

# REPORT OF THE FOURTH N.I. IMPACT FORUM MEETING

6 October 2015

Venue: NICVA

Attendance - see **Appendix 1**

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## **Welcomes & Introductions**

The fourth Impact Forum meeting was opened by the Chair, Eileen Kelly, who extended a warm welcome to the wider audience of adult learning stakeholders. She also welcomed representatives from NIACE, NIACE Cymru, Scotland's Learning Partnership and AONTAS. She then passed on Minister Stephen Farry's apologies and his wishes for a successful conference. She hoped that the day would enable even greater exchange and stimulation of ideas and experience that would forward discussions still further.

Eileen then introduced Junior Minister Jennifer McCann of OFMDFM, who not only wished the conference well, but spoke of her personal support for adult learning, having had the experience of being an adult returner herself. She particularly spoke up for community-based learning and the importance of support being given to allow adults a wide selection of access points to learning.

## **Context Setting**

Joyce Black (NIACE) gave a brief presentation setting the work of the 4 UK Impact Forums in the wider setting of the European Agenda for Adult Learning, Europe 2020, key European priorities and those of NIACE as the UK managing agency.

Colin Neilands then gave an overview of the NI Impact Forum and its discussions to date, on the themes of Essential Skills, Excluded Groups and Digital Learning - as well as wider areas of concern for the future development of adult learning locally.

## **Employability**

The Chair said a few words to introduce the morning theme of employability and then introduced the four speakers (see papers/presentations).

Mark Huddleston (NI Commissioner for Employment & Skills). Mark first of all gave an overview of the UK Commission for Employment & Skills. This was followed by a series of slides setting out skills shortages in NI by sector and showing that skills that employers find are difficult to obtain (which covers most commonly seen as core employability skills) are increasing. Of the four main X that employers in NI are looking for when recruiting (relevant experience, Maths/English GCSE, Vocational Qualifications and Academic Qualifications), relevant experience is significantly the highest. His conclusions on developing the skills agenda included: the need for all stakeholders to play an active part in developing skills (creating a true social partnership structure); and addressing the core skills issues i.e. Essential Skills in Maths & English, - work readiness skills (critical thinking / problem solving / teamwork / interpersonal skills), and making work placements available to provide that understanding of behaviours in a work environment.

Ian McIlveen (NACCO Materials Handling Ltd., Craigavon). Ian presented the case study of his own organisation in terms of investment in staff development. He clearly demonstrated that whatever risk might have been involved more than paid off in terms of staff commitment - of 50 employees who went through training only 1 left. The quality of this training investment has been recognised by 8 NTAs and the Gold Investors in People award. Ian also reiterated points made by Mark about the skills/competencies looked for at recruitment.

Nicola Aylward (NIACE). Nicola presented on the NIACE project - What Employers Want: Employability Skills for Young Unemployed Adults. Young people were trained to conduct interviews with employers and discover first-hand what they were looking for - namely positive attitude, 'soft skills', 'hard skills', experience and qualifications. The results have been published in hard copy and also at <http://www.whatemployerswant.org> . Feedback from both young people and employers involved has been very positive. The project is currently working in NI with the NOW Project <http://www.nowproject.co.uk>

Gerry Campbell (Colleges NI). Gerry spoke of the development of the FE sector over the past 10 years in terms of their levels of business engagement and support and led a transformation of their curriculum into one which has a very strong economic focus as its core foundation. A major strength of the curriculum includes embedding employability skills into the technical and professional courses on offer. Gerry's definition of employability skills included: communication, teamwork, problem solving, self motivation & initiative and the ability to cope with change/emotional resilience. Employability skills need to go hand-in-hand with the acquisition of technical and professional skills.

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Delegates then had facilitated discussion at their tables and the following points arose:

1. What are examples of good practice in learning for employability? How are these examples currently shared with other professionals in the field/with other audiences?
  - colleges working with local employers in co-design of courses specific to their needs
  - young people need greater awareness of how essential skills are vital to securing employment
  - employability skills need to be built into school/college curriculum
  - actually hard to come up with examples of good practice - there are few opportunities for sharing of experiences across different delivery sectors
  - more and better links need to be built between learning providers and Government bodies - we will only reach effective solutions through greater collaboration.
  
