

## **NORTHERN IRELAND CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY**

### **RESPONSE TO THE INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF EDUCATION PANEL**

**February 2022**

Dear Chair and Panel members

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written evidence to the Independent Review of Education, supplementing our earlier input when we met.

From a business perspective, it is clear that the most competitive economies have forward looking and resource efficient education systems. They are customer centric and value diversity and inclusion. As pupils that are in the education system enter the rapidly evolving world of work, they need to be both formally qualified and digitally enabled to make their way successfully. COVID-19, EU Exit, digitisation and the green energy revolution have all combined to increase demand for higher level skills and constrain migration, increasing the reliance on home grown skills. It is important to understand this context as there will be significant additional demands on the education system at a time when resources are constrained.

Within this context, the Independent Review is very timely. We wish you well in gathering evidence from a range of perspectives and concluding on a visionary way forward for the Education System in NI that will deliver better outcomes for pupils, taxpayers and wider society. NI Chamber will be delighted to engage further if required to support the important work of the panel.

Best wishes,

Ann McGregor MBE DL  
Chief Executive, NI Chamber

There were four main areas identified in the request for evidence and our response will cover each in turn.

## 1. A vision of education – i.e. what education in Northern Ireland should aspire to be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Education provides the skills and knowledge that are necessary for both individuals and the economy to thrive. In today's economy, formal qualifications are more important than ever before in terms of securing employment. However, it is not just about formal academic qualifications and knowledge; vocational qualifications and knowledge are equally as important as are the development of attitudes including perseverance, resilience and being inquisitive. The education system must be flexible enough to identify and value different skills sets and innate abilities and to help each child reach their potential.

We know that access to education is one of the most powerful tools available in terms of levelling up socio-economic disparities and creating a culture of opportunity. Certain elements of NI's education system perform very well, however others continue to underperform, with too many pupils leaving school with low qualifications. Areas of underperformance, which can be objectively identified in benchmarking exercises are where the attention should focus. It is critical that all children have access to a high-quality education to give them the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Our vision of education in Northern Ireland would be;

***“To support the development of the next generation of thinkers and doers, who are ready for the rapidly changing world of work and lifelong learning, are digitally capable and reach their academic or vocational potential.”***

## 2. Strengths and challenges of the current system and priorities for review

The NI education system has improved on many indicators and has many strengths including;

- Much improved attendance rates (prior to COVID-19);
- Only a small proportion of children education leave early, a significant improvement on historical figures;
- Only 1% of school leavers have no formal qualifications, again a significant improvement on historical figures;
- Record GCSE & A Level outcomes; and
- Mathematic, scientific and literacy outcomes are above the OECD average.

However, the NI education system also faces many significant and embedded challenges including;

- Providing better Value for Money by ensuring that spending is focussed on pupils rather than administration, division or the funding of surplus places;
- Levelling-up educational outcomes to the UK average (literacy, numeracy and scientific ability);
- Reducing numbers of leavers from the education system who do not have 5 GCSE's A\* - C;
- Increasing the pace of curricular change to focus on digital, STEM and human skills that are required for the future of work; and
- Measuring and reporting on the technological capability of pupils and teachers and supporting teacher training in this area.

### 3. Key issues to be considered during the review

Arising from this assessment of the strengths and challenges above and broadening the discussion to include a few other points, NI Chamber would suggest that the key issues arising from a business perspective for the Review Panel to consider are;

- **Improving Value for Money** – reduce the resources that are focussed on running separate, duplicative education systems, multiple institutions & administration and redirect savings towards pupil (customer) focussed activities.

There could be a dual target of reducing per capita spending on Education to the UK average (£1,462 in NI vs £1,304 across the UK) alongside increasing spending per pupil to match the UK average pupil (£5,800 in NI vs £7,300 in Scotland<sup>1</sup>). This would at least put service provision on the same, more competitive footing as the rest of the UK.

- **Make further progress on underperformance** – Whilst the proportion of pupils leaving school with no formal qualifications has improved markedly, there are still too many. The costs of retraining many such individuals is then passed on to the FE sector and potentially to DfC in the longer term. NI should focus on getting ahead of the UK average in terms formal qualifications of school leavers.

NI Chamber suggests that a target such as;

**“Reducing the number of pupils leaving school without 5 GCSE’s A\* - C to 3% by June 2025”**

should be implemented alongside an incentive framework to help its achievement.

