

A Report for
the Centre for Cross Border Studies

Ireland's Learning Poor

Adult Educational Disadvantage and Cross-Border Co-operation

Paul McGill

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April 2001

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About the Authors

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About the Centre for Cross Border Studies

The Centre for Cross Border Studies, based in Armagh, was set up in September 1999 to research and develop co-operation across the Irish border in education, health, business, public administration, communications and a range of other practical areas. It is a joint initiative by Queen's University Belfast, Dublin City University and the Workers Educational Association (Northern Ireland), and is financed by the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. Between February and May 2001 the Centre will publish research reports on cross-border telecommunications, cross-border health services, all-Ireland co-operation to tackle disadvantage in education, EU cross-border funding before and after the Good Friday Agreement and a number of other areas of practical North-South co-operation.

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Introduction

THE study reported here was commissioned by the Centre for Cross-Border Studies, following a call for proposals in January 2000. The focus is on educational disadvantage among adults in Northern Ireland and in the Republic. Thus it considers a number of areas which are normally treated separately from each other, including access to further and higher education, literacy programmes, community education and mainstream adult education.

The central guiding idea in the study was to examine the main policy statements and relevant research and to talk to interested parties with a view to seeing what the major policy initiatives were likely to be and how these might be facilitated through cross-border co-operation. This is an area in which there has been a high level of activity in the last few years. These are separate developments in each jurisdiction with only modest dialogue between policy makers in both. Because of this and the likelihood that important decisions with long-term implications will be taken in the near future, the systems in each jurisdiction may diverge in ways that preclude the kind of co-operation that is now possible.

This work is the joint effort of two people with backgrounds, expertise, and knowledge of the systems in each jurisdiction. Paul McGill's background is journalism and education/social policy and his work has been largely within the Northern Ireland context. Mark Morgan's background is in psychology and educational research and his work has been focused on the Republic of Ireland. We are hopeful that the blending of styles and traditions which we have brought to this task will result in some ideas that can be taken forward through the Centre for Cross Border Studies.

Paul McGill
Mark Morgan
April 2001



Extended Executive Summary

Introduction

THERE has been a very high level of activity in adult education on the island of Ireland in the last few years, but separately within each jurisdiction. There is very little cross-border co-operation in education and training on the ground despite the common problems that exist. The guiding idea of this report is to ensure that the important decisions that are likely to be taken in the near future take into account some cross-border initiatives that are likely to help the learning poor. This section, in particular, draws out some of the main areas where cross-border co-operation is likely to be fruitful.

The broad picture of educational disadvantage

Educational disadvantage is a severe problem in Ireland, North and South, and one of the main influences on school performance and on labour market prospects is social class origin.

Among higher education entrants in the Republic of Ireland, professional grades, employers, managers and farmers are greatly over-represented, while lower social classes have less than their share of the population would warrant. Entrants to higher education from Northern Ireland show a higher representation from manual social classes than the rest of the UK, but still less than their share of the population.

Initiatives to increase access to university education have generally not met the expectations set for them. A number of programmes, including two with a North-South dimension (*see page 50*), have been successful in increasing the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in further and higher education. Among their features are students tutoring pupils, involvement of parents, summer schools and efforts to raise student expectations through encounters with appropriate role models.

Much less attention has been given to widening access to further education (non-university third level), though this has recently begun to change. In the South, Institutes of Technology are appointing access officers to help widen access. In the North, the new lifelong learning strategy is proposing the creation of new further education places targeted mainly at the educationally disadvantaged population.

Essentially the main thrust of policy in both parts of Ireland is to extend opportunities beyond the core group of middle class school-leavers to bright working class children and older people who missed out first time round. The effect is to reach the 'nearly ready' in educational terms, bringing into higher education the next social or educational stratum. Once the middle class has



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reached saturation, in the sense that everyone goes to higher education who wishes to do so, then opportunities can be gradually extended down the social scale and up the age range, as resources permit.

The numbers of 'learning poor'

The vast bulk of the higher and further education budget, North and South, is spent on school-leaving entrants to full-time higher education. Since this group is largely middle class, this very large subvention has the effect of reinforcing inequality.

Compared with the 105,000 full-time higher education students, there are some 756,000 'nearly ready' adults in the South between the ages of 25 and 64, who have completed secondary or further education but not proceeded to degree level. There is an even larger number of 'learning poor' in the same age range: 806,000 who have not gone beyond lower secondary or even primary schooling – people who are not yet ready to progress to university and need to be reached by other means.

In the North, 420,000 people have qualifications below the equivalent of two A levels, advanced GNVQ or Leaving Certificate. The real learning poor are the 150,000 adults in the labour market who have no qualifications at all; twice as many if we include the economically inactive. If we add this 300,000 to the 800,000 in the Republic, we reach a total of 1,100,000 learning poor in Ireland as a whole.

Economic and labour market consequences

In the South, the likelihood of being in work increases sharply in line with educational achievement. In 1999, only 26% of women who left after primary school were in work compared with 85% of women who were graduates; 63% of men with only primary education were working as opposed to 93% of male graduates. Both men and women with primary education only are five times more likely to be economically inactive than people with degrees. Earlier the 1996 Census showed that people who stopped at primary education were six times more likely than graduates to be out of work. Similarly in the North, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) found that more than half the adult population lacked functional literacy but the figure was 71% among unemployed people. In spring 2000 32% of unemployed people had no qualifications compared with 19% of those in work.

Mature students

More opportunities for mature students are not sufficient to ensure we are making a real impact on the learning poor. Greater adult entry does not necessarily extend participation further down the social class ladder. In the South,

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mature students are predominantly middle class, especially lower middle class: two-thirds hold a Leaving Certificate and 44% have higher-level qualifications. Neither, in itself, will the creation of more part-time learning opportunities improve the position of the learning poor: people with degrees are more likely to benefit from this than those with no qualifications.

Having said that, if we want to attract back into education the 1.1 million adults with few or no qualifications, we need places for them, particularly in part-time study and in further education. More learning opportunities are a precondition for attracting the learning poor, but we also need a range of measures if we are to succeed.

Although the representation of mature students is better in Northern Ireland than in the Republic of Ireland, most learning poor are untouched. Further education colleges have concentrated more on expanding prestigious higher education work than on developing studies at basic or even intermediate level, where the skills shortages are most severe. In recent years, full-time higher education numbers in colleges increased by 243% while further education numbers rose only 0.7%.

Coinciding with changes in student financial support, statistics show a decline since the mid 1990s in the number of people aged 26 or more entering full-time further education, reversing steady growth earlier in the 1990s. On the other hand the number of mature adults embarking on part-time study has risen healthily in recent years. There has been a similar shift in universities, where the share of full-time places taken by adults has declined by a quarter. By contrast, part-time higher education is now dominated by people over 21, who represent nearly 84% of all entrants.

Institutions that cater predominantly for middle class school-leavers are far removed from the vision of lifelong learning, where people of all ages and social classes drop in and out of education and training on an equal basis. Ireland's higher education system is inadequate to achieve such a vision or to meet the needs of people who are not remotely ready to enter higher education. Incremental steps to extend working class and older participation are not enough. Further education is better geared to the task, but even Further Education Colleges (FECs) and Institutes of Technology (ITs) are too forbidding for very many of the learning poor.

We would argue strongly that the recent emphasis on lifelong learning will not, in itself, help disadvantaged groups, such as people in poverty, people with few or no qualifications, disabled people or members of ethnic minorities, including refugees and asylum seekers. Unless accompanied by special measures to attract these learning poor, lifelong learning will bring most benefit to those who already



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have good learning achievements. Likewise, expansion alone will not help. Very rapid growth in recent decades has not led to equal access for young people, North or South, and has not begun to tackle the legacy of under-achievement among the adult population.

The clear link between poor qualifications and unemployment makes it imperative that we give much greater impetus to promoting equality and social inclusion. The Republic has enjoyed unprecedented economic growth and Northern Ireland has been the fastest growing economy in the UK over the last decade. If the poor and the learning poor cannot be reached after years of boom, the chances are they will never be helped. Unless we can guarantee continued growth, and new measures to tackle low achievement, material and educational disadvantage will be their lot for ever and society will not benefit fully from what they could contribute.

In addition, the skills needed by new entrants to the labour market and by those already in it are increasing all the time, so it is necessary to cater for all the learning poor, whether employed or not. This fits well with the aim throughout Ireland of moving towards a knowledge-based economy. Shortages of skilled labour, especially at intermediate level, weaken the capacity to create a high-skill, high-value economy and to absorb technological advance.

Attracting the learning poor

So how can the learning poor be drawn into education? For very many of them, it is a matter of boosting their confidence and bringing their basic skills up to the level of functional literacy before they can contemplate third level studies. Three areas dealt with in this report can make a real impact on widening participation of adults:

- a co-ordinated effort to improve standards of literacy and numeracy;
- greater investment in community education and the creation of organic links between community groups and the resources of the statutory sector;
- open and distance education and appropriate use of ICT.

Change and commitment are needed at the highest levels if lifelong learning is to become real for everyone. Too much emphasis has been placed on higher education in recent years, especially for young, largely middle class school-leavers. In the North, policy drift and stagnation under Direct Rule have created a huge deficit for the devolved government to make good. Since disadvantaged groups have been hardest hit by the failures of the system, priority should be given to their needs in the growth that is now very much needed. The Southern system has grown more rapidly but, despite much rhetoric, little has been done to tackle the learning deficit among adults.

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The concept of an 'educational equity chain' is important. Among its elements are providing teachers with opportunities and incentives for in-service education and professional development; steps to ensure successful learning by all primary pupils; providing an institutional ethos in higher education that is supportive and inclusive, and offering bridging courses, flexible assessment practices and welcoming entry arrangements in order to meet the needs of under-represented groups.

A factor that applies in both parts of Ireland is the division of secondary education into vocational and academic streams, which helps create the problem of the learning poor in the first place. Even earlier, the improvement of pre-school facilities and the reduction in the age of starting school can help prevent children from disadvantaged backgrounds falling behind at primary level.

Locating institutions in geographical areas where there is relatively poor participation can also help greatly. This is part of the rationale for the Springvale campus in north and west Belfast. It is crucial that such institutions are not identified as 'inferior' or placed in league tables that do not take into account the opportunities they provide.

