

CASE STUDY – REVIEW OF THE FURTHER EDUCATION STRATEGY

Background

The Review covered the broad strategy for and directions of further education (FE), a sector with 16 colleges, over 100,000 enrolments annually, a budget of some £170m and provision ranging from basic education to post-graduate professional certifications. It was conducted in response to the Assembly Committee for Employment and Learning's study of 'Education and Training for Industry' published in September 2001. It took account of work on provision for 14-19 year olds undertaken as part of the Post-Primary Review; the experience of five years of further education incorporation; the results of the Foundation Degree pilots; and the results of a number of specific exercises relating to the sector. In addition, the Review has been informed by the medium-term strategic priorities of the Economic Development Forum, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's (DETI) Regional Innovation Strategy, the Department for Employment and Learning's (DEL) own Skills and Essential Skills Strategies, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's (DCAL) Strategy 'Unlocking Creativity' and the Department for Education and Skills' (DfES) White Papers on Higher Education and Skills.

Approach

The Review was undertaken by DEL officials, organised through a Project Board, chaired at G3 level. It was assisted by a sub-committee of DEL's Learning and Skills Advisory Board, chaired by Bill McGinnis (Chair of the Board) and including Board and external members from business/industry, the trade unions, the FE sector in Northern Ireland and England, and a former Principal of an Institute of Technology in the Republic of Ireland. It ran from November 2002 until October 2003. A draft paper is presently in circulation.

The project Board established an approach which:

- questioned critically the existence and work of the sector and perceptions of it and considered what the outcomes from the sector could or should be;
- drew on the experience and views of the officials working across the FE Division;
- engaged with an external "critical friend";
- worked closely to a Project Plan;
- was outward looking (it drew on experience in the rest of the UK, Republic of Ireland, USA, and mainland Europe, especially Germany);
- used and extended a strong evidence base including newly commissioned research on the sector, a broad range of quantitative

and qualitative material and direct experience and information from equivalent sectors elsewhere;

- was inclusive and drew upon the results of the initial public consultation, followed up by discussion with a range of stakeholders, involved either in or with the sector (students, employer bodies and individual employers, Association of Northern Ireland Colleges (ANIC) etc);
- focused on the economic relevance of the sector (the Board and sub-committee included strong business representation); and
- engaged other key Departments and parties in discussion including DE (14-19 provision); Invest NI (role in economic development); Universities (Foundation Degrees) and the sector itself.

There were several phases to the work, some of which overlapped:

- (i) The “questioning” phase – to establish the relevant issues, questions, influences, parameters and to consider potential outcomes.
- (ii) The public consultation – identify perceptions about the role and performance of and expectations about the sector.
- (iii) The “evidence gathering” phase – to examine and extend the evidence base including existing and new research; data collection and verification; visits; the results from consultation; and written material from a broad range of sources.
- (iv) The “challenge” phase – the existing internal knowledge and understanding and the emerging analysis was challenged by the sub-committee, the Project Board, the Departmental Board and the critical friend.
- (v) The analysis of a mass of information from a broad range of exercises had to be analysed and synthesised into a more manageable form. This involved divisional officials in discussion and the preparation of various papers out of which six key themes emerged.
- (vi) The drafting phase – several different writers were involved in the drafts of the critical paper, guided by a structure agreed by the Project Board. The aim was to complete a single draft document which could then be circulated and amended; at the same time discussions continued around specific issues or recommendations.
- (vii) The refining draft phase – returns from colleagues internally and from the critical friend were the bases of a significant revision of

the draft. Issues and recommendations were discussed further by the Departmental Board.

- (viii) Completion – an internal draft was circulated to other Departments for comment, before discussion with the Minister. In addition a separate evidence paper was produced.

Outcomes

To date, six broad themes have been identified, agreed and recommendations established:

- (i) The role of the further education sector.
- (ii) Enhancing the economic contribution of the sector.
- (iii) Strengthening the model of incorporation.
- (iv) Developing partnership with other key providers.
- (v) Enhancing performance.
- (vi) Considering the structures.

Lessons Learned

Good Practice

- Importance of planning.
- The forward look.
- The challenge function.
- The need for robust data.
- Discussion thinking and drawing 'ideas from elsewhere'.
- Good relationships with stakeholders.
- Support from the top (Permanent Secretary; Chair of Learning and Skills Branch).

Learning from Mistakes

- Ensuring the appropriate skills mix and giving more attention to the skills of the staff involved.
- Communicating more clearly our expectations of the external players involved directly in the process.
- Establishing, at an earlier stage, the potential costs of various options.
- Gathered too much information – stream on analysis.
- More rigorous monitoring and control of external research exercises.