- **Dealing with division** – The Cost of Division<sup>2</sup> in the education system was estimated to be between £16m and £95m in 2016. The main driver of these costs were around 50,000 unfilled school places, around one sixth of the total capacity of the education system<sup>3</sup>.

The issues raised are interlinked and reducing the number of unfilled school places would go a long way to providing better Value for Money and allowing the Department to focus more resources on the pupils that are filling school places, rather than empty seats.

NI Chamber suggests a target such as;

**“Reducing the number empty school places to 25,000 by June 2025”**

- **Teacher recruitment practises** should also be considered, as they are currently excluded from the fair employment legislation leaving the sector out of step with the rest of the economy. The best teachers should be recruited, irrespective of community background. This suggestion is supported by the Equality Commission, NASUWT and ICTU.

<sup>1</sup> Sources; HM Treasury, Public Expenditure Statistical analysis, Institute of Fiscal Studies & Nuffield Foundation

<sup>2</sup> Source; UUEPC

<sup>3</sup> Source; Department of Education

- **Addressing institutional overload** – There are seven<sup>4</sup> Arm's Length Bodies<sup>5</sup> and the Department, as well as 1,700 voluntary bodies that deliver youth provision. These are only in the realm of the Department of Education. The Department for the Economy and Department for Communities also provide FE, HE, workforce training and training & education for those outside the workforce. Many individuals participate in programmes that are funded by these three Departments and their ALB's. Greater co-ordination is needed in terms of how the NI Executive provides education and training services across society, and an assessment of whether earlier intervention would save resources in the longer term.

**NI Chamber recommends a single skills oversight body that would encompass with work of the seven ALB's, two universities, several colleges and multitude of training providers.**

- **Increasing digital & human focus** - Further develop the curriculum to enhance technological skills such as coding, programming and working with technology and human skills such as team working, determination, leadership and empathy.
- **Measuring, reporting and developing the technological capabilities of pupils and teachers.** This will be key to ensuring that those leaving school are not only competent, but competitive in the world of work. Pupils in the Netherlands will have experience of robotics by the time they leave school for instance, therefore NI must catch up to remain competitive.
- **Utilisation of big data** - to identify areas of underperformance, by subject, school and socio-economic background. This data can then be used objectively to improve service provision in these areas or move pupils to schools in which performance is stronger. There are academy models that have been deployed in other parts of the UK and these should be considered for underperforming schools.
- **Understanding and funding Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision** - 19.3% of the school age population had reported SEN's in 2019-20<sup>6</sup>. The NIAO has recommended a VfM review of SEN services to ensure that both the pupils and taxpayers are provided with an adequate service. This should be completed as soon as practical.

#### 4. Defining a “single” education system

This is a challenging and sensitive question in an NI context as there are multiple stakeholders that have invested significantly in current systems and institutions and deeply held personal and religious views on what a good education system looks like. However, given the challenges that face the current system and budget constraints that NI is faced with in future years, continuing as we are does not appear to be a viable option.

**The education system in NI should be defined by its vision and aspirations for pupils and how it contributes to the fabric of society and enriches the lives of children, rather than by sector.**

The first stage might be to seek the views of customers - citizens and businesses - on what a single education system might look like, in order to ensure that there is an evidence-based and democratic approach. This would necessarily include questions on;

---

<sup>4</sup> CCEA, EA, CCMS, GTCNI, NICIE, CnaG, Middletown Centre for Autism

<sup>5</sup> Source; NI Assembly Research and Information Service; Education system in NI, 2016

<sup>6</sup> Source; NIAO, Impact review of Special Educational Needs, 2020

- Local provision of education – how local is local?;
- Academic selection at 10/11 years old;
- The extent of involvement of churches in education and the teaching of religion;
- The application of Fair Employment legislation to teachers;
- Governance of School Board and selection of Governors; and
- Mixed religion and gender education.

**The key point is that those who do well and those who do less well within the current education system are similar – irrespective of community background.**

**Therefore, a single system should focus on producing educational outcomes that are similar to the UK average, or England from similar per capita and per pupil inputs.**

This is a complex issue and there are many institutions, stakeholders and voluntary organisations that do fantastic work. A single system would require civic and political consensus and after that, significant systemic transformation. Many small progressive steps will be required to get there.

**//ENDS**