Additional student financial support can help to reduce the under-representation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially if accompanied by benefits and subsidised services (housing, meals, travel). Also important is ensuring that unemployment is not better supported than studying.

Recommendations

1. We recommend a cross-border programme of research, policies and evaluations to ensure greater access to further and higher education to educationally disadvantaged groups. The shared experiences in both jurisdictions may enhance the likelihood of success on the following issues.
2. There is a need to improve the performance of children from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds before entry to post-primary school. Action at pre-school and primary level is needed to avoid problems that have accumulated in childhood persisting into adulthood.
3. There is a need to examine alternative forms of assessment for entry to higher and further education.
4. The precise activities that help develop fruitful partnerships between third level institutions and local schools should be identified.



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5. Institutions of higher and further education in both jurisdictions should set targets for the number of students from under-represented groups who are admitted and who complete courses, and the achievement of these targets should be monitored independently.
6. The factors creating success in examinations and completion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds should be examined.

Literacy problems, solutions and North-South initiatives

The most striking feature of the IALS was that nearly a quarter of Irish adults, North and South, have problems with even the simplest literacy tasks. Twice as many people aged 55-65 were at the lowest level compared with those in the 16-25 age-group. A major factor is that younger age groups tend to be much better educated than older ones.

Of the factors that are associated with literacy, level of education is predictably the strongest. In the North, close to half of people with degrees scored at levels 4/5 on the literacy scale, 10 times more than people who had no qualifications. In the Republic, the differences were even more dramatic. On the documents scale more than two fifths of graduates had literacy skills at levels 4/5 compared with less than 2% of those who had left school without qualifications. These findings show clearly that attempting to address literacy problems is to intervene in a central area of educational disadvantage.

Consequences of literacy problems

In Northern Ireland, half of people with a personal income in the top 20% performed at the highest literacy level compared with less than one fifth of those with below average incomes. In the Republic, more than two fifths of those in the top 20% of income were at the highest literacy level while only about one fourth of this number performed at the highest level among the bottom 40% of earners. In both Northern Ireland and in the Republic, people who were unemployed were twice as likely to score at Level 1 as were people in employment.

One of the most striking findings of the IALS is the association between low levels of literacy and reluctance to embark on education or training. In the Republic only one-tenth of people at Level 1 had been involved in learning in the previous 12 months. People at the highest level of literacy were five times more likely to have taken courses. These findings show the self-perpetuating nature of poor literacy skills, since they result in non-participation in the very activities that might enhance such skills.

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There is an important social inclusion dimension in the IALS finding of a strong association between literacy performance and participation in activities in everyday life. People with strong literacy skills are far more likely to attend films, plays and concerts and participate in community activities. Even more remarkably, people with better literacy skills are more likely to participate in sport than those with worse literacy skills. In fact, people with good literacy skills are more likely to be involved in every kind of cultural activity with one exception, watching television.

Very few adults believe they have a problem with reading and numbers: in the IALS, people whose skills were good never rated them as poor, while those whose skills were poor frequently rated them as adequate. This example of low educational aspirations means we cannot take for granted that most people recognise the importance of education or want to improve. This finding is crucial since it shows that many people are unaware of a problem and are unlikely to be motivated to do anything about it.

Literacy as a priority in adult education

Governments agree that tackling low literacy and numeracy levels must rank as the primary adult education priority. Failure to do so will not only constrain the life chances of the individual but will also limit overall progress. In a technological society in which so many aspects of life assume greater literacy competence, low literacy levels will result in the disengagement of larger proportions of the national population from the daily life of society.

Yet the scale of current provision is much too limited and patchy. Whether provision exists in an area largely depends on whether a provider such as a college or a local authority service thinks it is important.

A new strategy is needed, founded on the principle of entitlement. People who lack basic skills in English or mathematics should be entitled to a free assessment and referral to a suitable provider, offering programmes based on the workplace, the family and the community.

Recommendations

Those involved in both jurisdictions have indicated a particular willingness to cooperate in joint initiatives, particularly in the light of the need for cost-effectiveness in an area where the needs are great and where previous campaigns had little success.

7. We recommend therefore a joint cross-border testing-development programme. There is a need for research on methodology, effectiveness of current methods of instruction and teaching methods that are distinctive to



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adult literacy. In addition there is a need for developmental work on learning supports including text books, use of technology and tests that are suitable for adult learners.

8. While ICT offers some promising avenues to promote adult literacy, adults with literacy problems are unlikely to have access to the technology or the confidence to use the appropriate tools. We recommend that the research programme give particular attention to how ICT can be best utilised.
9. Given the scarcity of trainer programmes for literacy and the absence of a systematic programme of theoretical input in such programmes, there should be a joint cross-border programme of training of trainers for literacy.
10. Family literacy offers one of the best approaches to the literacy problems encountered by both children and adults. We recommend a joint resource centre that would collect information on best practice in family literacy and provide guidelines and support for the development of programmes.
11. Since the evidence demonstrates the potential of workplace literacy initiatives, we recommend a joint programme on a number of sites, North and South, particularly in workplaces that attract employees from across the border .
12. Because of the willingness of Northern further education colleges to extend their involvement in literacy in border counties beyond the small number of centres they already have in the South, this work should be extended and formalised.

Community education and training

Community education is a proven means of reaching people from disadvantaged groups. It uses innovative ways of giving people lacking basic skills, long-term unemployed, members of ethnic minorities (including refugees and asylum seekers), people with disabilities and others a way to identify their needs and find ways to meet them. It combines concern for people as members of a community with meeting their individual learning needs. Moreover, community education is part of the process of community development and gives disadvantaged individuals and communities the skills and confidence to seek improvements in their lives.

Social exclusion is not just a result of low educational achievement, it is also a cause. People blighted by multiple deprivation, such as poverty, disability or discrimination, may have difficulty in recognising the relevance of education and face great hurdles in gaining access to it.

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Much can be done on a cross-border basis to build on the strengths of the community education movement. This can and should be done both within the community and in other institutions involved in lifelong learning for adults, such as further education colleges. There is great scope for partnerships involving both.

The Republic's White Paper on Adult Education accepts the criticism that the growth of community education has been constrained by the low levels and uncertainty of resources, separation from other sectors of education and inadequate research support. It promises a more streamlined funding mechanism and a separate budget for education in the voluntary and community sector. However, funding will not be guaranteed or seen as an entitlement but offered through a competitive bidding process and normally on the basis of three-year programmes of activity.

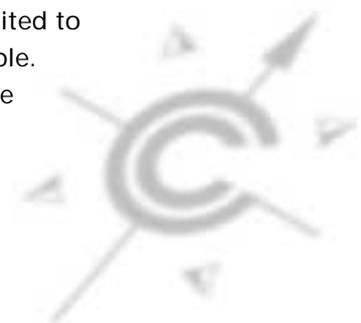
The White Paper proposes a National Adult Learning Council with a research role and staff and resources to carry it out. It notes a particular dearth of data on participation in adult learning by groups such as Travellers, students with disabilities and immigrants, on processes and outcomes in community education and on the effectiveness of outreach strategies. It announces new structures and support staff to meet the educational needs of adults, including 33 Local Adult Learning Boards, on which the local voluntary and community sector would have four representatives.

In the North, too, funding is difficult to get, comes from a wide variety of sources and is usually short-term. One difference is that further education colleges, unlike Southern institutes of technology, have a community education role, in partnership with local groups. The way ahead was sketched out in a Government report in 1999 which proposed a strategic collaboration fund for FECs to promote inclusive local strategic partnerships to co-ordinate activity to meet local needs. It recognised that the voluntary and community sector has a special entrée to those groups which are under-represented in education and often offer them the first step on the learning ladder.

Colleges and communities

Making a success of the relationship between colleges and communities requires better communication, the building of trust on both sides and a commitment to serve the learning poor rather than vested interests. If this happens, everyone can benefit.

One way ahead is for democratic community organisations to continue to assess local needs, decide on the education programmes best suited to meeting them and the forms of delivery that will suit local people. But, instead of employing tutors directly, they can work with the local college, which can draw down the funds to pay for tuition.



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There is a cross-border dimension to this as well. Northern FECs could share their expertise in community education with their Southern counterparts, especially now that ITs face a substantial decline in the number of traditional school-leavers and have begun the search for a wider remit.

Recommendations

13. There is immense scope to develop fruitful relationships between colleges and local communities in order to reach out to the learning poor. It is, however, difficult for institutions to develop new roles from within limited internal resources. We believe both governments should create mechanisms to encourage links and give financial incentives to both sides to build on what already exists. They should also ensure that good practice in relations between colleges and communities is disseminated effectively.
14. The fund to encourage co-operation between Northern and Southern colleges, recommended in this report, should allow community groups on either side of the border to use the expertise of colleges on the other side and to spread good practice in this sphere as well.
15. It is important that all financial power is not given to colleges. We propose community learning accounts, similar to individual learning accounts, which would give more economic power to local groups. It is important that the core costs of running groups are met on a guaranteed, long-term basis rather than leaving them dependent solely on short-term project funding.
16. Consideration should be given to creating a system of accreditation and certification, building on small blocks of learning such as might attract new learners and giving credit for prior experience. This work should draw on the experience of bodies such as the Northern Ireland Open College Network and could also adopt some of the methodology of the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS), which is working towards a unified system of accreditation built on blocks of learning with defined values that can be put together for various qualifications.
17. The research unit within the Republic's proposed National Adult Learning Council (NALC) could be the nucleus of a body to carry out research throughout Ireland, offer a resource to community educators and to disseminate good practice.
18. The NALC, or a body serving all of Ireland, could develop quality assurance and auditing methods appropriate to community education. The claim is often made that the financial and administrative burdens on projects arising from the demands of funders are too onerous. On the other hand, it is important that projects account for the expenditure of public money. Cross-border projects could investigate these issues and reach reasonable compromises.

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19. The Republic's White Paper proposes the creation of a Forum for Adult Education Practitioners. This too should operate on a cross-border basis since the functions envisaged (exchange of ideas, good practice and new thinking, influencing policy development and contributing to solidarity and peer support) can be enriched by bringing together the different perspectives of adult educators North and South.
20. Support services are a key area of community education, from databases of learning opportunities and advice and guidance services through to helping with learning skills and careers advice. Similarly there is a great need for support for community groups. In these areas, too, much can be learned from both North and South and structures should be created to ensure that new support services are planned and delivered in an integrated manner. This should ensure that services are better and more cost effective.
21. A specific area of support, drawing on existing expertise, North and South, should be the joint training of adult educators and the voluntary management committees responsible for community education projects.

