

include YOUTH

Response to DEL's consultation on the development of a new Further Education Strategy for Northern Ireland

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Include Youth

Include Youth is an independent non-governmental organisation that actively promotes the rights, best interests of and best practice with disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people.

The young people we work with and for include those from socially disadvantaged areas, those who have had poor educational experiences, those from a care background, young people who have committed or are at risk of committing crime, misusing drugs and/or alcohol, engaging in unsafe or harmful sexual behaviour, or at risk of being harmed themselves. We provide a range of tailored employability programmes for these young people, including programmes in partnership with community based organisations.

Include Youth also engages in policy advocacy work in the areas of employability, youth justice and policing. This work is informed by relevant international human rights and children's rights standards, is evidence based, including that provided by young people and practitioners and is based on high quality, critical analysis.

Reflecting the cohort of young people we work with, that is young people aged 16-24 who are in or leaving care, those who are classified as NEET and young people engaged in offending behaviour, our comments below relate to these young people and their access to, participation in and outcomes achieved through further education. Further education forms part of the more vocational route through education and training and into employment for many of these young people and it is vitally important therefore that it fully understands and responds to their needs and entitlements¹, both within and outside of the classroom.

¹ Under a range of international human rights treaties, which the UK government is a signatory to and which the NI Executive has a duty to give effect to, young people have an equal right to vocational and work related training as to the more academic forms of education. These include the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 28 (b) and (d) and the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 13.1(b))

Our comments and recommendations below relate to the following four themes:

1. The role of FE in widening access and participation
2. The need for a continued commitment to care leavers by FE
3. The importance of working in partnership with others
4. The importance of disaggregated data collection, analysis and tracking

Each of these themes is addressed below.

Initial comments

We welcome the opportunity to respond to DEL's consultation on the development of a new Further Education Strategy for Northern Ireland and wish the following comments and recommendations to be treated as Include Youth's response to that consultation.

As a general comment, it is difficult to assess the merits of this proposed strategy without an accompanying implementation plan and budget. A key assessment measure will be the extent to which specific policies are properly embedded within the overall Strategy, and the status of the funding that underpins those commitments i.e. whether it is core, ring fenced funding or whether it sits more on the periphery placing it at greatest risk to funding cuts.

1. Role of Further Education in widening access and participation

We welcome the Department's acknowledgement of the dual role of colleges which alongside the objective of growing the skills and knowledge base to meet the needs of the changing economy involves their role in supporting diversity and social inclusion by encouraging participation from the most deprived areas. However, reading through the consultation document it would appear that inadequate emphasis has been given to the second part of this dual role, with the overriding priority being attached to meeting the needs of the economy. **We would suggest that the Vision for the Strategy set out on page 6 should be amended to better reflect this dual role.**

In addition, we would suggest that the final draft of the Strategy should be amended to include the following specific points, which would help ensure a more balanced focus throughout the document.

2. Need for a continued commitment to care leavers by FE colleges

All six Further Education Colleges in Northern Ireland were awarded the Buttle Quality Mark for commitment to Care Leavers over a number of years. This award raised awareness of the barriers faced by young people in relation to further education, it supported institutions to develop their provision in order to improve retention and successful course completion and it enabled partnership working to develop across sectors. While the Buttle Quality Mark project formally ended in July 2015, the Minister for Employment and Learning Dr. Stephen Farry has indicated his Department's commitment to working with stakeholders to continue the progress made through Buttle.

Through their engagement with the Buttle Quality Mark, much good practice has been developed by FE providers, including in Northern Ireland, for which colleges should be rightly proud of.²

Recognition of this work, coupled with a statement of the FE sectors' continued commitment to care leavers post Buttle, would be important to include in this document.

3. Importance of working in partnership with others

We welcome the recognition of the importance of partnership working reflected in the consultation document. This is particularly important in respect of the implementation of the Strategy's commitment to supporting social inclusion and diversity, and work on widening access and strengthening pathways for learners.