2. What could/should be done to improve & extend provision of learning for employability? - and who/what groups should be involved in such provision? Where should such provision be delivered?
  - we first need to agree our definition of employability skills - this would best be done by providers, employers and learners working together on design
  - we need to retain flexibility in definition too as needs can change
  - there needs to be greater integration between learning support and course provision - this could be achieved by complementary working relationships between sectors, recognising and playing to the strengths of each
  - while collaboration is key to success this is not necessarily supported by current funding mechanisms
  - employers should build relationships with their local schools and community organisations so that their needs are better understood and addressed locally
  - greater opportunities for work placement - including volunteering in the workplace to gain experience
  - how effective are the compulsory Government work schemes?
  - how are post-employment learning needs best met?
  
3. What actions need to be taken to ensure learning for employability is accessible by all? i.e. supports groups such as older learners, marginalised groups, immigrants, etc.

- while the 16-24 age group remain an important target (and there is still some way to go there to achieve the desired results), what about the 50+?
  - is there better practice elsewhere?
  - these target groups are most often addressed with EU funding, but the problem is that this is short-term, whereas the problems are long term - where good practice is built up it is deserving on on-going support - this needs to be recognised and addressed by our politicians
  - will there be opportunities to build better practice through working with the new councils?
  - is the way to go for voluntary organisations the social enterprise route, as exemplified by the NOW Project?
  - we should change the dynamic of conversation with funders, policy-makers etc. - challenge the agenda of austerity
  - information and experience needs to be fed up from community to policy-making levels so that strategies are informed by evidence
4. Should learning for employability focus solely on getting people into work, or should it also include provision to assist mobility for those already in employment? If yes, who is responsible for providing and resourcing this provision? -employers, Government, individuals?
- there needs to be greater opportunity and support for CPD for all employees - this is difficult for employers in NI where most are SMEs
  - currently there is emphasis almost exclusively on training to get INTO employment which promotes a message of 'a job is a job is a job - be grateful to be working' and little thought to on-going learning needs
  - this seems to be reflected in recent ESF funds which only support very basic qualifications
  - in the public sector the culture seems to be the more you have the more you get i.e. those in higher paid posts receive more investment in learning than those in lower paid posts
  - in terms of matching employer needs there is a dichotomy between younger people who can have qualifications but lack experience, and older workers with experience but often lacking qualifications, even essential skills - so the required support is not a case of 'one size fits all'
  - so there needs to be more investment in the development of older employees, especially if they are made redundant
  - control of learning funds should rest with the individual so they can chose the provider that suits them best
5. What other services are needed in parallel with learning provision in order to support its effectiveness? One example might be guidance.

- support is vital for adult returners - mentoring being one methodology
- childcare is essential
- learning environments that put the new learner at ease - so family and community based learning is ideal - and this has the ripple out impact of encouraging others in the family and community to engage in learning also
- support needs to be there before entering learning as well as throughout courses
- EGSA's services are much missed.

## **The Wider Impacts of Adult Learning**

This section of the day began with the inspiring stories of three adult learners.

Caroline Birch who left school with just a handful of GCSEs, but is now, thanks to support from her employer and the APL scheme, completing a degree in Community Development at Ulster University.

Neil Foster who has returned to learning thanks to Barnardo's Family Connections programme and has discovered a love of learning and writing poetry and has started down the road of gaining qualifications in essential skills.

Mary McCusker who left school at 14 with no qualifications, but defied preconceptions of her abilities and went on to university and spent her working life in adult education.

These were followed by a presentation from John D'Arcy (Open University).

John spoke of the OU's history of being at the forefront of utilising technology to widen participation in learning, helped for example with its long collaboration with the BBC. In today's world adult learning needs to embrace the broad scope of IT outlets - YouTube now being the most fantastic and vast resource for learning. Technology is altering how people live and work, and so also how they learn and accumulate the skills and competencies employers (will) require. The OU has its own OpenLearn website and has just published a guide that will help structure a route through its range of free online resources - <http://www.open.ac.uk/northern-ireland/study/free-online-learning/routes-learning> John explained another recent development - Badged Open Courses that have been developed in response to the needs of informal learners who are seeking access to study skills and to have their learning recognised.

