



A submission to the consultation on -

“Further Education Means Business

Policy proposals for:

- **Curriculum provision in FE colleges to support the economy**
- **Curriculum provision in FE colleges to support social inclusion**
- **Provision in FE colleges for 16-19 year old learner”**

**Department for Employment and Learning
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The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an infrastructural umbrella organisation, which provides support and services to, and represents over 30 groups (mostly in the Greater Belfast area), including community-based women's centres, women's projects and women's infrastructure groups.

WSN aims to achieve social, political and economic justice through the promotion of the autonomous organisation of women. The Network aims to strengthen the collective voice of women's groups and to promote and develop networking opportunities, to enable collective action and to impact upon policy and decision making processes. We provide an accessible, relevant and high quality support service and resource for member groups. The Network is also an important information provider on issues relevant to community-based women's organisations and for other infrastructure groups, nationally and internationally.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the overall findings of the Department of Employment and Learning's *Further Education Means Business*. The second strand of the document – 'Curriculum provision in Further Education colleges to support social inclusion' - is the most relevant to our work. Before answering the applicable prescribed questions we should like to point out that the document is in the main 'gender-blind: its only specific mention of gender equality, found in the equality impact assessment (p. 34) states that more females than males access FE provision and the proposals in the policy document may result in a change in this statistical difference. However, from WSN's perspective this view of an equality impact in terms of gender is overly simplistic and the redressing of this noted 'imbalance' will have a negative impact because the priority areas for funding will be at Level 2 and above. At that higher level men already outnumber women.

The Women and Work Commission (2006) stated that it is DEL's responsibility to provide local training and educational opportunities in a supportive environment. 'Women returners should have access to confidence-building measures, including peer-group support, perhaps delivered through local community groups. <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/women-and-work-commission-report-ni-response.pdf> Therefore WSN is surprised to note that there is no mention in *FE Means Business* of the role of women's centres in the provision of courses at any level. Our recent report on **Women's Centres' Community-**

Based Education proves the important role this form of education plays in the encouragement of women who have had a negative experience of mainstream educational provision and have traditionally been 'hard to reach'. Academic research in Northern Ireland found that 'most people think that their school did not help them prepare for learning in adult life'.

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The Women's Ad Hoc Policy Group advocates flexible training/re-training opportunities, including those provided through community-based education, for women who are low-skilled or have low levels of qualifications, therefore acknowledging the other responsibilities these women may have/have had in terms of caring for dependents (older relatives or children) (Briefing Paper No. 1 Women, Education, Work and Life Long Learning) The Gender Equality Strategy (NI). The unequal burden of unpaid work and lack of recognition of this work further undermines women's ability to achieve economic independence. Our survey of **Women's Centres' Community-Based Education** indicates that the cost of childcare within Further Education institutions is prohibitive and often there are not enough childcare places to meet the demand. An increase in the availability of affordable, accessible and flexible childcare places in FE colleges is therefore essential. Around 45% of lone parents - are workless. This compares with 8% of couples without dependent children and 6% of couples with children. In other words, single adult households - with children - are much more likely to be workless than couple households.

<http://www.poverty.org.uk/I34a/index.shtml> Statistics show that 89% of people enrolling in FE colleges have no dependant children compared with 36% the total adult NI population (Appendix 1, *FE Means Business*) These figures would suggest that having dependant children can be a barrier against engaging in further education in the college setting for that section of the population in most need of raising their skills level.

It is disappointing, if inevitable in the current economic climate, that the policy is predominately economically driven. Tackling social exclusion through education cannot be achieved by focusing exclusively on the marketplace. [Eduard Lindman's](#) classic *The Meaning of Adult Education* (1926) argues that Education is life: 'not merely preparation for an unknown kind of future living... The whole of life is learning, therefore education can have no endings. This new venture is called adult education not because it is confined to adults but because adulthood, maturity, defines its limits...' (Lindeman 1926: 4-5) The case studies and statistics included in 'Women's

Centres' Community-Based Education' indicate that life-long learning as a life-enhancing experience is not only about training for employment but also about personal development in a woman-friendly environment with accessible, affordable and good-quality childcare.

Similar anxieties to those of the WSN about the commodification of education and the move away from Lindman's vision have been expressed by other local voluntary and community education providers, such as the Educational Guidance Service for Adults, the Workers' Educational Association and the Ulster People's College. WSN and these organisations are concerned about the funding implications of *FE Means Business* for the voluntary sector.

Local research on life-long learning indicated that

- Three quarters of those surveyed believe the government should be spending more on lifelong learning.
- Most people want employers to pay the costs of training to cope with technological change.
- Most people also think that workers themselves need to take responsibility for learning new skills.

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We at WSN hope that DEL will take note of the opinions of the voluntary sector and potential students in producing their final policy on FE.

Question 1 (Recommendations 1 to 3)

- Do you agree that, through weighted funding and performance targets, colleges should be encouraged to increase the proportion of their provision that is in Northern Ireland's identified priority skill areas?

Please comment.

