

**MINISTER FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING, DR SEAN FARREN'S
ADDRESS TO THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY REGARDING THE DEL
COMMITTEE'S REPORT ON EDUCATION AND LEARNING FOR INDUSTRY –
MONDAY 15 OCTOBER 2001**

I would wish to thank Dr Birnie and his Committee for their thoughtful consideration of this vitally important aspect of my Department's responsibilities. You will appreciate that I have not had sufficient time to reflect on the detail of the report but I appreciate and welcome the Committee's intentions to improve the quality of education and training provision for our young people and to enhance the skills of our current workforce and those not presently in employment. This report is a very valuable contribution to an essential debate.

Can I say that I agree fully with the Committee's view on the importance of this subject area. Indeed the Executive has emphasised the importance of this work by including the issues of education and skills and competitiveness in the Programme for Government.

My Department's aim is to promote a culture of lifelong learning and to equip people for work in a modern economy. This springs from the belief that education and training, post-compulsory school leaving age, can and do make a powerful contribution to our economic position and towards social inclusion. The universities and colleges create the vast majority of our higher level and technical skills; the universities, as indicated in the recent NIEC Report, provide a more substantial proportion of our R&D than elsewhere in the UK and Ireland; the colleges and training organisations offer our young people and adults both a first and subsequent opportunities to gain a wide range of vocational, technical or occupational qualifications which allow them to progress to further or higher education or into work. FE, HE and vocational training feed directly into the economy and since they are helping our population to acquire job related skills, self-confidence and self-esteem; they are also promoting greater social cohesion.

Since I came to office I have promoted policies in the best interests of those who attend the colleges, the training providers and the universities and of the employers

and public and social institutions which are the recipients of their skills and attributes. I am grateful for the support contained in the report for these policies. I accept fully the spirit of the report as a determined effort to develop and strengthen education and training and to enhance their contribution to the regional economy.

I would wish to remind members of some of the developments for which I have been responsible:

- a Skills Task Force has been established and a series of research projects designed to improve our understanding of the demand side of the labour market have been initiated. The task force has just recently published its first comprehensive report which I commend to members. That report covers much of the ground in the Committee's report and set alongside a major monitoring survey of skill needs complements and supports many of the Committee's conclusions;
- the Support Programme for University Research will provide over £40m investment from a public-private partnership over the next four years to invest in the research and development infrastructure in both our regional universities. I was privileged last week to launch one of the projects selected by the International Panel as worthy of support – the Sonics Arts Centre at Queen's. This will bring together in an intensely creative way the knowledge and scholarship in the creative arts and technology and provide opportunities for economic and social activity as well as for teaching and research. The Centre for Molecular Biosciences at University of Ulster will build on the tremendous research strength in this area at the university and provide support for the University's technology transfer activities;
- finally, my recent changes to student support, my access measures in FE and HE, my introduction of ILAs and LearnDirect and my support for NICATS are illustrative of my determination to embed lifelong learning within our society and to open up opportunities for education and training to a much wider cross-section of our community.

The participation in learning as a result of these initiatives has grown considerably and members will be aware from recent assembly questions that

we have an overwhelming response to ILAs in particular. I will be examining, as suggested by the report the opportunities for better focusing the application of ILAs for the future.

As I said earlier I welcome the Committee's endorsement of my existing policy direction in these vital areas.

Let me move on, Chair, to the essence of the report. I will not at this stage attempt to respond directly to each of the 43 recommendations. Members will appreciate that there has not been sufficient time to give them the full consideration they deserve. I promise, however, that I will return to them in detail in the near future.

I would welcome an opportunity to respond in writing and to follow up with a discussion with the Committee. The Report deserves no less than this.

I would prefer, at this stage, to reflect on some of the main themes suggested by the recommendations and to relate my response to the published Strategic Plan of my Department. I would identify for today the following five themes:

- the need for action in relation to poor levels of adult basic skills;
- a sharper focus, in particular, on ICT skills and on retraining and re-skilling the existing workforce or those currently unemployed;
- the strategic direction of further education and the issues which flow from that;
- the contribution which the universities can make to the economy and, in particular, developing the enterprise culture;
- the need to develop training provision and related occupational and vocational qualifications.

In relation to basic skills, the Committee is aware that I have identified this within the Strategic Plan as one of the key issues facing my Department over the coming years. I can understand the Committee's concerns. It is a significant challenge which must be overcome if the skills levels available within the economy generally are to be raised and if all our population is to aspire to social and personal advancement and esteem. My officials are working, currently on a comprehensive Adult Basic Skills strategy and I will bring this forward for consultation within the next two months. I recognise some impatience with our speed on this. However, I would ask members to recognise that this is complex territory. Existing approaches, while of benefit, have not brought sufficient success. Asking people to come forward and admit a problem is not easy. The image of basic skills work must be transformed and a comprehensive and wide range of programmes and providers must be involved including training in the workplace. Standards, Curricula, Assessment arrangements and the professional development of tutors must be worked through. Realistic targets must be identified.