John also emphasised that adult learning should be valued and supported not just for contributing directly to the economy, but also because of its contributions to health, wellbeing, self-esteem, families and communities - a great segue into the afternoon's workshops.

### **Thematic Workshops**

Rural Isolation - facilitated by Libby Keys and Maura Johnston.

Many of the barriers to accessing adult learning in rural areas are also those found elsewhere, but these are exacerbated by the rural context - childcare, finances and transport. The last of these in particular is a huge issue, not just for accessing learning but also employment. For those on low income the expense of private transport is considerable. Learning opportunities have also been reduced because of cuts to library services, including mobile libraries.

Possibly online learning can answer some of these issues, although it does not bring the same community/relationship benefits of group learning. However some rural areas still have relatively poor access to high speed digital services - and people need the basic skills before accessing the riches of learning online. It is also hoped that the new councils may be more effective at addressing these local concerns and so there is a need for advocacy directed to staff and local councillors.

Social Cohesion - facilitated by Karin Eyben and Lyn Moffett

The session was designed to challenge participants' ideas of cohesion/inclusion and encourage new thinking. Diverse ideas were stimulated by the creative learning environment and exercises. One was that it's not enough that we lobby Government about changes needed in education if we ourselves as educators are not prepared to be open to change and challenge also and to constantly seek to innovative ways to stimulate learning for adults - as was demonstrated by the workshop.

Other ideas included: every adult with their own learning account and a mentor over their life journey to access life-long learning; a shared education system that begins at nursery level and continues throughout people's lives; access at any time to free learning – any time, any size, any place; learning champions for adults.

50+ - facilitated by Paul McGill

This workshop raised many questions. The first question arising was how can the stats produced by Paul (see paper) be actioned? When older workers are made

redundant how can they access supportive learning to gain qualifications needed to gain employment in the modern age? Should employers invest more in providing learning opportunities to their older employees? Union Learning Reps could play a key role. As was suggested in the Inquiry into Lifelong Learning, should we all have access to a mid-life career review? - but then how would this be financed and serviced? Clearly there is a need for more research and analysis into 50+ employment.

#### Health & Wellbeing - facilitated by Paul Donaghy

Despite 50% of our health being determined by our behaviour, in terms of interventions and consequently investment 90% of the health budget is spent on clinical care.

In the Health Service there is a vast discrepancy/inequality in terms of spend on training/learning, with a much higher proportion of spend on those in higher grade posts - another case of the 'haves' continuing to get more than the 'have nots' and the system not supporting advancement from lower grades.

There are examples of good practice in terms of utilising adult learning in treatment and prevention - such as the Recovery College model that has now been rolled out across the HSCTs.

There needs to be a Bigger Conversation linking learning and empowerment and greater leadership for collaboration within the health service and out to the wider community.

#### Family Learning - facilitated by Barnardo's

The Barnardo's presentation showed the effectiveness of a multi-disciplinary approach. All the usual barriers to accessing learning as an adult have been effectively addressed. Key to success has been strong relationships with the schools who help identify pupils who are underperforming and then the change model that Barnardo's have developed can efficiently target these youngsters and their families. The effectiveness of this model in both helping improve the school performance of the children and engage the parents in learning is one that should be mainstreamed and not be a chance opportunity just for a few areas.

#### Concluding Remarks



Forum for Adult Learning

NI



Scotland's Learning Partnership



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

Colin returned to look briefly to the future. There is good news in that the Commission has approved a further two years support for the Impact Forums - which offers a fantastic opportunity to identify actions and goals and by the end of the three years of the initiative make some real impacts in terms of adult learning in Northern Ireland.

He also invited delegates to a FALNI event on 2nd Nov in NICVA to create a new adult learning manifesto ahead of the Assembly elections scheduled for May 2016.

The conference concluded with thanks from Eileen to all who had contributed to its success.

### **Evaluations and Feedback**

There was high satisfaction with the day - scoring 4.7 out of possible 5.

The event was thought well organised with good handouts/materials and a good mix of people attending. The morning presenters and the adult learners were singled out for particular praise.

