



northern ireland's
colleges

**response to the consultation on the
Independent Review of Economic Policy**

November 2009

Northern Ireland's Colleges' response to the consultation on the Independent Review of Economic Policy

The Association of Northern Ireland Colleges (ANIC) represents all six of the regional Colleges in Northern Ireland.

- Belfast Metropolitan College
- Northern Regional College
- North West Regional College
- Southern Regional College
- South Eastern Regional College
- South West College

This submission represents their collective views in response to the consultation on the Independent Review of Economic Policy (IREP) conducted by Professor Barnett and his team.

Northern Ireland's Colleges currently attract one in three 16-17 year old school leavers and attract some 200,000 learners a year. They are Northern Ireland's main skills provider.

Northern Ireland's Colleges clearly have a fundamental role to play in building the skills and capacity of the workforce and the economy to respond to the current economic challenges. The two key points in responding to the report are:

- The Colleges are well placed as the solution to many of the recommendations in the review.
- The Colleges can already demonstrate good practice solutions in many of the recommendation areas.

Based on the recommendations of IREP, there are a number of additional observations in relation Northern Ireland's Colleges and the future of Northern Ireland's economy.

1. Highly-effective, well-managed Colleges with strong reputations and excellent local networks are essential.
2. The Colleges should sponsored by one Department (this is currently the Department for Employment and Learning).
3. Colleges should be able to draw down funds from a number of other Departments and government programmes in order to contribute fully to the needs of Northern Ireland, particularly those identified by IREP; for example by acting as a channel for SME engagement for INI/DETI, third-age provision for DHSSPS, Neighbourhood Renewal for DSD, Welfare to Work Programmes for DSD/SSA.

4. As the agent of half of the Departments of the Executive and with private sector customers, the Colleges would be fully exploiting the potential of their incorporated status to act as economic drivers.

Recommendation 3 - working throughout the entire business base to raise awareness and provide support for businesses undertaking Innovation, R&D and exports

Northern Ireland's Colleges are ideally placed to deliver increased flexibility and provide targeted support to businesses throughout Northern Ireland because of the existing College network and established links to the wider community.

The College network covers the six regional Colleges, 47 campus locations and some 400 outreach locations and employs 7,400 people, many of whom have the experience and expertise to provide support to businesses and specifically SMEs.

Northern Ireland's 132,000 SMEs are at the very centre of the economy accounting for 98% of the business environment and employing over 500,000 people.

The Colleges are the only practical way to provide a delivery solution that is capable of penetrating the SME base.

There is the capacity within the sector to develop this work as demonstrated recently through the Rapid Response programme where Colleges work collaboratively as a single point of contact across Northern Ireland.

The existing Centres of Excellence and success of the connectED programme also highlight the capacity to provide support for businesses undertaking innovation, R&D and exports, and partnership working with the HE sector and businesses.

The Colleges already have a significant level of business contact, for example the South Eastern Regional College has over 1,000 established contacts.

The Colleges could deliver training and support for innovation and allow Invest NI to work on other priorities.

Skills and upskilling are highlighted in the IREP as key issues. However, it is widely accepted that there needs to be greater coordination.

While there are a number of organisations offering solutions, including Colleges, Invest NI, enterprise agencies, councils and the private sector, what is missing is a 'front door' for the dialogue and coordination of action on skills, business improvement, etc.

Northern Ireland's Colleges, with an established local and regional network, could provide the forum for co-ordinating delivery. While the colleges might not supply all services, they could act as the signpost to other providers.

Simplified engagement with the business community is also required in order to identify their needs more clearly and tailor skills training to meet that need, at both a regional and local level.

Closer regional and local contact with the business community and with the Workforce Development Forums and Sector Skills Councils through the Colleges could provide a ready forum for respond to identified need quickly.

Recommendation 8 - *Invest NI should further reduce its support for company training*

While recognising that shifting resources towards the SME sector is a priority, data from DEL and UKCES suggests that at least 75% of the current workforce will still be in employment in 2020.

