

Evaluation of the Centre for Cross Border Studies

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by Brian Harvey

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Executive Summary

This evaluation of the Centre for Cross Border Studies covers 2002-5. It was carried out in May 2005 by desk research and examination of the documentation, statistics, products and records of the centre; 25 semi-structured interviews with staff and board members, experts and clients; and survey of people known to the centre (42% response rate).

The work of the centre shifted substantially compared to the previous triennial period. Although research activities, dominant before, continued, they were eclipsed by an expansion of the centre's work in conferences, seminars, training and networking, as well as servicing and providing administrative support for important north-south bodies such as the Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South and Universities Ireland. This practical work is making a major contribution to building positive relationships across the border between a diverse range of groups, especially government officials, educationalists, students and schoolchildren.

The analysis of the centre's performance is a positive one. The centre has maintained, even accelerated, its performance:

- Growth in website traffic, up in all indicators;
- Volume of research reports, publications, paper and grey literature;
- Numbers attending events, 1,297;
- Quality of national and international speakers at centre events;
- Publicity achieved;
- Finance, with income up 55%;
- Endorsement from political leaders.

In the survey of external opinion, the centre is appraised positively for relevance. Its effectiveness and impact have improved over the 1999-2002 period. The quality of its work was estimated at 7.02 on a 10-point scale. Training course participants rated their course highly for relevance, quality of organization and administration (100%) but improvements were suggested in working methods. Clients of the centre appraised its work as more than competent, demonstrating the highest levels of professionalism, coupled with commitment and invariable courtesy. Expert opinion likewise gave a high assessment of the centre's performance, admiring its quality, output, impact, relevance, value-for-money, working methods, expertise, vision, tact and diplomacy. Many seemed aware of the centre's struggle for resources. The board has performed its role effectively and the centre is regarded by staff as a good place in which to work.

Two key issues arose from the evaluation: the shift in the centre's mission over 2002-5 and the continued struggle for core and other funding. While all defended the mission shift into servicing, administration, training and

networking, there was a well articulated concern that the centre's policy-making role had fallen below an acceptable level and should be rebuilt.

There are two general recommendations: first, the centre should consolidate, expand and develop its existing activities in servicing, networking, training, conferences and administration, not only in the existing priority area of education but also into a wider range of common north-south issues such as the environment, waste, health, energy, transport, spatial planning and public administration. These can add considerably to the building of positive relationships and the promotion of reconciliation on the island. Spin-off products should be developed from this work (e.g. all-island public administration yearbooks, generic and sectoral). Educational cooperation can be extended into new thematic areas with new partners, especially institutes of Technology and Further & Higher Education. Second, the centre should rebuild its role as a critical space, independent voice and strategic commentator on the state of north-south relations and cross-border cooperation and the policy issues arising, both general and thematic. This role should initially be reinvigorated through an annual conference, run for profit, and an expanded own *Yearbook* modelled along the lines of continental yearbooks. This should address generic cross-border, north - south issues and also specific cutting-edge policy and research themes in frontline thematic areas.

The centre's current funding strategy is a correct one, but application for core funding should also be made to the Department of Education in Northern Ireland. The centre is right to pursue funding from government departments, agencies and public bodies for the current range of activities. This should be extended, making sure to build in a significant overhead. The centre must be prepared to be dynamic in developing such options in the future. A specific advertising pitch for such work should be made through a brochure and part of the website with the suggested strapline of *Cross-border? Yes, we can do that!* Consultancy options can be pursued more aggressively, subject to conditions on project size, profit margin, supervision, cross-border focus, policy relevance and public domain. There should, over time, be financial diversification along the lines of the new think tanks, starting with a system of member subscribers. An e-newsletter is an important part of such a strategy.

Finally, a number of organizational changes are recommended: to extend the board's coopted membership; include summary annual accounts in the annual report; develop the website (moderated forum, newsletter, hot topics, e-consultation, mail-a-friend, regular redesign and member's section); and evaluation of all events in real time.