

REVIEW OF EDUCATION NORTHERN IRELAND: CBI Northern Ireland

16 February 2022

Dr Keir Bloomer
Chairperson, Independent Review of Education NI

Dear Dr Bloomer

Thank you for your invitation to discuss the Review of Education in Northern Ireland on January 18th 2022. The CBI Chair of People and Skills Working Group and I found the discussion very worthwhile, and we welcome the opportunity to collaborate with you and your team. This review comes at a very important time for education and skills reform.

The CBI represents 190,000 businesses across the UK, representing approximately 7 million employees – about one third of the private sector workforce. As discussed on January 18th, the CBI in Northern Ireland has a strong interest in education policy. Below I have summarised the CBI perspective on the 3 main areas that you proposed to discuss:

- 1) **The purpose of education and a vision for the future.**
- 2) **The strengths and challenge of the current system and priorities for the Review.**
- 3) **Defining “a single education system”.**

The business community in Northern Ireland recognises that education plays a key role in the betterment of the individual, society, and the wider economy. The education system is responsible for preparing young people for work so that they can live independent and fulfilling lives. Education should support young people to develop interpersonal skills, critical thinking and promote creativity – all of which will lead to better employment opportunities. It is widely agreed that education also plays a key role in improving societal goals. For example, educational attainment is positively correlated with an individual’s health outcomes and social mobility.

The CBI is eager for Northern Ireland’s future education sector to:

- a) **Promote inclusivity** and deliver a positive experience for all pupils.
- b) **Prepare young people to reach their full potential** so that they can lead fulfilling lives and make a positive contribution to both society and the economy.
- c) **Promote the right mindset** in young people, for example, promoting higher ambition, support pupils to develop a ‘can-do’ attitude, develop innovative thinking and problem-solving skills as well as the ability to work as part of a team.

- d) **Build a strong relationship with the business sector – to support pupil interactions, offer work experience, provide advice on skills and careers as well as course content.** Evidence shows that engaging with employers has transformative effects on the employment outcomes of young people. This engagement takes many forms and can bring the world of work to life and help teachers to develop new skills and better understanding of the world of work. Business leaders are eager to collaborate with the Department of Education on such advice. For example, the world of work in 2030 is going to look significantly different to today, with tasks, jobs and entire industries being transformed by accelerating technological change. Businesses are looking to build digital skills within their workforce to embrace the fourth industrial revolution, while automation is also catalysing increasing employer demand for new and higher-level skills. Currently, interactions with business and school are not happening in a co-ordinated way, leaving only a fraction of firms engaged with the educational system and many schools deprived of what could be a very positive and important interaction for their pupils.
- e) **Demonstrate agility, adapting teaching to the full range of educational and economic needs.** As noted above, the world of work is always changing and adapting to wider economic needs. Technology is changing the workplace and disrupting almost every industry across the globe. The Fourth Industrial Revolution requires the education system in Northern Ireland to respond with agility and flexibility to ensure that the local economy has the necessary pipeline of people with relevant skills. The software sector in Northern Ireland relies heavily on the education system to provide the majority of its new entrants each year, but there are worrying signs that this supply of skills could be disrupted. The number of applications to university courses in computer science and software engineering has declined. The number of post-primary schools offering 'A' Level and GCSE courses in the subjects valued by industry is too small resulting in fewer people seeking places in tertiary education in these subject areas. I attach with this letter a copy of a 2021 report "Software Skills for the 10x Economy" which lists several targeted recommendations for Northern Ireland's Department of Education in relation to improving the supply of relevant digital and software skills which local employers seek.
- f) **Align education and skills policy: provide pupils with a full understanding of all the viable routes to successful employment.** Current education policy and skills policy in Northern Ireland are not aligned, and better co-ordination is needed to help pupils find the most appropriate path. The current education model leads to schools and FE colleges competing for post-GCSE pupils – leading to many being steered on to a sub-optimal path. For example, in the school's system today many pupils are not aware of the apprenticeship routes available to them, and there is not a full understanding of the employment-relevant (and affordable courses) available at local FE colleges. Much more needs to be done to promote vocational education options. Greater co-ordination in terms of education and skills policy would lead to greater efficiency and better outcomes for pupils, employers and the wider economy.
- g) **Be properly funded.** Adequate funding for Higher and Further Education is a pre-requisite for obtaining a high growth and inclusive economy. The business community in Northern Ireland had repeatedly raised concerns around the NI Executive's resource allocations to local universities. The current funding model which imposes a cap on undergraduate places for NI students serves only to constrain economic growth. The current policy works to direct young people to GB universities – with many of them failing to return to Northern Ireland and enter the local labour market.

The CBI in Northern Ireland recognises that the current education system is very successful in some respects, but there are some notable weaknesses. As noted earlier the lack of alignment between education policy and skills policy is a significant weakness. Furthermore, public money spent on education is not always aligned with desired outcomes. Evidence from the NIAO report "*Closing the Gap – social deprivation and links to educational attainment*" revealed that £913 million of *Targeting Social Need* funding has not made any demonstrable difference in narrowing the educational attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent counterparts.

The education system has other notable weaknesses which the CBI recommends the Independent Review should seek to explore. These include:

- a) **Levels of segregation and the associated impact upon cost** – without doubt the current segregated education system is inefficient, with higher costs associated with school provision, education administration, youth community relations and teacher training. This prevailing multi-sector school system in Northern Ireland has also led to a surplus of school places – reflecting inefficient use of public funding. The Educational Authority reported that in 2018/19 almost half of NI schools were running a budget deficit. Excessive cost pressures in the education system can only lead to sub-optimal pupil outcomes and inconsistent standards in terms of educational provision. There is a need for the public (particularly parents) and politicians to fully understand the prevailing trade-off that exists when a multi-sector approach to education provision is chosen over a single-education system.

- b) **Exams Culture** – The business community has consistently called for education to produce more ‘rounded and grounded’ young people. Business have expressed concerns that a heavy focus on exams tends to produce mindsets in young people that hinder high performance at work. For example, businesses report that young people leave school with a fear of saying the “wrong” thing in the workplace and this stifles innovation and basic team problem solving. With too much focus on high level exams, other key skills tend to be crowded out of the curriculum. The CBI believes that charting a course between these two extremes would be an optimal approach. There is no doubt that not having basic English & Maths is a real problem for participation in the labour market, but only having these qualifications is a problem too.

In addition, the heavy focus on exams means that pupils are forced to make decisions on subject choice at a relatively young age. This review should seek to understand the full consequences of asking young people to commit to certain subjects for GCSE during Year 10 (which will have consequences for ‘A’ level choice and university courses). Is the current education system forcing subject choice too early? It may be worth comparing the NI system to international best practice in this regard.

I hope you find these comments useful and thank you again for reaching out to the CBI Northern Ireland for our perspective.

Yours sincerely



Angela McGowan
Director, CBI Northern Ireland