In due course I will welcome the opportunity to share our strategy with the Committee and to seek their support.

In relation to skills I have already mentioned the work of the Skills Task Force which supports our commitment in Programme for Government. If we are to achieve and sustain our goal of an expanding economy based on the knowledge based industries I fully acknowledge that we must update the relevance and quality of vocational education and training. That is something all of our higher and further education and training providers are aware of and working toward. The current difficulties in the global economy are as we know having an impact on Northern Ireland. I hope that is a short lived difficulty but it does underscore the recommendation that we address retraining and re-skilling. I will of course tackle that issue vigorously against the current background but at the same time seek to achieve longer term labour market and skills objectives.

Of course when we look at the issues of future skills and the need for re-skilling and retraining we must also consider the need for high quality careers information and guidance to support our young people as they make informed decisions about their futures. I welcome and share the Committee's desire for best practice in careers education and guidance and with this in mind have requested, in conjunction with the Department of Education, that Professor Sean Fulton carries out some additional research before concluding the final report on the findings of his review group. My Department's Careers Service stands ready to meet the challenges set down in the recommendations made by Professor Fulton and the review group.

In connection with these developments I am pleased with the progress to date made by Northern Ireland Business Education Partnership (NIBEP) in relation to its strategic positioning as the key enabling body for business education activities. I am also pleased with NIBEP's commitment to increasing the range and number of teacher placement opportunities and the quality and quantity of work experience placements for students.

The Committee has made a broad range of recommendations in relation to the FE sector. I will need to reflect on these over the coming weeks. However, more than once, matters are related to the perceived need for an overall strategic plan for the sector. Let me state first my strong support for the sector and remind members of the wide range of roles which FE plays throughout Northern Ireland. It is a

significant provider of education and training for 16-19 year olds, either to help them gain the qualifications and skills for immediate entry to the labour market or to move on to higher education. Over and above this it is a provider, itself, of higher education, both full-time and part-time, and is, for example, currently developing and piloting Foundation Degrees in conjunction with HE and employers. In addition, FE provides customised training for employers and a very valuable service for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. Adults can access through FE an extremely broad range of opportunities to enhance their skills and qualifications from basic entry level to professional qualifications, mainly on a part-time basis. FE provides, also, social and recreational courses, for a huge number of people and is, for many, an important part of the social fabric. In other places, there are different providers for these different roles. In NI they come together in FE. I regard this diversity and this range as strengths not weaknesses. When I debate a narrower focus for FE I always ask what should be left out? I can imagine for response from members if I removed the recreational courses from their local college or refused young people the right to do A-levels at the college or whatever. FE provides a local service to the students, employers and employees within the local area. It is not a matter for my Department to determine what is necessary in Omagh or Coleraine or Newry. That is a matter for the college and its governing body.

My strategy is set out in my Department's Strategic Plan. I want all colleges to:

- increase participation, especially of adults;
- widen access especially to those previously under-represented;
- enhance the quality of their provision;
- provide courses and programmes and activities which are of greater economic relevance, especially in the six priority skill areas.

That strategy is well understood. However, if the Committee wish it to be more explicit I will work towards this in the light of current developments especially the outcomes of the Burns

Review and the strategies which emerge from the new economy agency Invest NI.

The Committee is asking me to enhance the economic/ enterprise role of HE. I will be pursuing, in the context of competing priorities, the question of additional

resources for R&D and also for HEROBC (Outreach Fund) which is assisting the universities to develop their regional economic role. I will work with DETI and its new agency to promote technology transfer, the development of incubation facilities and business links. I am already investing heavily in additional resources to retain high quality staff. I agree with the Committee that the universities are a most important engine of economic growth and that investment, in particular, in high level skills and in R&D and Innovation is resource well targeted.

The Committee makes a number of recommendations in training and on qualification. In general, there are a number of studies and reviews at UK level which my Department is involved with and which, subject to Northern Ireland's particular needs, may impact on the Committee's report. The review of National Training Organisations is drawing to a conclusion and following a statement by UK ministers this week I will assess the implications locally. A review of occupational standard setting arrangements is also close to conclusion. Sir John Cassells is to report shortly on a review of Modern Apprenticeships and again I will follow that work with interest. My Department is also currently undertaking a review of the provision for 16-19 year olds with a view to ensuring that the curriculum provided for young people will help them meet the needs of employers and the demands of the 21st century. ICT will be central to the curriculum for all. I am chairing myself the Task Force on Employability which will range widely across many of the issues raised in the report. These are all matters on which I will report to the Assembly in the near future and which are covered in the recommendations.

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