Enhancing participation of adults through ICT

Of those who complete the Leaving Certificate in the Republic, 83% go into higher or further education; in contrast, less than one third of those who leave school without completing the examination go into any form of education. Few early leavers find their way back to education. Mature students are predominantly middle class, from non-manual and lower professional backgrounds. One study showed that only one-fifth of mature entrants to higher education came from the four lowest socio-economic groups, although these groups make up more than two-fifths of the population.

Comparing older and younger people in the South throws up stark contrasts. Twice as many people in the 25-34 age-cohort have at least an upper secondary qualification than in the 55-64 age-group. So, if we concentrate on increasing participation among young people without providing for older adults, the task of enhancing the educational level of the population will be a very slow one.

A Higher Education Authority report in 1999 suggests an additional 10,000 places for mature students in the Republic, four-fifths of them part-time. In addition, extra places are needed for adults who have not completed secondary education, the learning poor who are the main focus of this report. In particular, there is a great need to promote 'second-chance' education, using a more flexible approach than has previously been the case in adult education. Many courses taken by adults tend not to be



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distinctively 'adult' in nature. Rather they are the traditional courses like the Leaving Certificate which make use of traditional classroom teaching methods rather than innovative or modern ways of delivery.

Two features of Northern Ireland are of particular interest. Firstly, while relatively more mature students enter further and higher education than in the Republic, the numbers involved are less than in Britain. Secondly, Northern Ireland adults are less likely to do organised learning than in the UK as a whole. This may result from inhibiting social norms, possibly an anti-education culture, and the industrial structure of Northern Ireland, which has more small, low-paid, low-skilled and low value-added companies than Britain.

Potential for ICT

Enthusiasm for ICT is evident in the Republic's White Paper on Adult Education for three reasons. The first has to do with vocational and economic reasons, with particular emphasis on employability. The second is the view that ICT can improve the quality of the educational experience and induce a higher level of motivation. Thirdly, reference is made to social benefits and the importance of avoiding a two-tier society. Given the major difference in the educational levels of older versus younger generations, it stresses the danger of an even greater gap in the ICT area.

This fear is reinforced by the findings of a survey in 2000 of the use of technology in the Republic. Firstly, access to and usage of PCs by adults has roughly doubled over the last two years, while that for the Internet has tripled. Secondly, however, evidence of the 'digital divide' was stark. Among those at work, 42% had used the Internet, as had 69% of students, but this was true of only 13% of those out of work.

Most dramatic of all was the fall in the likelihood of receiving training as people get older; almost three-quarters of people aged 15-24 had received training, but this was true of less than one tenth of people aged 65 or older. In addition unemployed people are far less likely to get training (24%) than people in work (55%).

A major proposal in the White Paper is the provision of a National Adult Basic ICT Skills Programme as part of the Back to Education initiative. This programme is seen as an essential element in the national infrastructure for adult education. Among the priorities identified in this programme are training in IT itself, literacy, language training and the development of a global civil society.

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Innovations in the UK: Ufi *learndirect*

The Ufi *learndirect* initiative in the UK aims to help build a learning society; encourage lifelong learning to raise business competitiveness; help adults to improve their knowledge and skills at all levels; and help promote and support the habit of effective and purposeful lifelong learning for all adults.

Among its features are a brokerage service, which attempts to match learners to courses, using a huge electronic database of all learning opportunities in the UK and promoting learning through extensive public marketing. A freephone enables anyone in the UK to receive free advice on courses that might meet their needs. A second is the development and provision of learning materials in specific areas, including ICT, basic skills, business and management, the environment, retail and distribution, and multimedia skills.

A third feature is the emphasis on non-traditional learning principles. There is a major effort to make the learning engaging, even enjoyable. In addition most of the materials are in 'bite-sized' chunks, so learners can do them when they want. There is a particular focus on accessing the Internet and individualisation of learning. A fourth feature is that while there is a strong emphasis on quality assurance, the initiative does not have specific plans for accreditation.

Recommendations

Recent policy statements have generated considerable debate and the action plans that are likely to follow will shape adult education for some years. This context suggests the possibilities of cross-border co-operation on a number of fronts. Four possible areas of cross-border co-operation are considered here.

22. There is considerable scope for a research and development programme on adult learning, with particular reference to the current plans for lifelong learning. This is especially appropriate given the meagre level of research on adult learning and its status in the education system in both parts of Ireland. A research programme would focus not only on the supply side (making new programmes available) but also on the demand side, giving attention to matters like motivation, perceptions and expectations of potential clients.
23. Particular attention should be given to the professional training of adult educators, perhaps linked with the training of literacy tutors, recommended earlier.
24. Given the potential of Ufi *learndirect*, discussions should be held on a framework under which extension across the border might be achieved, in partnership with existing education and training bodies in the South.

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25. Whilst the framework for extension would cover the entire Republic, consideration should be given to creating learning centres along the border, in which providers North and South would collaborate to meet local needs.

Funding and structures

One of the recurring themes in interviews for this report was the difficulty in finding money to support education for disadvantaged groups, the lack of flexibility in how it is spent and the particular restrictions that affect cross-border work.

The education of full-time students is largely free in both parts of Ireland and public third level institutions have guaranteed annual allocations. Funding for community education is not guaranteed and comes from a large number of bodies. Much of the work of statutory FECs in community education relies on such short-term funding, as does all of the funding of community organisations for educational programmes.

This obviously puts community education at a severe disadvantage. Firstly, it can be difficult to gain funds even if severe, long-standing needs exist in the community. Secondly, there is no continuity of work, either in the sense of recruiting annual cohorts of students onto courses or in ensuring that they progress to a higher level. Capacity building in disadvantaged communities is a long-term process, not one that can be solved by a few short-term courses.

If the new creed is lifelong learning, the entire rationale for funding post-school education needs to be re-examined. No fundamental re-examination is proposed either North or South. The former has begun to give financial power to adults through individual learning accounts (ILAs), but the number of ILAs is limited and they are allocated on a first come, first served basis. This is contrary to the notion of targeting social need and reneges on the promise in both the British and Northern Ireland White Papers to make low-paid workers a particular target group.

The Southern White Paper will perpetuate the divisions even within the adult education sector. For example, schools will be entitled to financial benefits for adult education as of right whereas community education providers will have to access funds through a competitive bidding process, normally for three years and subject to 'a rigorous prioritisation process'.

Colleges have to subsidise courses for unemployed people and community outreach work from their own, very limited, resources. It is wrong that colleges should be penalised for doing what governments want them to do or that there should be a crude brake, imposed by financial shortage, on helping the learning poor.

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These difficulties are compounded when there is a cross-border element. Some Northern colleges run courses in the South, such as caring, counselling and some vocational training, but these are on a full cost recovery basis, so they can be expensive. Yet, there is a big potential demand for courses on both sides of the border in areas such as adult literacy, information technology and business support.

If funding issues were resolved, there is huge capacity to expand cross-border education. One option is that FECs could run courses in the South but the Northern government could claim the money back from the Republic and vice versa for Southern providers in the North in a 'knock for knock' system. Alternatively there could be a separate funding body with a budget for North-South projects.

Funding for community groups is even more difficult. While it is often possible to get money for specific projects, it can be difficult to fund continuing core activities. Much cross-border work is entirely voluntary and people have to pay out of their own pockets the travel costs for visiting groups to discuss education and training needs.

Apart from organisations with specific budgets for North-South work, the existence of the border can be a barrier. We were given examples of funding bodies which refused to give grants because people on the other side of the border might benefit, and others that insisted they be used only for people living in the jurisdiction. It does not seem logical that people can cross the border without penalty to take higher and further education courses, but they cannot travel to do community education courses.

In rural areas some of the funding problems are particularly acute. Travelling to the local town can be expensive and difficult because of poor bus services and child care facilities. On the other hand, if the local college does outreach work, it can be difficult to attract enough students to make the courses viable; 12 may be a reasonable class size in a city, but it is very difficult to achieve in rural areas.

Student support

In both North and South, our elitist system of higher and further education means that it is the learning rich that gain most of the substantial public subsidy. We have not begun to face up to the revolution in thinking demanded by the idea of lifelong learning. The Republic abolished fees for full-time students in 1996, with the result that the middle class makes no contribution to tuition fees.

The UK went in the opposite direction in 1998 by introducing fees, now charged at £1050 per year, but only for students from higher income families. Even this represents only between



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7% and 18% of the cost of tuition, so the middle class continues to receive a substantial public subsidy, despite the high personal dividends they reap from higher study.

There is much less money for the largely working class learning poor. Costs per student in further education are much lower than in universities and students pay fees in most cases, though there are some alternative routes, such as the education and training option in New Deal for long-term unemployed people, during which they continue to receive Job Seekers Allowance. The budget for discretionary grants for further education has been cut severely in recent years and virtually nothing is spent on adults who dropped out of education early and have few or no qualifications.

The proposal by the Northern Ireland Assembly's Higher and Further Education Committee to replace up-front tuition fees with a contribution by graduates earning more than £25,000 per year would represent an even greater subsidy to higher income families and leave less money available to target disadvantage. This recommendation has not been accepted by the Higher and Further Education Minister, Dr Sean Farren, who instead announced a package of measures designed to promote the policy of Targeting Social Need.

In the South, the White Paper proposes only modest measures to help people at the bottom of the learning ladder. In the Back to Education initiative, for example, only narrowly defined categories will be eligible for free tuition. Many groups of unwaged people with less than upper secondary education will still have to pay partial fees and receive no allowances. Others, including pensioners with non-means tested pensions and people outside the labour force, will be required to pay the full fee.

The Irish Government has agreed to abolish fees for part-time higher education courses, but only for defined disadvantaged groups doing third level courses: recipients of means tested social welfare or unemployment benefits, medical card holders and recipients of family income supplement and their dependants. In supporting this limited concession, the Government uses an argument that could be applied with equal force to full-time higher education:

"In ring-fencing the scheme in this way, the Government believes that it can positively discriminate in favour of the most deserving groups economically; reach the most educationally disadvantaged sectors within the mature student population and respond in a very tangible way to the educational needs of those with the lowest incomes" .