This presents key issues in relation to upskilling the existing workforce. The commitment of greater resources focused on up-skilling the existing workforce, including the development of leadership and management skills would appear to be required to deliver the broader direction outlined in the IREP.

The provision of company training is a key element of assistance offered in various international examples of best practice, for example in North Carolina. In order to achieve greater aditionality clearly there is a need for greater long-term engagement between providers to develop demand and cost recovery mechanisms.

Recommendation 10 - *new Innovation policies, including a new institution for commercially-oriented research, outside the University system; industry-led Innovation communities; support Innovation in service sector firms beyond software*

Northern Ireland's Colleges could be the quickly-available and low set-up cost new institution.

There is the capacity and expertise to develop this approach immediately on a "virtual" basis by building on existing best practice, for example on the cutting-edge work being carried on Polymers in the Bangor Campus of SERC.

It is essential that any new development avoids unnecessary bureaucracy and include FE as representatives of academia, with the Colleges focusing on applied development. Northern Ireland's Colleges are not required meet the demands to publish research and could focus more on activity of value to economic competitiveness.

It is important to consider the 'development' side of R&D and in particular the role that the Colleges can play in supporting development. Northern Ireland's colleges have a critical role as it is about the development outcomes of the research, particularly in relation to training and development.

The wider definition of innovation including processes, marketing and organisational development is one that the colleges would support particularly given the prominence of small firms in NI.

Recommendation 25 - *establish how the social economy might be further helped*

The College sector is well placed to develop and deliver support, in partnership with local communities, DETI, DEL, etc. the training and skills required to support the growth of the social economy.

The Colleges have established community and business relationships across Northern Ireland, for example Southern Regional College (SRC) is actively involved in the five Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Boards that the Department for Social Development (DSD) has established in the council areas of Armagh, Craigavon and Newry. The five Neighbourhood Renewal Areas (NRAs) have a combined population in the region of 33000, i.e. approximately 16% of the total population of SRC's catchment.

As a result of the SRC's engagement with local resident groups, local Councils, the Southern Education & Library Board, the Southern Health & Social Care Trust and DSD over £500,000 has been secured to deliver a range of projects over a three year period.

Research into education, training needs and barriers to participation was carried out in each of the five areas, in partnership with local residents' groups, where nominated individuals received training and achieved an OCN Level 2 qualification in research.

SRC is involved in the delivery of a number of free courses that range from introductory non-accredited to accredited computer courses. This increased engagement, funded by DSD, also contributed to an increase of 20% in enrolments in these local NRAs between 2007/08 and 2008/09 and SRC's engagement of 14.6% in its NRAs has surpassed that of its engagement in the region as a whole (13.4%).

Northern Ireland's Colleges are now seen as integral players not only in the provision of education and training that helps individuals develop their learning and skills but also in community development, as agents for social cohesion and in economic development. For example, SRC is viewed by all four of its local councils as a key partner.

Recommendation 27 - *DETI, DEL and Invest NI should work together to more effectively*

Clearly issues have been identified with 'liaison' and consideration should be given to the establishment of a single organisation to ensure the policy framework and action plans are effectively implemented and assessed.

A Strategic Forum across both DETI and DEL but also including other key government departments such as DARD, DRD and DSD and government agencies and Stakeholders e.g. businesses, universities, etc. facilitated by the College sector could be a model that builds on international best practice.

There is evidence of a lack of joined up government leading to possible duplication and the risk of confusion and inconsistency in economic planning. The FE sector – and a stakeholders’ forum – could be a key mechanism to bring many of key drivers together to ensure the delivery of the required mix of skills required to underpin economic growth and increasing productivity.

Recommendation 28 - a single ‘Department of the Economy’

ANIC has no particular view about bringing together a range of function from DETI and DEL into a single a single ‘Department of the Economy’ with the important caveat that the College sector has a key role in not just Economic Development (which is within the remit of this submission) but also for Lifelong Learning and Social Cohesion.

Many of the central issues highlighted in this report require a decisive response across government, some of which are beyond the remit of the IREP.