Organisations with the expertise in engaging with young people with additional barriers, such as care leavers, young people who are NEET or young people engaged in offending can provide effective support to colleges and to the young people to ensure that those young people are enabled to participate in and benefit from FE provision.

One model of partnership working between FE colleges and the voluntary sector that has worked extremely well has been the Transitional Support service piloted by Include Youth during 2012-2014 and subsequently mainstreamed.

While outcomes for young people with additional barriers from supported employability programmes such as ESF programmes are very good, with approximately two thirds achieving a positive move on, a significant number of these young people will subsequently struggle with making and sustaining the transition into mainstream further education provision. The Transitional Support service is designed to address this need by providing support to care leavers to make successful transitions from supported employability programmes into mainstream FE provision.

² NIACE (2015) Supporting Care Leavers in Further Education – A Guide to good practice in colleges achieving the Buttle UK Quality Mark.

Young people are provided with support for a 6 month lead in period prior to moving to college and for a further 6 month period at the outset of their course. The support provided to the young person is needs led and ranges from assistance with enrolment forms, accompanying them to initial visits/meetings in the college, liaison and advocacy with relevant college personnel in respect of any issues around attendance, punctuality and brokerage between various agencies involved with the young person around issues such as financial support, accommodation, transport etc. One young people described the service thus:

“ the thing about the transition service is it helps you adjust at the start and then gradually when you start to feel more comfortable you become to rely on yourself a bit more, you become more in the regime, you are in the groove where you can get yourself up. You just get into a routine and then gradually you don’t need as much help anymore. It starts to come more natural” .

Include Youth’s Transitional Support staff have built up excellent working relationships with college staff. Evaluation of the Transitional Support pilot project has highlighted the value placed by FE colleges on the provision of such a service, with providers commenting on the importance of being able to work with these young people in a more holistic manner. Examples given by FE college staff as to the practical support Transitional Support workers can provide included the following

“In something like coming through the door, some young people will be like ‘I’m not going’ even if it’s just around the corner. To the transitions worker there, someone who will say ok I’m coming with you” .

“ It’s good to close that circle, so that the young person will know if they are attending college then the tutor or myself will contact the Transitional Support worker and let them know that maybe the young person has missed so many days or maybe he’s acting up. The worker can come and have an informal word with him” .

The evaluation also demonstrated the impact of the Transitional Support service on retention figures, as illustrated by the table below:

Sustained engagement of young people in mainstream education or training

Phase	Numbers	Sustained placement after 3 months	Sustained placement after 6 months
Scoping study December 2010	82	53(65%)	49 (60%)
Transitional Support July 2013-July 2015	45	45 (100%)	39 (86%)

The Transitional Support project demonstrates how the FE sector can work in partnership with organisations in the community and voluntary sector to successfully support those young people who face significant barriers to participation to access, participate in and achieve through FE.

We would like to see greater recognition of the value of models such as these reflected in the Strategy than is currently there.

4. The importance of disaggregated data collection, analysis and tracking

Data collection and tracking is essential in order to measure retention and success of students, including those from a care background. There are examples of good practice across the UK FE sector documented in the NIACE publication.³ For example, Belfast Metropolitan College encourages students to ‘tick the box’ on the application and enrolment forms. In this way a student from a care background is flagged up to the Learning Support Officer assigned to care leavers for additional guidance and support provision.

Under Policy Commitment 11 – Improving Performance, DEL should ensure that data collection and tracking in respect of students from a care background is consistently carried out by all colleges and is quality assured.

³ Ibid

Concluding Remarks

We hope our comments and recommendations are helpful. If you require any further detail in respect of any of the points above please do not hesitate to contact us. We would appreciate some feedback on how our comments/recommendations have been incorporated into the final draft of the new Further Education Strategy. We would also like to be kept informed as to the ongoing work on developing the new strategy.