Many adult learning poor have dropped out of education long before they are ready to enter higher education. For them financial incentives can be a determining factor. For this reason, pilot projects are being held in Britain to

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assess the effects of providing educational maintenance allowances. Recent research suggests that these allowances may be effective in encouraging people from lower income households to stay on after school-leaving age. Government may be able to recoup some of the spending on these allowances in the form of higher tax revenues or reduced expenditure on social care or benefits.

Financial incentives

Educational maintenance allowances and other initiatives, if properly marketed and targeted, may reduce the number of learning poor emerging from the school system today, but measures are also needed for the 1.1 million adults in Ireland who have few or no qualifications. Means tested grants are an important incentive. Such grants already exist in the South but they go mainly to younger people. The December 2000 packages of proposals in the North includes the reintroduction of means tested bursaries in both higher and further education.

This is welcome but insufficient because experience, both North and South, suggests that means tested grants do not radically change the social class or age composition of higher education. Specific incentives are needed to attract the learning poor, possibly means tested bursaries for people over the age of 25, assuming these would be lawful under the new equality legislation North and South.

There are some more radical approaches that should comply with the law. One is that decisions on charging fees would be taken on the basis of income rather than mode of study. Instead of a vertical distinction between full-time and part-time courses, we should have a horizontal distinction based on income. Under this scenario, people with high incomes would make a contribution to their education. This would free up money to give real financial incentives to the poor and learning poor to enter education. A distinction based on income rather than mode of study would be fair and transparent, as well as helping people in low-paid, low-skill jobs at a time when the economy demands higher levels of qualifications.

An alternative and potentially complementary approach is to concentrate resources specifically on the learning poor rather than the materially poor. For example the two governments could abolish fees for any courses up to A level or Leaving Certificate standard. This would give adults who were disadvantaged by the education system an opportunity to catch up on their peers. This idea is simple but radical since it encourages study by those who have no or few qualifications.



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The two approaches can be combined. It would be possible to have no fees for low-level courses but also to offer bursaries to low income students studying for them. In the case of courses at a higher level, low-income students could still be offered fee concessions or bursaries to enable them to build on their previous study achievements.

Structures

There is enormous goodwill for the idea of working across the border, but the amount of cross-border work is very small. The main difficulty is that the education systems North and South have evolved separately for so long that there are few areas common to both. There are many areas where fruitful co-operation could help everyone by better identifying and meeting educational needs. By filling gaps in provision, eliminating duplication and ensuring that lead responsibility is given to the most suitable organisation, we believe this could be cost effective. Moreover, it has the advantage of ensuring that statutory and community organisations work together.

At institutional level, we believe the two governments, through the North/South Ministerial Council, should create a fund to encourage ITs and FECs to work more closely together. This could include sharing expertise and staff, encouraging joint research, serving the needs of industry, especially small and medium enterprises, seeking out the learning poor and working with communities to meet their needs.

It is possible to take a more radical approach to co-operation at national and local levels. For example, instead of creating the National Adult Learning Council as an executive agency of the Republic's Department of Education and Science, it might be possible to set up a body for the whole of Ireland. This would involve communities, providers, employers, unions, statutory bodies and learners from North and South, and would control its own budget. The argument for this is that both parts of Ireland share similar problems and, in many cases, the solutions may be very similar.

Lack of a strategic focus at local level is one of the key reasons for continuing under-achievement among adults. It might be possible, therefore, to have joint bodies along the border as well. The nucleus for these in the South would be the Local Adult Learning Boards proposed by the White Paper. There is no similar mechanism for the North, but there are several agencies with partial responsibility. If local bodies with effective powers and budgets are created, they should replace, rather than add to, the plethora of bodies involved.

These new agencies could greatly increase the effectiveness of services for adults in communities, the workplace and education and training institutions. Potential learners on either side of the border could have access to the most suitable provider. The co-ordination of services in this way would provide better for the

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local population, while also avoiding wasteful duplication of expensive facilities and expertise.

Creating such public bodies can itself do much to promote informal learning among adults, with desirable spin-offs in reconciliation and mutual understanding. Working together would be a form of citizenship education in action.

Recommendations

26. Funding formulae for higher and further education should include a substantial social inclusion element, similar to Targeting Social Need in the North, to encourage the recruitment of disadvantaged students and to ensure that colleges are not penalised for social outreach work, as at present.
27. Governments should review the equity of their post-school funding systems generally, with a view to targeting greater resources at the learning poor as distinct from the traditional school-leaving cohort.
28. In deciding on funding formulae, account should be taken of the greater cost of providing, and taking up, education and training in rural areas.
29. Student funding should be rationalised so that decisions are based on incomes rather than mode or level of study. Resources should be directed to people on low or no incomes, including the economically inactive.
30. Community groups should get core funding for educational activities, along with resources to buy in courses that suit them from any part of Ireland.
31. Funding bodies should be prohibited from refusing grants solely on the basis that some people may benefit on the other side of the border.
32. The Governments should actively tackle the problem of the learning poor by abolishing all fees for courses below A level or Leaving Certificate and by concentrating student support at these lower levels.
33. The Governments North and South should consider the possibility of setting up national and local bodies responsible for co-operation in lifelong learning, with a particular remit to tackle the problem of the learning poor.
34. Short of this fully integrated solution, public bodies North and South should be required to promote cross-border information exchange and co-operation in carrying out their duties.



Methodology and Outline of Report

Sources

THIS report is based on an examination and analysis of relevant policy statements, national and international research and interviews* with people who have particular interests in the implementation of programmes, North and South. Specifically the following sources were of primary importance:

- The policy statements on access to further and higher education, adult literacy, community education, provision for mature students and use of ICT in addressing educational disadvantage.
- National and international research on policies and initiatives to increase access to further/higher education by disadvantaged groups, methods of enhancing adult literacy, initiatives in community education and effectiveness of developments in ICT in adult education.
- Interviews with personnel involved with adult literacy and community education, North and South.
- Interviews with heads of Institutes of Technology (Republic of Ireland) and Institutes of Further and Higher Education (Northern Ireland), normally referred to as further education colleges or FECs.
- Consultation with organisers of Ufi *learndirect* in Northern Ireland, together with a seminar on same topic for policy makers from the South (this was the focus of a separate report for the Centre for Cross Border Studies, November 2000).
- Site visits to centres involved in community education focusing on cross-border co-operation.
- Regular consultation with the Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies and with a CCBS board member with particular expertise in Adult/Community Education.

* A full list of people interviewed is shown in Appendix 1

Methodology and Outline of Report

Interviews

The content of the interviews varied depending on the focus. However, they were largely open-ended in format and lasted one to two hours. In each interview particular attention was devoted to the following:

- What were the main problems that needed to be addressed in the light of the issues under consideration (literacy, community education, adult education)?
- How was it proposed to tackle these problems?
- To what extent were interviewees aware of relevant problems, issues and initiatives in the other jurisdiction?
- What were the possibilities of cross-border co-operation around such policies and programmes?

Outline of report

The report begins with a chapter setting out the background to, and broad discussion of, the problem of the learning poor. This is followed by a brief review of access programmes in Chapter Two and then by three chapters on specific areas where action could be taken to tackle the problem of the learning poor, namely literacy (Chapter Three), community education (Chapter Four) and mature students and technology (Chapter Five). Issues to do with funding and structures are considered in Chapter Six and we draw together our main conclusions in Chapter Seven as well as drawing attention to some outstanding areas.

In each case, the background to the main issues is sketched, along with relevant policy statements and international or national research as appropriate. We then put forward recommendations for cross-border co-operation in the targeted areas. Because the recommendations are central to the report, it is worth commenting on the criteria by which we put forward particular recommendations. Firstly, we selected areas where there was a particular need in both jurisdictions and where it was likely that advances would be made in the future. Secondly, we targeted activities where, in our judgement, there was sufficient goodwill and motivation to implement such actions. Thirdly, we gave special attention to areas where there was a degree of urgency.

It is worth mentioning that the recommendations that we make are at several levels. In some cases we have drawn attention to good practice and have suggested that the policy makers in the other jurisdiction should note the success and limitations of this



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initiative and that it might provide a useful model. This is the least specific kind of recommendation that we have made. Another kind of recommendation centres on research and the need to develop joint research programmes that have a particular focus (adult literacy, access or ICT). A third and much more specific form of recommendation is where we suggest joint programmes or actions which will involve a pooling of resources and personnel (e.g. workplace literacy and development of instruments for assessing adult literacy). A final kind of recommendation centres on recommendations for actions in the border counties. In the latter case geographical proximity is a guiding factor.

In making these recommendations, we are conscious of the powerful political, economic, social and religious forces that have shaped the education system in each jurisdiction. In some cases they are driven by different philosophies. The North, especially under Direct Rule, has tended to follow developments in Britain, many of which have never taken root in the South. An obvious example is the principle of consumer power, under which parents of school children and students in further and higher education were seen as consumers and given information and power to exercise greater choice; the Republic, by contrast, is much more driven by institutions and providers, including the teachers who work in them.

We are also aware of the fragility of the new political arrangements and the difficulty of delivering joint programmes in any situation, and more especially in the North-South context. However, we were strongly influenced by the depth of goodwill towards co-operation which in many instances had at its foundation the needs of the communities. While recommendations that we suggest may need to be implemented on a phased basis, the potential pay-off for both parts of the island is great.

The Broad Picture of Educational Disadvantage

THIS first chapter sets out some features of educational disadvantage, beginning in part one with a brief examination of some of the evidence relating to unequal and low achievement in primary and post-primary schools and its consequences, some differences by social class and gender, and the impact of part-time working. We then move into the main focus of the present study viz. educational disadvantage in adulthood, beginning with recent policy statements (part two) and continuing with an examination of the issue of whether the problem of the learning poor can be solved incrementally or needs more radical interventions (part three). The fourth section gives an estimate of the number of learning poor in Ireland, followed in part five by some of the labour market consequences of low achievement and in part six by examination of recent trends in mature and part-time study. The seventh section contains a brief discussion of the issues.

