Graduating to Success (Summary)

A HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

This strategy was launched by the Minister for Employment and Learning Dr Stephen Farry MLA on the 23rd April 2012. This Strategy now complements the Success Through Skills: Transforming Futures Strategy, which was launched last year, and the Further Education Means Business Strategy.

The Strategy’s four guiding principles are:

1. Responsiveness
2. Quality
3. Accessibility
4. Flexibility

1. More responsive to the needs of the economy

A supply of high quality graduates is vital for economic success. In recognition of this, the Strategy promotes graduate employability and skills. It also encourages the upskilling and reskilling of those already in the workforce. The Department will support the higher education sector in achieving an increase in: (i) the number of people attaining Level 4-8 qualifications; and (ii) the number of people attaining graduate and postgraduate qualifications in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects.

The Department will encourage the higher education sector to rebalance the current academic profile, with a greater emphasis on STEM and economically relevant subjects; to offer more part-time study opportunities for those in the workplace; and to establish an initiative which will offer higher education places to unemployed people in priority skills areas at Levels 6-8.

2. A higher quality learning experience

The Strategy has a strong emphasis on the quality of the student experience. Excellence in teaching will be a priority. To this end, the Department will continue to support the Higher Education Academy (HEA), the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and valuable programmes such as the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme. A single quality assurance framework for all institutions will be developed in co-operation with the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency).

The Strategy proposes that all students should have the opportunity to develop a distinctive portfolio of skills and attributes that will enhance their employability and set them apart from their peers. The Department, the higher education providers, industry and individual students will each make a contribution to this aim in providing personal development and work experience opportunities alongside a relevant and up-to-date curriculum.
3. A more accessible higher education sector

The Department will also improve rural access to higher education, in partnership with the higher education and further education sectors. There will be a pilot of university bases at the further education colleges (FECs) with the aim of enabling higher education students to access learning resources in locations throughout Northern Ireland.

Higher education providers will be encouraged to facilitate student flows between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; to minimise the obstacles to cross-border undergraduate mobility; and to collaborate on an all-island basis on teaching and learning, where possible.

4. A more flexible lifelong learning environment

Higher education must be flexible in delivery and in funding. Lifelong learning must be at the heart of the system and new routes into, and through, higher education must be developed. This will be supported by a revised funding model and an appropriate governance structure.

The Strategy aims to create a lifelong learning system; to increase part-time and postgraduate capacity within the sector; to give the further education sector an increased role in the delivery of intermediate higher education provision; to continually review the curriculum to ensure that it remains relevant and up-to-date; and to provide greater support for economically relevant subjects.

Flexible provision will, of course, require flexible funding. The Strategy proposes to enhance the funding model in order to support a lifelong learning ethos.

Implementation

Sixteen initial projects have been developed in order to implement the proposals contained within the Strategy. Each project will be assigned a project manager. The implementation of the Strategy will be overseen by an Implementation Committee, comprising key senior stakeholders.

The sixteen projects are:

1. Increase the number of students undertaking higher education courses in economically relevant subjects.
2. Support internationally excellent and world-leading research and development.
3. Build upon and increase sustainable knowledge transfer activities.
4. Develop a single quality assurance framework for all higher education providers in Northern Ireland.
5. Create a more supportive learning environment.
6. Enhance the employability prospects of graduates.
7. Increase Northern Ireland’s international higher education activity.
8. Improve information in regard to higher education.
9. Enhance engagement between the higher education sector, the community and government.
10. Establish university bases at the further education colleges.
11. Facilitate cross-border co-operation and student mobility.
12. Establish a flexible lifelong learning system.
13. Review the higher education funding model.
14. Achieve efficiency savings within the sector.
15. Review the Maximum Student Number (MaSN).
16. Enhance the governance and accountability framework.

The full report is available on the CITB-ConstructionSkills NI website at www.citbcsni.org.uk

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