

Further education means life

SIR REG EMPEY may have a business orientation but his brief at the Department for Employment and Learning includes a little file marked 'community education'. He needs to take it out and learn about the great things that are happening in Northern Ireland to bring education to disadvantaged individuals and communities.

Among them, the Educational Guidance Service for Adults, Workers Educational Association and Ulster People's College have created a learning network throughout Northern Ireland which many voluntary and community organisations are part of. It benefits people who lost out on education first time round; who have low confidence and skills; who lack literacy and numeracy; and who are working in communities grappling with disadvantage and sectarianism.

He should read further and ask questions about why this work of many decades – WEA first received public funding in 1946 – is in danger of being destroyed, or at very least severely fragmented, by changes coming from his Department (pages 12-15).

And he should take time away from his file to check out the law on his duty to consult publicly on policy changes and to carry out equality impact assessments. So far, there has not been even a hint of public consultation on important decisions affecting very many people.

DEL has been following a "Further Education Means Business" policy for several years. Meeting the needs of the economy is very important and the role of education is crucial. We cannot move towards the high value-added, well-paid jobs we need in Northern Ireland if we do not raise the education and skills levels of the workforce.

Ironically, the WEA and UPC have to demonstrate that their courses serve the economy before they can run them (and the Education and Training Inspectorate checks up) but the seven further education colleges do not have to do that. So we know the two voluntary providers and many other voluntary and community groups are doing their bit for our economic vision.

But further education means more than business. It offers citizenship to young adults; improves the health of older people by encouraging active participation; gives people of all ages the chance to develop new skills that may not be directly related to work.

It is about all aspects of personal development but it is also a community activity. One thing we have learned over many years is that initiatives such as neighbourhood renewal cannot work if they are imposed from above. Community education is the process by which local people come to grips with the problems they face, find solutions to them, decide priorities and work out how change can be implemented.

Community education is also central to the task of confronting prejudice, whether sectarian, racist, sexist, homophobic or any other form, bringing it to the surface, discussing it and learning how to build mutual respect.

So education of the sort promoted by EGSA, WEA and the UPC has helped build the economy, promote personal growth and strengthen out communities. That means they contribute greatly to DEL's two objectives: "to promote economic, social and personal development" and "to help people into employment".

So far we have been given no convincing reasons for putting these gains at peril; Sir Reg has made no public statement on them at all. Admittedly the policies were in train before he took over the Department but devolution is supposed to make a difference.

On a broader front, we have reason for concern about what difference a local Minister is making. The draft Budget gives DEL £731.5 million this year, rising to £818.8m in 2010/11, a rise of 12%. But lifelong learning is getting an increase of only 5.2% (from £257.2m to £270.6m), far behind the 14.5% boost for higher education and well below the rising cost of wages and prices.

This doesn't sound like a policy that will help combat poverty, since DEL itself has always argued that further education – which it now calls lifelong learning – serves more disadvantaged people than higher education. Yet, a 'high level impact assessment' carried out by DEL found no evidence of negative impacts.

This must be pursued in the debate on the draft Budget but there must be specific consultations on the plans to cut off funding from the three voluntary providers, giving a proper opportunity for the voluntary and community sector to put its views and be listened to.

Discussions were continuing with DEL on the funding crisis as SCOPE went to press.



Managing Editor:
Editor:
Desktop Publishing & Design:
Subscriptions:
Printing:

Frances McCandless
Paul McGill
Fiona Veitch
Cathy Breslin
gps colour graphics

SCOPE is published 10 times a year as a review of voluntary action and social policy in Northern Ireland. SCOPE is published by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action. Opinions expressed in SCOPE are not necessarily in accordance with the views of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, and all correspondence in respect of SCOPE should be addressed in the first instance to the Editor. Copyright to the material in SCOPE is reserved and it may only be reproduced or broadcast if SCOPE is acknowledged.

ISSN 0144-0462

61 Duncairn Gardens, Belfast BT15 2GB. Tel: (028) 9087 7777. Fax: (028) 9087 7799. Email: scope@nicva.org