1.1 Primary and post-primary

A considerable body of evidence testifies to the extent and nature of educational disadvantage in Ireland, North and South, and much of it is very similar. At primary level a recently published national study of the reading achievement of students in Fifth class in the Republic of Ireland found that various indicators of socio-economic status were strongly associated with school performance (Cosgrove, Kellaghan, Forde and Morgan 2000). One such index used in that study was entitlement to a medical card (which in turn is based on income). The results showed that pupils whose parents possessed a medical card scored on average one fifth of a standard deviation below the mean, while those pupils whose parents did not possess a medical card scored on average almost half a standard deviation above the mean.

It is particularly interesting to note, however, that relatively stronger correlations were found between home process variables than was the case with indicators of socio-economic status (Cosgrove et al. 2000). In particular, parental expectations regarding educational achievement of the child related strongly to reading score, as did the number of books in the home, the number of study aids and the frequency of reading to the child before he/she started school.

Evidence on the number of children affected by educational disadvantage at primary level is harder to come by. However, a number of sources suggest that an estimate in the region of 16% of children in the Republic of Ireland is appropriate. For instance it has been shown in a number of surveys that in teachers' views 6-8% of children leaving primary school have literacy skills that are so poor that they are likely to have serious problems at post-primary, while a similar number have difficulties that, while not as serious, give rise to concern (Kellaghan et al. 1995).



The Broad Picture of Educational Disadvantage

At post-primary level, particular attention has been given to the huge differences in the educational attainment of school leavers. The most recent evidence shows that while the percentage of students completing the Leaving Certificate in the Republic has risen from 60% in 1980 to 80% in 1995, the situation has not changed over the last few years (McCoy et al. 1999). A breakdown of those failing to complete the Senior Cycle showed that 4% left with no formal qualifications, while a further 1% left having obtained less than five Ds at Junior Certificate level. In addition, 8% left after the Junior Cycle with five or more Ds and 5% with one or more honours.

What is particularly striking is the consequence of early school-leaving for success in the labour market. While over half of those early school-leavers who entered the labour market were unemployed one year later, this was true of only one-fifth of those who secured the Junior Certificate and less than 10% of those who achieved Leaving Certificate standard. This was true despite the overall decline in unemployment among school-leavers that has occurred over the last decade (McCoy et al. 1999).

The measurement of achievement of school-leavers in Northern Ireland is not directly comparable to the South, but participation rates appear to be lower and to have been stagnant in recent years. In 1999/00, 65.4% of 17 year olds were in full-time education and there was a large gender difference, with a rate of 73.3% for female and only 57.8% for male students. This means that more than a third of pupils drop out of education almost as soon as the law allows them to (ie. if they are aged 16 on 1 July). Even at the age of 16, almost a quarter of pupils, and three out of ten boys, have left school (Department of Education 2000A).

There has been a substantial improvement in the qualifications of school-leavers in Northern Ireland in the decade to 1998/99, during which the proportion of leavers with three A levels rose from 16.3% to 28.2% and the proportion with five or more good GCSEs went up from 10.6% to 20.7%. But a substantial number still leave with poor examination results. More than 11,000 leavers, 43.4% of the total, do not achieve five good GCSE grades (51% of boys and 36% of girls) and more than 5% have no qualifications at all. This is particularly the case among boys. For example, in 1998-99, over 22% of boys left school with less than five GCSEs and 6.5 % had no GCSEs. In contrast the corresponding figures among girls were 11.7 and 2.7% (DENI 2000A). It is also significant to note that of those who left school with less than five GCSEs, only 13% went to further education.

As in the South, there is strong relationship between employment status and qualifications. Thus, while only 2.6% of 1999 school-leavers in Northern Ireland with five good GCSE grades were unemployed, this figure was 19.5% for those who left school with no formal qualifications (DENI 2000A, Table 10).

The Broad Picture of Educational Disadvantage

As might be expected, one of the main influences on school performance is social class origin, as has been found in primary school achievement. In fact social background has a profound influence not only on the likelihood of remaining in school but also on labour market prospects. This cumulative effect of social background is evident as well in examination results. Hannan et al. (1996) found that there were social class differences in both Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations and that the relationship between social class and Leaving Certificate performance remained significant even after the Junior Certificate performance was taken into account.

In the North, it has been well documented that social class divisions reach back into childhood. Pupils in well-off primary schools, as defined by entitlement to free school meals, were three and a half times more likely to get grade A in the 11+ selection tests than children from the poorest primaries in the three most recent years (Gallagher 2000, paper SEL2.1: p4). This confirms an earlier study by the Department of Education (Northern Ireland), which showed that 52% of children in prosperous schools, but only 16% in the poorest schools, got grade A in 1995/96 (DENI 1996). One result is the perpetration of very different social class compositions of secondary and grammar schools. Parents in secondary schools were six times more likely to be unemployed than grammar school parents; conversely, the latter were six times more likely to have professional jobs than parents of secondary pupils (Gallagher et al. 2000, paper SEL4.2: p9).

Through selection at 11, both the social class gap and the learning gap between middle class and working class pupils are reinforced. There is a very large 'grammar school effect' which is the most important factor in achieving a high GCSE score, other things being equal. Being at a grammar school adds almost 16 GCSE points to a pupil's achievement; that is slightly more than the difference between five grade Bs and five grade Es (Shuttleworth and Daly 2000, paper SEL3.1: p5).

Considerable attention has been given to the way in which the effects of educational disadvantage are mediated. One particular matter that has received considerable attention is part-time working during the school year. A recent study in the Dublin area concentrated especially on secondary schools serving disadvantaged communities (Morgan 2000). This showed that while four fifths of the students in Junior Certificate, Fifth year and Leaving Certificate classes had been working at some time, there was a great range between students with regard to hours worked. Thus, while a substantial number had not worked at all, some were working for more than 20 hours weekly during the school term. It is particularly noteworthy that in the case of students from disadvantaged schools, nearly one fifth had worked 20 hours or more.



The Broad Picture of Educational Disadvantage

It is especially significant that students in disadvantaged schools tended to work rather more than those in other schools, especially during the weekdays. In other words, it would seem that they worked rather more during the times when it is most damaging to their school work. It is especially significant that students in disadvantaged schools worked relatively longer hours than other students in the Leaving Certificate year, yet this pattern was not found to the same extent in Fifth year. Thus, there is some evidence that while students in all schools work quite a lot, the management of that employment is rather different among those young people who are not in disadvantaged schools and was less likely to affect their examination results.

While considerable attention has been given to the association of educational disadvantage with social background and home processes, gender has also emerged as an important factor in school achievement in both jurisdictions. For example, relatively more boys than girls leave school in the Republic without any qualifications – 4.4% versus 2.6% (McCoy et al. 1999) – and the proportion of males who leave school without the Leaving Certificate is also higher: 24% versus 14%. Similarly in Northern Ireland, two and a half times more boys than girls leave school with no passes in the GCSE examination. More than half of boys in the North, compared with just over a third of girls, failed to reach the benchmark of five good GCSE grades (DENI, 2000A). Concern about boys' performance has prompted official research on the topic which has broadly concluded that the 'moral panic' on this subject is an over-simplification: in general boys' achievement is improving, but not as fast as that of girls (Gallagher 1997).

1.2 Policy statements on educational disadvantage in adulthood

One of the most important features of the consideration of educational disadvantage among adults is the sheer volume of policy documents and statements (North and South) that have emerged in the last year and which are set to give direction to new structures and programmes for the medium to long-term. These include the White Papers on Adult Education in both jurisdictions, several publications on access to further and higher education, policy documents on ICT and policy statements on adult literacy and community education. In some respects there are remarkable similarities to what is proposed in the various statements of policy, for example in adult literacy. In other cases, while the diagnosis of the problems may be similar, the proposed solutions are different.

Because the systems are undergoing profound change, there are a number of possible scenarios. One is that the two systems diverge in terms of structures, policies and actions. Another is that they 'invent' similar solutions independently. A third possibility is that the problems North and South can be tackled in co-operation, something that would be relatively easier at this stage in the evolution of the systems, especially since a mechanism for joint work exists in the North/South Ministerial Council, set up under the Good Friday Agreement.

The Broad Picture of Educational Disadvantage

The recently published Southern White Paper on Adult Education (2000) *Learning for Life*, devotes a chapter to co-operation with Northern Ireland. It suggests that there are "extensive opportunities to co-operate and share experience in areas of mutual concern" (p.180). There are three dimensions to such co-operation: along the border corridor, North-South co-operation within the overall island, and East-West cooperation between Ireland, Great Britain, Europe and internationally.

Within the education and training sector, the White Paper places particular emphasis on joint co-operation in the following areas: (i) research and development in higher and further education; (ii) the development of lifelong learning, adult literacy, adult guidance as well as the promotion of education/community/business links; (iii) information and communications technology in schools; (iv) educational under-achievement.

In discussing North-South co-operation, the White Paper draws attention to the role of the Centre for Cross Border Studies in developing co-operation in education, business, public administration and communications.

1.3 Extending participation – by steps or by leaps?

Considerable attention has been given to increasing access to university education. Much less attention has been given to widening access to further education (non-university third level), though this has recently begun to change, boosted by the seminal Kennedy (1997) report in Britain. In the South, Institutes of Technology are appointing access officers to help with the task of widening access. In the North, the new lifelong learning strategy has proposed the creation of 8,000 new further education places "targeted mainly at the educationally disadvantaged population, at meeting local and regional skill needs and at promoting wider access for adults to tertiary education and training" (DENI 1999, p16). It also noted that the Workers' Educational Association and Ulster People's College, both of which were promised more funding, "are well placed to support the drive to reach the 'learning poor'" (*ibid* p 25).