To build a better and fairer society for everybody here, we must try to improve access for people who live in areas of social and economic need. We need to get more people coming forward from areas of high unemployment to ensure that the entire Northern Ireland economy becomes prosperous, rather than just areas such as east Antrim, west Tyrone, and north Down. In order to have a workforce that is highly skilled academically, and vocationally FE colleges need to provide educational courses relevant to the skills-gap in their local area. We would also welcome the value of level 1 qualifications on the ladder of vocational a progression as many women especially those without qualifications could start at this level.

Question 2 (Recommendation 4)

- Do you agree that weighted funding should be applied to sub-regional skills needs? Please comment

Weighted funding is an excellent way to meet these needs. WSN also urges DEL to aim to provide a service that promotes gender equality. Following the NI government's policy, to ensure the economic security of both men and women and address the gender inequalities which lead to poverty and promote social inclusion, particularly acknowledging women's vulnerability to poverty e.g. Lone parents, carers, low earners, inadequate pensions. (Gender and Sexual Orientation Equality Unit OFMDFM: 2007:5)

Question 3 (Recommendations 5 and 6)

- Do you agree that a key objective for FE colleges is to encourage and support learners to progress to Levels 2 and 3, and that through weighted funding and performance targets, colleges should be encouraged to increase the proportion of their provision that is at Levels 2 and 3? Please comment.

In the face of the competitive international challenge for jobs, the Leitch Review recommended that the UK commits to becoming a world leader in skills by 2020. Achieving this means doubling attainment at most levels, and in many cases achieving far better than that. Its principal targets are: 95% of working age adults to achieve functional literacy and numeracy – up from 85% literacy and 80% numeracy today. It is therefore essential that those in most need should have access to the basic education on which to build. Also if there is to be a move to have more emphasis on level 2 and 3 how this can be achieved and managed is crucial with 42% of the N.I. population ages 16-74 having no qualifications it is vital that provision of level and other lower levels of qualifications remain in the foreseeable future. The FE colleges need to have resources to promote and market courses to the most hard to reach and this would entail some sort of partnership with the voluntary and community sector who have proved that they can reach and engage with the most disadvantaged in the community.

Question 4 (Recommendation 7)

Do you agree that FE colleges should be encouraged to increase the proportion of their provision that is of a professional and technical nature? Please comment.

We would argue that this form of provision should be encouraged, but not at the expense of other essential forms of education and that this form of vocational training should be provided for males and females in a manner which challenges traditional career choices by gender.

Question 5 (Recommendation 8)

Do you agree that FE colleges should continue to be the main providers of academic and applied 'A' Level and GCSE provision for adults? Please comment.

We would support the continued provision of GCSEs and 'A' Levels in FE colleges and promote partnership work with women's community based education sector and involve them in the delivery of this provision, specially at GCSE level.

Question 6 (Recommendations 9 to 13)

• Do you agree that colleges providing courses that are on the NQF is the best way to ensure that learners are offered provision that is of a high quality, that is recognised by other educational establishments and by employers and that guarantees progression routes for learners? Please comment.

In theory this regulation of educational provision looks as if it will be beneficial to learners and employers, however we would like to express concern about the narrow economic focus of these recommendations. Will qualifications gained by adults through courses delivered in women's centres be integrated into the NQF?

We are particularly concerned that Access courses which enable mature students who have no formal qualifications to gain entry to university are not on the NQF. Access courses have provided a life-line to many women who were failed by the education system and/or came from disadvantaged backgrounds. They are especially valuable for women returning to education and the labour market after raising their families. While it is stated in para

3.3.20 that 'some' of the provision of externally regulated courses currently offered by FE colleges will be approved under the PLAQ system this has not yet been developed. Access courses are mentioned but we note that there is no promise of their inclusion in the system.

Question 7 (see also Question 12) (Recommendations 9 to 13)

• Do you agree that NQF courses should be the main provision offered by FE colleges ie 95% of colleges' taught hours of delivery by 2009/10?

Please comment.

We would like to express our concern about the very rapid rate of change in this area. In the course of four academic years enrolments on non-NQF will fall from 50% to 5%. We would argue that as women predominate on lower level courses they will be disproportionately disadvantaged by this change.

Question 8 (Recommendations 9 to 13)

• Do you agree that an approved list of courses is necessary to ensure that colleges are able to deliver high quality professional and technical courses that sit outside the NQF, but which are valued by employers?

Please comment.

Yes again we would like to see an improvement in gender balance on all courses.

Question 9 (Recommendation 14)

• Do you agree that Further Education colleges are best placed to assess how their curriculum targets are achieved to best suit local needs and that, consequently, the Department should not be prescriptive in terms of how colleges meet the agreed targets? Please comment.

We believe that FE college staff should be aware of the unique needs of the local community; employers, employees or potential employees and that the educational providers are better placed than the Department to define the needs of the locality. *Shaping a Fairer Future* (Women and Work Commission: 2006: 6) Argues that in the interests of gender equality Regional Development Agencies 'should provide grant funding for outreach centres aimed at women seeking local jobs or training which match their skills and potential'. WSN recommends that this policy be integrated into *FE Means Business*

Question 10 (Recommendation 15)

- Do you agree that colleges should be funded to deliver provision at Level 1 and below, but that weighted funding should only be available for Level 1 provision identified by SSC as being relevant to their sectors? Please comment.