Areas which participants would like to see addressed in the future by the Impact Forum included:

- equality of provision - inc access for those not deemed socially disadvantaged
- funding - simplifying applications - sustainability - challenging cuts
- family education
- sharing good practice, including from wider European context
- increasing political/departmental buy-in, including lobbying at local government level
- develop clear messages on diverse policy agendas - for colleagues and defined audiences
- improving coordination and collaboration between providers - FALNI to lead
- research
- progression
- resourcing/provision for the over 25s
- representation of adult learners
- identifying champions of adult learning
- education in community settings vs education in colleges
- need for central info point/website on adult learning for Northern Ireland

## ATTENDANCE LIST – Appendix 1

Hilary	Adair	Ashton Community Trust
Dolores	Atkinson	Belfast Health Development Unit
Nicola	Aylward	NIACE
Sandra	Bailie	NICVA/Impact Forum
Nuala	Barr	Blackie River Community Group
Caroloine	Birch	UU Student
Joyce	Black	NIACE
Alison	Blayney	Kilcooley Women's Centre
Lorraine	Boyd	NEETS Forum/Impact Forum
Berni	Brady	AONTAS
Karen	Brennan	Community Change/Impact Forum
Peter	Brown	Reed in Partnership
Gerard	Campbell	Colleges NI/Impact Forum
Niall	Casey	Invest NI/Impact Forum
Ned	Cohen	General Teaching Council NI
Jim	Cunningham	Southern Regional College
John	D'Arcy	Open University/Impact Forum
Kevin	Doherty	ICTUNI
Paul	Donaghy	HSC Leadership Centre/Impact Forum
Jan	Eldred	NIACE
Karin	Eyben	Corrymeela
Neil	Foster	Adult Learner N- Barnardo's
Julie	Gorman	ICTUNI
Ciara	Graham	Barnardo's
Louise	Gregory	Wade Training
Lesley	Hamilton	Southern Regional College
Mark	Huddleston	NI Adviser for Employment & Skills
Maura	Johnston	Freelance Facilitator
Eileen	Kelly	Impact Forum Chair
Paul	Kelly	Libraries NI/Impact Forum
Danielle	Keenan	Women's Centre Derry
William	Kerr	NACCO
Pauline	Kersten	Conway Education Centre
Libby	Keys	Freelance Facilitator
Carolyn	Largey	NOW Project
	Lavery-	
Lorraine	Bowen	Ulster University
Margaret	Logue	Women's Centre Derry
Amanda	Marshall	Ballybeen Women's Centre

Marina	McCarney	Belfast Health & Social Care Trust
Emma	McClimonds	Reed in Partnership
Mary	McCusker	Adult Learner
Brian	McDonald	Community Change
Paul	McGill	CARDI
Emma	McIlveen	BBC, Digital & Learning
Ian	McIlveen	NACCO
Anne	McVicker	WRDA/Impact Forum
Lyn	Moffet	Ballymoney Community Resource Centre
David	Monahan	BBC, Digital & Learning
Martin	Moorcroft	Barnardo's
Colin	Neilands	FALNI/Impact Forum
Trevor	Neilands	Impact Forum
Janette	Nhangara	Open University
Mark	Ravenhall	NIACE
Katherine	Robertson	WRDA/Impact Forum
Kevin	Robinson	Ecorys - Erasmus+
Judith	Searle	Barnardo's Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council
Carol	Shane	Advice NI
Dominic	Sharvin	Impact Forum
Patricia	Short	NIACE Cymru
Kay	Smith	VCU DSD
Peter	Toner	Scotland's Learning Partnership
Tracey	Waddell	Extern
Trevor	Wright	

## APOLOGIES

Martin Flynn (OCNNI/Impact Forum), Simon Hamilton (OCNNI), Patricia Cochrane (DEL/Impact Forum), Emma Dunseith (BBC/Impact Forum), Michael Donnelly (DSD VCU/Impact Forum), Peter Shields (AMH/Impact Forum), Ann Osborne (NOW Project/Impact Forum), Kelan McClelland (Simon/Impact Forum), Norrie Breslin (Big Lottery/Impact Forum), Ashfa Slater (EPALE UK), Roberta Gray (Shankill Women's Centre), Diane Taylor (HSC Leadership Centre), Lorna Morton (USDAW), Laura Doherty (Belfast HSCT), Yvonne Connolly (Belfast HSCT)