The approach to widening access reveals a common view of the democratisation of higher education in both parts of Ireland. Essentially it is a policy of extending opportunities beyond the core group of middle class school-leavers to bright working class children and older people who missed out first time round. This is a perfectly laudable aim, which the authors fully support. However, it is essentially a means of reaching the 'nearly ready' in educational terms, bringing into higher education the next social or educational stratum. It appears to rest on the assumption that once the middle class has reached saturation, in the sense that everyone goes to higher education who wishes to do so, then opportunities can be gradually extended down the



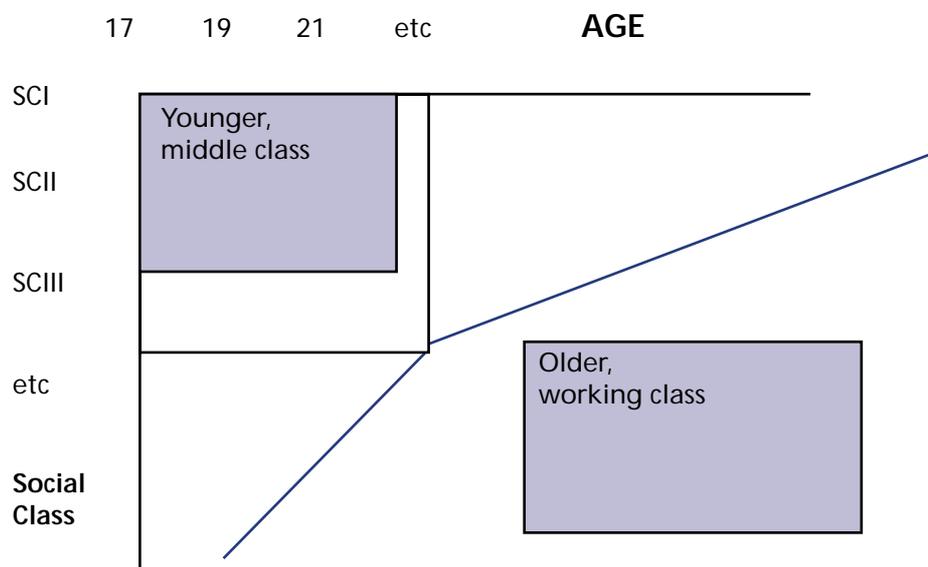
The Broad Picture of Educational Disadvantage

social scale and up the age range, as resources permit. Access to higher education is important but it is only one feature (and hardly the most important) of addressing inequality and educational disadvantage in the population.

Ireland's system of further and higher education can be represented as in *Figure 1*. The square above and to the left of the dotted lines represents the core group of young people from largely middle class backgrounds who, along with small numbers of students from lower social classes and older age groups, make up further and higher education. Below and to the right of the dotted lines are the people that universities do not, and perhaps cannot, reach. Northern Further Education Colleges (FECs) attract more older and working class people than universities. In 1997/98, there were 32,170 students aged 26 and older on vocational courses in FECs, making up 37.6% of all enrolments, but the overwhelming majority were on part-time courses. Older students made up only 2% of full-time enrolments, 508 out of 24,968, whereas they constituted 52% of part-time numbers (DENI 1999).

Southern Institutes of Technology (ITs) and their predecessors, Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs), have traditionally catered for more working class students than universities, but still less than their share of the population. The unskilled manual group, for example, raised its share of new places in RTCs from 2.9% to 5.2% between 1986 and 1992 (Clancy 1995, Table 18), but this was still below the 8.1% share of the population this social class represented (*ibid* Table 13). Moreover, more recent data suggest that the share of first year places taken by students from unskilled manual backgrounds fell to 4.3% in 1998, though this was for the entire IT sector, not just the previous RTCs (Clancy and Wall 2000, Table 7).

Figure 1



The Broad Picture of Educational Disadvantage

ITs cater for very few older students. In 1992/93, only 456 out of 22,364 students were aged 25 or over, only 2% of the total (McIver 1996, Table 2.17). Separate figures are not given for the numbers of older students who are full-time and part-time but, unlike Northern FECs, Southern ITs concentrate mainly on full-time study; part-timers made up only 6.8% of equivalent whole-time enrolments in 1994/95 (*ibid*, Table 1.2), though they represented a total of 14,980 students (*ibid*, Table 2.9). The diagonal lines of Figure 1 for further education are slightly lower down than those of the universities (more from lower social classes), but only slightly to the right of universities (more older students), especially in full-time study.

1.4 Numbers of learning poor

The vast bulk of the higher and further education budget, North and South, is spent on the minority above the diagonal lines of Figure 1. The number of full-time students in the public sector in the Republic of Ireland is around 61,000 in universities and 42,000 in the IT sector, with another 1,000 in other institutions (HEA 1999, p29), making a total of just under 105,000. To meet the rapid growth in recent years, the higher education budget has risen from 18% of the total education budget in 1980 to 25% in 1997 (*ibid* p30). To the extent that the intake to higher education is predominantly middle class (Clancy and Wall 2000), this very large subvention has the effect of reinforcing inequality.

Compared with the 105,000 full-time higher education students, there are approximately 430,000 'nearly ready' adults in the South between the ages of 25 and 64, namely people who have completed upper secondary education but not proceeded to third level study. We might add in 198,500 who have done further education and training and 127,800 who have completed third level non-degree courses; both these groups might wish to have top-up opportunities.

However, there is an even larger number of 'learning poor' in the same age range: 373,000 who have not progressed beyond lower secondary schooling and 433,000 who went no further than primary. This makes a total of 806,000 people, 44.9% of all 25-64 year-olds whose qualifications are known, who are not ready to progress to university and need to be reached by other means.

No comprehensive data more recent than the 1991 Census is available for Northern Ireland on the educational achievement of all adults, but it is known that 58% of workers had qualifications below National Vocational Qualifications level three (the equivalent of two A levels, advanced GNVQ or Leaving Certificate) (NISRA 1998). Since the workforce numbers 731,000 (DHFETE 2000, p8), this means that more than 420,000 have qualifications below level three.



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The real learning poor in the North are the 19% in work and 40% unemployed people who have no qualifications of any kind, a total of 150,000 people. If the 'no qualification' rate of the 533,000 people not in the labour force is the same as that of the labour force, we can add another 120,000 people with no qualifications, bringing the number in this category to 270,000.

Seen against this background, the official estimate that there is "a large group of people in Northern Ireland (as many as 200,000) with no or few formal qualifications" (DENI 1999, p22) may be a severe underestimate. Moreover, it is likely that the economically inactive are less well qualified than the labour force, so the total could well be above 300,000. If we add this sum to the 800,000 in the Republic, we reach a total of 1,100,000 learning poor in Ireland as a whole. Obviously, we are not suggesting that increased provision alone will be sufficient to enhance the situation of this very large number. However, we take the view that there is a need to prioritise the needs of this group in the context of the plans for lifelong learning. We need a 'quantum leap' in investment to tackle the backlog of educational under-achievement (Kennedy 1997, p52).

1.5 Economic and labour market consequences

Table 1.1 indicates some of the features of the learning poor in the South. Men make up more than half of those who left school early, five percentage points ahead of women. More than half of all learning poor are in work, 5% are unemployed and four out of every ten are not in the labour market. There are large and important variations between women and men, with only a third of the former in work compared with nearly three-quarters of men. The table gives clear information on where to find most of the target group for 'second chance' learning opportunities: the two largest groups are 306,000 men in work and 238,000 economically inactive women, followed by 132,000 women at work and 85,000 economically inactive men.

Table 1.1: People in South aged 25-64 with primary or lower secondary education only by work status and gender (1999)

	At work	Unemployed	Not in labour force	Total numbers	Gender %
Women no.	131,800	13,200	238,400	383,400	47.6
Women %	34.4	3.4	62.2	100	
Men no.	306,400	31,100	85,000	422,500	52.4
Men %	72.5	7.4	20.1	100	
Total no.	438,200	44,300	323,400	805,900	100
Total %	54.4	5.5	40.1	100	

Source: Quarterly National Household Survey (Quarter 2, 1999), extracted from Appendix 1 of the White Paper on Adult Education.

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Table 1.1 hints at one reason why the issue of the learning poor needs to be taken seriously. During the peak years of employment, only 54% are actually in work. In fact the likelihood of being in work increases directly in line with educational achievement, as Table 1.2 shows.

Table 1.2: People in South aged 25-64 at work by highest education achieved (1999)

	Women	Men	Total
Primary	26.2	62.5	45.2
Lower secondary	43.9	84.1	65.0
Upper secondary	60.5	89.4	73.7
FE & training	65.2	90.1	77.4
Third level non-degree	76.8	92.6	83.6
Degree or above	84.7	93.1	89.2

Source as in Table 1.1

There is a very large increase in female participation in work in the South as levels of education improve, rising from 26% of women with primary education only to 85% of those with degrees. For men, too, there is an unbroken increase but from a larger base since more than six men out of ten with primary education are at work.

A similar but inverse relationship exists between education level achieved and absence from the labour market. Women with primary education only are five times more likely to be economically inactive (70.9%) than women with degrees (14.3%); they are also three times more likely to be unemployed. Men who left after primary school are also five times more likely to be out of the labour market (29.1%) than male graduates (5.8%). Male unemployment falls steadily as education levels improve so that a man with primary schooling only is six times more likely to be out of work (8.4%) than one with a degree (1.3%). Looked at another way, 72.7% of unemployed men had not gone beyond lower secondary education. These findings confirm the pattern shown by the 1996 Census: 26.2% of people who stopped at primary education were unemployed, six times more than the 4.2% of people with degrees who were out of work (de Buitleir 1999, p11).*

Similarly in the North there is a close relationship between low educational attainment and unemployment. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1996 found that more than half the adult population lacked

*De Buitleir included people who did not state their level of education under 'Primary only'; if this report had used the same method, the number of learning poor would be higher.



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functional literacy in two of the three areas tested but the figure was 71% among unemployed people (NISRA 1997). Statistics in the same year showed that 51% of long-term unemployed people, compared with only 22% of people in work, had no qualifications; only 4% of long-term unemployed had higher qualifications but this was true of 23% of the employed population (DED 1996). In Spring 2000, 32% of unemployed people had no qualifications compared with 19% of those in work (DETI 2000).

1.6 Recent trends in mature students

More opportunities for mature students are not sufficient to ensure we are making a real impact on the learning poor. Referring back to Figure 1, greater mature-age entry may extend participation from left to right but may not necessarily shift it down the social class ladder. The de Buitelir report in the Republic found that mature students were predominantly middle class, especially lower middle class, since higher middle class young people had largely benefited from higher education first time round. It also found that between 60% and 70% held a Leaving Certificate and 44% had professional or third-level qualifications (HEA 1999, p79).

