strategy has also introduced the concept of a baccalaureate with a number of core components including a relevant professional and technical qualification, literacy and numeracy where required and the development of employability and enterprise skills through mandatory work placements. Significantly, the youth training strategy also proposes that the new youth training system will, effectively, replace further education provision at level 2 for young people, and Training for Success at level 2.

Colleges, together with universities, will be the primary deliverers of the new apprenticeships system, and, with partners, they will be key deliverers of the new youth training system at level 2. Therefore, as I have stated above, these new programmes will determine the nature and content of a significant proportion of the provision to be delivered by the further education colleges in the future, and so will be an important aspect of the proposed new further education strategy.

Vision for further education

My vision for the further education sector is that colleges will be recognised locally, regionally, nationally and internationally for high quality and economically relevant education and training provision. They will be focussed on achieving excellence in delivering the skills needed for current and future jobs. Finally, they will be ambitious for their learners, for their region, and for the contribution they make to improving the competitiveness of the Northern Ireland economy.

Further Education's Dual Role

I am very conscious of the challenging dual role that colleges play. They are pivotal to the development of strong and vibrant economies through the provision of professional and technical skills, increasingly at higher levels, and through the many ways they help employers to innovate and to develop new products and markets. However, they also have an important responsibility to help to fight poverty and support social inclusion by providing those with low or no qualifications, or who have barriers to learning, with the skills and qualifications they need to find employment – in particular the essential skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT.

To achieve this vision, and to fulfil the important, but challenging, dual role that colleges have to adopt, the future direction for further education here will be built around four key imperatives. These are:

- ensuring the highest quality provision of learner education and training;
- developing the talents of those already in work and those seeking to enter employment, in order to provide a pipeline of suitably qualified individuals at all levels to meet employers' needs, including indigenous companies and inward invest projects;
- supporting employers to more innovative and competitive, and to source new markets; and
- encouraging and supporting economic participation of those who are furthest from the labour market, to the benefit of individuals the economy and wider society.

Process

In taking forward the development of this consultation, a range of information has been considered and used to inform a number of policy commitments, including an underlying evidence base setting out the economic and social context that is specific to the further education sector, desk research of key literature and research papers, an analysis of the best practice that is present in our own further

education colleges, and in other parts of the world, a detailed statistical analysis of further education activity, and consultation with key stakeholders.

An accompanying supporting evidence document has been produced to provide more detailed information on areas such as the strategic context, related strategies and recent reforms and developments which impact on the work of colleges. This document also presents a summary of the findings from research on international policies and practices, case studies of best practice in the Northern Ireland further education colleges, and statistical information on college enrolments and performance, in terms of learner retention, achievement and success.

Themes

The consultation is built around the following themes:

- Economic Development
- Social Inclusion
- Curriculum Delivery
- Excellence
- International Dimension
- Governance
- College Partnerships
- Funding Model and College Sustainability
- Promoting the Further Education Sector

Economic Development

Colleges will continue to have a key role to play in identifying the skills and qualification needs of individual employers, with a particular focus on those sectors which are important to rebalancing and rebuilding the economy of Northern Ireland. Colleges also provide direct support to employers, for example, up-skilling their employees and supporting them to become more competitive, to innovate and to source new markets. Working alongside Invest Northern Ireland, colleges also have a crucial role to play in ensuring a pipeline of highly skilled individuals to support inward investment.

Social Inclusion

Colleges will continue to support social inclusion and social cohesion. Colleges' primary and distinctive role in social inclusion is to provide individuals with the skills and qualifications they need to gain employment and to become economically active, with all the benefits that brings to individuals, the economy and society. In addition, education is one of the clearest indicators of other life outcomes.

Curriculum delivery

The curriculum for professional and technical subjects provided to learners is crucial. Delivery will be flexible and imaginative, and will make full use of technology to engage learners and enhance the teaching and learning experience. The use of technology in transforming professional and technical education, and the manner in which it is accessed, will create value for employers and individuals.

Excellence

Excellence will be at the heart of everything that colleges do, particularly in terms of improving the quality of provision that is delivered and monitoring and evaluating the outcomes that have been achieved. College lecturers in Northern Ireland are already well qualified, and this will be enhanced to ensure that they have strong pedagogical skills and have up to date industrial knowledge in their areas of expertise. The Department and colleges will also take steps to ensure that we elicit meaningful feedback from learners and employers on the quality and relevance of the services provided to them, and that this is used to inform the on-going quality improvement processes in colleges.

Internationally Connected

Colleges have become increasingly focused on the need to operate in an international arena. Colleges will continue to build upon the excellent partnerships that have already been created with employers and educational institutions across the world to maximise student and staff exchange opportunities.

Governance

Colleges and the Department will work together to maximise the benefits to colleges and their customers of the Non Departmental Public Body (NDPB) status, while also addressing any challenges posed.

College Partnerships

Working in partnership with others was an important theme in Further Education Means Business, and is just as important now. Colleges will make use of shared services to enable them to operate with maximum efficiency, and will share the excellent practice that is present throughout the sector to enable them to deliver services to learners and employers to the highest standards of quality. Colleges will also work in partnership with other educational institutions, with government departments, with the new district councils and with the voluntary and community sectors to deliver effectively to the employers, individuals and communities that they serve.

Funding Model and College Sustainability

The Funded Learning Unit will be reviewed to underpin future priorities for the sector.

Promoting the further education sector

Colleges will work together with the Department to identify ways in which to promote the further education sector.

Consultation

This consultation sets out, and seeks views on, 18 policy commitments across the themes I have outlined above, to build upon current strengths in a way that will establish a world class system of further education in Northern Ireland.

From today, these policy commitments will be the subject of public consultation over the next 12 weeks.