The proportion of the working-age population without any educational qualifications is much higher in Northern Ireland than in any of the regions in Great Britain. Within Northern Ireland, there is a huge difference in the proportion of unqualified working-age people according to whether they are under or over the age of 40. Among those under 40, around 10% are unqualified. By contrast, among those aged in their 40s the rate is double that at 20%. And among those in their 50s, the rate is almost double again at 40% it may be extrapolated from these figures that the overall proportion will fall rapidly over the next decade. However, the proportion of those in their 20s without qualifications is the same as that of those in their 30s. Therefore the great progress in reducing the proportion of people with no qualifications seems to have ended. www.poverty.org.uk/I34a/index.

Question 11 (Recommendation 16)

- Do you agree that the focus for provision at Level 1 and below should support learner progression to higher levels of study or into employment? Please comment.

We would agree that progression to higher levels of learning and employment are a positive focus for learners as long as there is not a level of compulsion and that progression should take into account individual differences between students. Support and confidence-building for those who have had a negative experience of formal education and/or have been out of the workplace and classroom for many years. There is a key issue at level 1 concerning engagement and the role of the voluntary and community sectors in supporting and assisting in this issue which needs to be explored as expressed in the original FEMB document.

Question 12 (see also Question 7) (Recommendation 17)

- Do you agree that by 2009/10 only 5% of colleges' taught hours of delivery should be on non-NQF provision? Please comment.

Again we would reiterate that this fall from a base of 50% in 2005 is too dramatic and that the virtual obsession with education for work at the expense of education for life and personal development can be counter-productive for individual citizens. Also with the emphasis on level 2 funding and above how does DEL intend to meet the needs of the 42% of the population with no qualifications.

Question 13 (Recommendations 18 and 19)

- Do you think that the enhanced Individual Learner Programme will add value to the curriculum offer for 16-19 year old students and that it should be an area of college activity that should be inspected by the Education and Training Inspectorate? Please comment.

Yes although this type of learning will be very difficult to quantify. Will this programme eventually be extended to adult learners?

Question 14 (Recommendations 20 and 21)

- Do you agree that the curriculum offer for 16-19 year olds should include wider key skills that prepare young people for the world of work and should cultivate an entrepreneurial culture within this cohort of students? Please comment.

We hope that there will be a commitment from FE colleges to promoting a culture of gender equality and active encouragement for young women to engage in non-traditional female roles. The latest figures for the Jobskills programme illustrate that a very small minority of males and females choose non-traditional occupations. (Briefing Paper No 1 Women, Education, Work and Lifelong Learning 2006). Education for young people should not focus exclusively on individual fiscal enhancement but should enable them to play a full part in their community as active citizens making a social contribution to their society.

Question 15 (Recommendations 22 and 23)

- Do you agree that Further Education colleges should focus on providing more Applied 'A' Levels and GCSEs for 16-19 year olds in the context of Area Planning? Please comment

Again we hope that colleges will aspire to gender equality and that vocational qualifications will be considered to be of equal worth and value to academic qualifications.

Question 16 (Recommendations 24 to 26)

- Do you agree that colleges should develop Information Advice and Guidance strategies to ensure that all 16 to 19 year old students enrolling in Further Education colleges (and where appropriate adult learners enrolling in Further Education colleges), are provided with the most appropriate package of learning to meet their specific learning needs? Please comment.

We would support this strategy on principal and hope that it will be adequately funded and will challenge traditional gendered subject and career choices. Will the Information, Advice and Guidance be available in the six major FE colleges only? Will this assistance be easily accessible to those in most need? Will the college staff decide or negotiate the 'specific learning needs' of students? Will subsequent programmes prioritise the needs of the economy over the educational and personal development requirements of the individual?

In conclusion, we would reiterate the concerns we have regarding the reduction in funding for level one courses and believe that this will have a detrimental and disproportionate affect on women. We would further reiterate that the equality impact assessment in terms of 'gender impact' is over simplistic. The 'equality impact' must delve deeper than simply examining the numbers of men and women participating on FE courses – at what level do women and men predominantly enter (and graduate from) courses; what is the need of women and men in communities, particularly in disadvantaged communities; has the FE sector addressed the barriers and obstacles faced by many women that hinder their full participation eg. class times, outreach provision and childcare provision. All of this must be addressed in a comprehensive 'gender' equality impact assessment.

Finally, WSN have been eagerly awaiting the proposals in terms of ‘learner access and engagement’, as these proposals are likely to have a considerable impact on the women we work with and represent – women living in disadvantaged areas. We are keen to know how this policy will interlink with ‘learner access and engagement’ and are keen to see how this will develop.

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WSN Members

Full Members

Ardoyne Women's Group
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Carrickfergus Women's Forum
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Greenway Women's Group
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