Just as greater mature age entry will not necessarily improve the social class balance of further and higher education or reach the learning poor, neither, in itself, will the creation of more part-time learning opportunities. A study in Northern Ireland found that people with degrees were 10 times more likely to receive on-the-job training than those with no qualifications (Armstrong 1996). In spring 2000, it was found that 59% of professional staff surveyed had received training in the previous 12 months compared with 32% of semi-skilled and 15% of unskilled workers (Kennedy 2000).

Having said that, it is obvious that if we want to attract back into education the 1.1 million adults who have few or no qualifications, we need incentives for mature students, both financial and in the form of additional support. Moreover, part-time study may be appropriate for many of them, so might opportunities in further education. The research volume of a recent Northern Ireland Assembly report posed the reasonable proposition that people from disadvantaged backgrounds "benefit by having courses available local to home, thereby reducing maintenance costs and also reducing the hypothesised 'cultural' problems many from disadvantaged backgrounds experience when leaving home to go to university" (Osborne et al. 2000).

While not sufficient in themselves to attract the learning poor, more learning opportunities for mature entrants in further education and in part-time study are preconditions for such a move. It is useful, therefore, to look briefly at how these areas of learning have been progressing.

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A baseline study of the former RTCs in 1996 found that only 2% of students in that sector were aged 25 or over and that the mode of study was overwhelmingly full-time. One extract from the study typifies the situation: "Most colleges also teach a small range of part-time courses for adults that do not lead to qualifications. However, there is a trend towards discontinuing these courses because they are not seen as being a core part of the RTC mission and because it is an area in which many second level schools are active" (McIver 1996, p29). There are no indications that the picture has changed dramatically since 1996, though the incentive of the declining school-leaving population and the proposal to establish Institute of Technology outreach centres may bring about a reconsideration of these issues.

Although the representation of mature students is better in Northern Ireland than in the South, it is still far from ideal and many of the learning poor are untouched. Further education has concentrated on expanding more prestigious higher education work than in developing studies at basic or even intermediate level, where the skill shortages are most severe (DED 1999, p116). In the seven years to 1998/99, higher education numbers in FECs rose by 141% and full-time numbers increased by 243%, partly because of restrictions on the growth of university enrolments. In sharp contrast, further education in the colleges remained stagnant, with enrolments rising by a mere 0.7% or 500 to 76,421 (DENI 1999).

There is also evidence that the changes in financial support in the last few years have discouraged mature entrants from entering further education colleges on a full-time basis, following steady growth earlier in the 1990s. The number of people aged 26 or more enrolled in the three most recent years is given in Table 3.3:

Table 1.3: Number of people aged 26+ full-time in Further Education Colleges

	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	change	% change
Higher education	124	114	94	-30	-24.2
Further education	487	394	328	-159	-32.6
H&FE	611	508	422	-189	-30.9

Source: DENI 1999

On the other hand the number of mature adults in the North embarking on part-time study has risen healthily by almost 9,000 or 37% in the seven years to 1998/99. It is not known if this is by choice, or because they are working full-time, or because of financial constraints or other factors.

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In the Northern Ireland universities there is also a shift from full-time to part-time study, coinciding with changes in student support. The rise in adult students has also been reversed. The number of full-time entrants to higher education aged 21 or older more than doubled in the decade to 1995/96 but then fell by 17% over the four years to 1999/2000, whereas the number of younger entrants continued its steady rise. Consequently, the share of full-time places taken by adults has declined from a peak of nearly 20% in 1995/96 to 15.3% in 1999/00 (DENI 2000B). As in further education, the fall-off in adult full-time entrants has been accompanied by a surge in part-time study. Numbers were edging up in the first half of the 1990s and then accelerated, rising by more than 4,000 or 86% in the last four years. Part-time higher education in the North is now dominated by adults, with people over 21 representing nearly 84% of all entrants in 1998/99. Likewise, less than a fifth of the 10,848 adult undergraduate entrants were full-time.

Declining full-time participation by people aged 21 and above is confirmed by figures from UCAS for the 1999 intake to the two Northern universities, the vast majority of whose students (96%) come from Northern Ireland. The picture is stark. While the number of young people accepted rose by 8.2% between 1997 and 1999, the number of 21-24 year olds declined by 7% and the number aged 25 or older fell by 9.6%. As a result, the share of places taken by people aged 21+ has fallen by a full two percentage points, from 14.8% to 12.8% of total acceptances.

1.7 Discussion

The picture that we have painted indicating the inadequacies and shortcomings of the current situation is not meant to deny that very substantial improvements have come about. The contrast between current provision and that of one or two generations ago is very striking. At the outbreak of the Second World War just over 60 years ago, the combined enrolments of the Southern universities totalled 5,000 (Coolahan 1981); now there are that many mature students alone and higher education enrolments have multiplied more than 20 times. In the early Sixties less than half of the age cohort achieved Junior Cycle qualifications in the Republic while only 4% went on to university education, a figure that has increased more than tenfold.* When a major review of higher education in Northern Ireland was published in the mid 1960s (Lockwood 1965), the proportion of school-leavers with two A levels was around 7%, compared with 35% now (DENI 1999). The number of full-time higher education entrants has risen in that period from 2,700 to 24,000. However, in relative terms, people left behind by these major advances are in some respects in a less fortunate position than when opportunities were much scarcer.

* This point was suggested by Professor John Coolahan of National University of Ireland Maynooth.

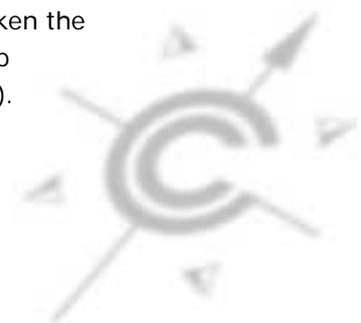
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We take the view that institutions that cater predominantly for middle class school-leavers are far removed from the vision of lifelong learning, where people of all ages and social classes drop in and out of education and training on an equal basis. Ireland's higher education system is inadequate to achieve such a vision or to meet the needs of the learning poor, the people who are not remotely ready to enter higher education. It is our contention that universities can and should broaden their base, but incremental steps to extend working class and older participation are not enough. Further education (non-university) is better geared to the task, but even FECs and ITs are too forbidding for many of the learning poor.

We would argue strongly that the recent emphasis on promoting lifelong learning will not, in itself, help people from disadvantaged groups or areas, such as people in poverty, people with few or no qualifications, disabled people or members of ethnic minorities, including refugees and asylum seekers. Unless accompanied by special measures to attract people from disadvantaged groups, lifelong learning is likely to bring most benefit to those who already have good learning achievements. Likewise, expansion alone will not help the learning poor. It is right that a large chunk of the extra places be earmarked for disadvantaged groups and that the statutory higher and further education sectors be required to widen participation. But rapid expansion, both North and South, over the last few decades has not led to equal access to higher and further education for young people and has not begun to tackle the legacy of under-achievement among the adult population.

The statistics presented in this chapter indicate the kind of educational inequalities that exist and the consequent disadvantage in the labour market for those who have lost out in school and college. This clear link between poor qualifications and unemployment makes it imperative that we give much greater impetus to promoting equality and social inclusion. The Republic has enjoyed several years of unprecedented economic growth and Northern Ireland has been the fastest growing economy in the UK over the last decade (Morahan 2000). If the poor and the learning poor cannot be reached after several years of boom, the chances are they will never be helped. Unless we can guarantee continued growth, and new measures to tackle low achievement, material and educational disadvantage will be their lot for ever and society will not benefit fully from what they could contribute.

In addition the skills needed by new entrants to the labour market and by those already in it are increasing all the time, so it is necessary to cater for all the learning poor, whether employed or not. This fits well with the aim throughout Ireland of moving towards a knowledge-based economy. In the North, the government-endorsed economic plan Strategy 2010 repeatedly emphasises that shortages of skilled labour, especially at intermediate level, weaken the capacity to create a high-skill, high-value economy and to absorb technological advance (DED 1999, pp 80, 81, 83, 84, 97, 105, 117).



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So how can the learning poor be drawn into education? For many of them, it is a matter of boosting their confidence and often bringing their basic skills up to the level of functional literacy before they can contemplate third level studies. Three initiatives dealt with in this report can make a real impact. The first is a co-ordinated effort to improve standards of literacy and numeracy. Another is a greater investment in community education and the creation of organic links between community groups promoting education and the resources of the statutory sector. Thirdly, there are also possibilities for widening participation of mature students through open and distance education and through appropriate use of ICT. It is our view that such initiatives are an intrinsic part of a comprehensive response to educational disadvantage as well as access programmes.

Change and commitment are needed at the highest levels if lifelong learning is to become real for everyone. Too much emphasis has been placed on higher education in recent years, especially for young, largely middle class school-leavers. The figures given above demonstrate a considerable decline in adult participation in full-time higher and further education in the North over the last few years. The Direct Rule ban on growth in universities, combined with policy drift and stagnation in further education, have left a large learning deficit. Although the planning blight began under the Conservatives, Labour made scant improvement in its caretaker capacity since its election in May 1997, despite the priority the party gave to education. There is now a huge deficit for the Northern Ireland Executive to make good. Since disadvantaged groups have been hardest hit by the failure of the system to grow, priority should be given to their needs in the expansion that is now very much needed.

Adults who left school in previous years without completing their education can be regarded as mountain lakes. Just as lakes need openings to allow them to flow down into the countryside, so the talents of adults need to be opened up through learning: this will convert them from static pools to reservoirs of talent that can flow through society and enrich it.

This report does not seek to be a compendium of good practice in education for the learning poor. Much imaginative and sensible thinking on that point lies in Helena Kennedy's report (1997) and we list in Appendix 2 the nine principles of good practice in widening participation produced by her committee. A great deal of innovative practice also exists on the ground, though it is often sporadic and lacks strategic focus. Rather we seek to identify some of the key issues and comment on how they might be tackled better through co-operation between North and South. In that way the waters can enrich all the people on the island of Ireland.

IN this chapter the issue of educational disadvantage is considered in the context of access to further and higher education. There are four main sections. The first provides evidence on access to further and higher education, with particular focus on the effects of socio-economic background. This is followed by a review of the international literature on issues of access with particular reference to policies with promise. The third section deals with initiatives in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland that have tried to address this problem and it is followed by a section containing recommendations.