Key economic problems such as economic inactivity, uncompetitiveness and low productivity represent genuine socio-economic challenges to government in Northern Ireland because of their intractable and multi-causal nature.

The operation of government often makes genuine progress of cross-departmental action slow or ineffective. Yet, the delivery of local (and information intensive) joined-up multi-agency responses are at the heart of many of the recommendations in IREP.

Beyond the argument of consolidating a range of functions within a single ‘Department of the Economy’ there is a need to deliver joined up local solutions that deal with the skills and training needs of our economy and the broader socio-economic issues.

The solution is also in allowing the freedom to foster innovation and growth.

The answer is incorporated local delivery organisations, for example in the Colleges. If we can make progress in achieving an effective balance within the Governance model, the Colleges could be the key to cross-Departmental local delivery.

Recommendation 47 - anticipated increased demand for higher level skills in STEM

Meeting the anticipated increased demand in STEM subject is an essential in addressing the productivity challenges facing the economy in Northern Ireland.

ANIC supports early action to meet an increased demand for higher level skills in STEM and other innovation relevant subjects. Northern Ireland’s colleges have a key role in working with schools and the HE sector to achieve uptake of STEM subjects and the throughput to higher education.

Increasing demand for STEM subjects requires a more flexible framework and a more effective cross-departmental approach from DETI, DEL and DE.

The flexibility and responsiveness of the College sector was most recently demonstrated through the Software Professional programme. Working in partnership with Momentum and the Department the programme was co-ordinated centrally, through a College-led management group, and led to the delivery of accredited Level 5 graduate conversion programme to re-skill individuals for the software sector in Northern Ireland.

Although, suspended until later this year the programme demonstrated the responsiveness of the Colleges sector and its ability to design and development a tailored programme that met the needs of the software sector locally.

For example, SRC has been active in promoting applied science training with a number of local science based companies including Norbrook Laboratories. The College delivered a number of NVQ qualifications for employees in Norbrook in areas including manufacturing operations and laboratory techniques. This also led to the development of a Foundation Degree in Medical and Applied Sciences in conjunction with the University of Ulster. This programme is currently being delivered to employees of Norbrook to ensure that a clear progression pathways exists for employees from NVQ L2 to Foundation Degree and Honours Degree provision. The programme will also be offered to other local employers.

Recommendation 48 - emphasise *higher level qualifications at levels 4 and 5*

The College sector clearly has a critical role in the delivery of technical and professional qualifications, including apprenticeships and vocational training.

There are four key areas of skills that need to be effectively addressed:

- Essential Skills
- Employability skills
- Technical Skills
- Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Northern Ireland's Colleges have a central role in delivering across all of these areas that are essential in ensuring throughput to qualifications at level 4 and 5.

ANIC strongly support the need to emphasise qualifications at level 4 and 5 and expanded provision at this level. Greater partnership with the HE sector and business is the key to increasing participation rates at this level, and particularly the movement of learners and teaching staff across the sectors.

The colleges have a good track record on conversion courses for industry e.g. the 40 week software professional course. Working with the Sector Skills Councils and the Workforce Development Forums, the College sector, in partnership with our Universities, should be the driver for the expansion of routes for gaining higher qualifications. This includes the expansion of qualifications at level 4 and 5.

While there has been a significant increase in enrolments at entry and level 1 across the College sector there has been a slight decrease in numbers coming through at levels 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Key to addressing this is aligning specific skills with market demand, vocational education in schools and affordable apprenticeships. Working closely with business to develop relevant training is also essential. There also needs to be greater strategic collaboration and planning between suppliers and employers for progression from level 2 to 3 and beyond.

A specific issue that must be addressed in relation to apprenticeships is the need for clarification of the standards in relation to tendering process for the next Training for Success programme. It is also essential that current efforts to promote apprenticeships and vocational training are maintained.

There are key issue that need to be addressed beyond the scope of this report but include the MaSN cap and, freedom to allow the Colleges to collaborate with HE institutions outside of Northern Ireland.