2.1 Access, North and South

A study by Clancy and Wall (2000) analysed the social background of 1998 higher education entrants in the Republic of Ireland, following similar analyses of entrants in 1980, 1986 and 1992. As in the earlier studies, the most striking differences were between the socio-economic groups. The study showed that 58% of higher education entrants came from four socio-economic groupings (higher professional, lower professional, employers and managers and farmers) even though these groups constituted only 37% of the relevant population. In contrast the other six groups were under-represented in higher education, making up 41% of entrants even though they constituted 63% of the cohort. In particular the higher professional group was strongly represented, taking about twice the proportion of places which its population would warrant. The representation of farmers was also higher than would be expected. On the other hand, those in the categories of 'agricultural workers' and 'unskilled groups' had only a third of the places in higher education that their numbers in the population would warrant.

A number of features of this report are worthy of comment. These have to do with the relative improvement over the years in the numbers from under-represented groups, the differences between the various sectors of higher education and the evidence on how third level opportunity is intimately linked with other features of the educational system.

On the issue of the relative improvement over the last 20 years, in 1980 when the overall rate of admission to higher education was 20%, it was found that 35% of the over-represented socio-economic groups went to third level, while only 8% of the under-represented groups did so. By 1998 the overall admission rate to higher education had increased to 46%. Interestingly the rate for the over-represented groups is now 62% versus 30% for the lower socio-economic groups. Thus the relative odds had changed from 4:1 to 2:1. On the other hand, the gap between the two groups had risen from 27 to 32 percentage points.



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It is worth noting that, in line with earlier findings, the Institutes of Technology (ITs) have a relatively higher proportion of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds than the university sector. For example, in the most recent survey (Clancy and Wall 2000), the three highest socio-economic groupings (employers and managers, higher professional and lower professional) between them make up more than half of the entrants to universities in 1998. However, the same three groups combined make up less than one-third of the entrants to ITs in the same year. Conversely manual worker groups (skilled and unskilled) made up only just over 15% of entrants to universities but roughly twice this number in the case of ITs. To an extent this is inevitable since the middle class tends to attach a higher premium to university as a gateway to the traditional professions than to technological institutes.

A recent study by Osborne (2000) describes a number of features of access to higher education in Northern Ireland. Compared to Britain, Northern Ireland has consistently had more full-time undergraduate entrants in the past decade but a slightly lower number than Scotland. However, it is also noteworthy that Northern Ireland has lagged behind the rest of the UK in attracting mature students to full-time undergraduate study. A second point emerging in Osborne's study is the relatively large increase in 'sub-degree' undergraduate programmes and in part-time courses. Furthermore, about three-fifths of entrants to non-degree courses had gone on to more advanced, largely degree courses after completing their initial courses. Thus Osborne contends that expanding sub-degree provision may increase the demand for degree level studies. A third point of note in Osborne's study is that the number of females entering higher education has increased to the point where almost three-fifths of the entrants in 1997-98 were female.

With regard to the association between social class and entry to higher education, the Osborne analysis shows two interesting points. Firstly, entrants to higher education from Northern Ireland show a higher representation from manual social classes than the rest of the UK. Unlike in the South of Ireland, where lower social classes are better represented in the sub-degree programmes (as in ITs), there is no firm evidence that entrants to such programmes in Northern Ireland show this pattern.

2.2 International literature on successful policies elsewhere

Concepts such as 'equal opportunity', 'access' and 'equity' are central to many analyses of participation in higher and further education. There is considerable evidence from most European countries that while absolute participation rates in further and higher education have increased for all socio-economic groupings, the relative rates for different groups have not changed substantially. For example, data from Germany is of particular interest. The differentiated secondary school system in Germany involves a series of four transitions for

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students to gain access to further/higher education. The first is a transition from the common primary school to one of three secondary school systems – one of which provides a standard route to higher education. Transitions within secondary school and requirements for higher education reduce the pool of students whose qualifications will enable them to enter higher education. A recent study by Schnitzer et al. (1999) showed that while 33% of children from the lowest socio-economic grouping reached upper secondary school, only 8% managed to get to higher education. In contrast, 84% from the highest group got to upper secondary school and 72% to higher education.

The picture is quite consistent across countries regardless of educational structures and policy initiatives. For example, in Belgium economically disadvantaged groups are still under-represented, while in Denmark the percentage of higher education students from lower socio-economic backgrounds has not changed over the last two decades (Nexelmann, cited by Skilbeck and Connell, 2000).

On a broader basis, the major conclusion in a thirteen country study by Shavit and Blossfield (1993) is that while the proportion of all social classes attending higher levels of education had increased, the relative advantages associated with higher class origins is still found. In other words, while in absolute terms lower socio-economic groups have done rather better in terms of access to third level, the relative differences between classes has not changed very much. The Shavit and Blossfield study indicated that only two countries (Sweden and the Netherlands) have made significant progress in changing the relative positions of higher and lower socio-economic groups.

Improving access: policies and interventions

The international literature on improving access suggests that a number of provisions, interventions and policies can assist in promoting access. Three reviews will be considered below: Skilbeck and Connell (2000), who reviewed the international literature on behalf of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in the Republic of Ireland; Woodrow (2000) who examined the practices and policies of six European countries, and Bowen and Bok (1998) who evaluated the effects of special entry programmes in the United States.

Firstly, monitoring and ensuring compliance with policies, while not guaranteeing improvements per se, have an important role to play in the context of suitable measures. An example is the monitoring measures of the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs in Australia by which an institution's performance in achieving previously agreed equity objectives forms the basis for assessing the resources for that institution. Thus since 1995 institutions have set targets and strategies for increasing the participation of disadvantaged



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groups. There have been standard definitions and performance indicators to report progress in achieving targets for access, participation and retention of each equity group. In turn, funding is determined on the basis of performance against equity targets.

Secondly, the evidence suggests that growth in numbers in higher education is one of the most effective ways of providing an opportunity for greater inclusiveness (Skilbeck and Connell 2000). Such growth however needs to be accompanied by other measures to target disadvantaged groups. It is also important that increased growth is monitored so that such development is not accompanied by poor retention and success rates.

A third factor that enhances access is an increase in diversity in third level education. This diversity is usually reflected not only in newer and different kinds of institutions, but also in the adoption of more flexible forms of teaching and learning, the recognition of prior learning and credit transfer, support and guidance of students with special needs, flexible scheduling of courses, as well as part-time and distance education. Locating institutions in geographical areas where there is relatively poor participation can also help greatly.

While diversity remains a powerful approach to addressing the needs of disadvantaged groups, it is crucial that such institutions are not identified as 'inferior' or placed in a league table that does not take into account the opportunities they provide.

Fourthly, it is now recognised that improvement in access by disadvantaged groups requires different kinds of action at all levels in education and in the wider society. The suggestion of Skilbeck and Connell that there is a need for an 'educational equity chain' is especially important. Among the suggestions put forward are some that are concerned with broad issues of equity not only in third level but at earlier levels. Thus they point out the need for providing teachers with opportunities and incentives for in-service education and professional development, taking steps to ensure successful learning by all students at primary level, as well as providing an institutional ethos in higher education that is supportive and inclusive. They also propose bridging courses, flexible assessment practices and welcoming entry arrangements in order to meet the needs of under-represented groups.

It is interesting, fifthly, that the study by Woodrow of six European countries also draws attention to the importance of first and second level in ensuring wider access to further and higher education. In particular Woodrow notes that stratification at second level (division of secondary education into vocational and academic) creates obstacles that are difficult to overcome for those in the

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vocational stream. Similarly the improvement of pre-school facilities and the reduction in the age of starting school can help prevent children from disadvantaged backgrounds falling behind at primary level. Other ideas mentioned include increases in the period of compulsory education and the postponement of the choice between vocational and academic education.

Similarly she notes that a major obstacle is the operation of rigid admission criteria which are often regarded as treating all applicants 'equally' when in fact they produce unequal effects.

Sixthly, of the 'good practices' identified by in the literature, additional student financial support is the most common and sometimes the only solution for the under-representation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This approach is most likely to be effective if accompanied by benefits and subsidised services (housing, meals, travel). Also important is ensuring that unemployment is not better supported than studying. Woodrow identifies targeting of resources as being of value and notes the success of a Netherlands project which involves an independent agency working with higher institutions to improve access, retention and transition to higher education. A related policy is the regional co-operation between the relevant institutions to design curricula and pathways through the system to improve transfer and participation.

A seventh conclusion is the value of close links between secondary and third level institutions, as in the participation of third level students in mentoring, having some third level courses in upper secondary schools, and the establishment of special units within universities for running partnerships with schools.

Finally, there is evidence that special entry programmes may be of particular value in ensuring better access. The study by Bowen and Bok examined the success of schemes that admit disadvantaged students to colleges with achievement levels lower than those normally required. Two points are especially worth making. Firstly, on the basis of their evidence they suggest that test and grade scores are not only imperfect predictors of academic achievement but that they only predict some 15-20% of the variance among all students in academic performance. On this basis they suggest that other considerations including membership of disadvantaged communities should play an equal part in the admission procedures of universities. The second important finding is that students who enter under special admission procedures do as well academically and in their subsequent careers as those who enter through the conventional routes to these same institutions.



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2.3 Initiatives in Ireland, North and South

Effectiveness of HEA Initiatives

Under the Higher Education Authority Act (1971) the HEA has a statutory function to promote equality of opportunity in higher education in the Republic of Ireland. In line with this function the HEA has promoted a number of targeted initiatives and has commissioned an evaluation of these initiatives (Osborne and Leith 2000). The evaluation report concluded that, at least on the basis of the numbers of students involved, the initiatives had not met the expectations of either the funding agency or the institutions themselves.

However the Osborne and Leith report also concluded that the initiatives may be having some success in changing the negative attitudes towards education in disadvantaged communities, which in turn may result in bolstering the belief that entry to third level is an achievable goal for young people in these communities. This in turn would be expected to lead to higher participation in the future. Another factor identified is the role of part-time work and the social activities associated with such work, which may weaken examination results and thus give fewer options after the Leaving Certificate. A related point is that those school leavers who enter the labour market directly after school experience relatively lower rates of unemployment than was the case some years ago.

Other access programmes

In addition to the HEA funded access programmes, a number of other initiatives in the South have attempted to increase the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in further and higher education. Generally these have tended to focus on either attitudinal change, financial support or academic support (Lynch and O'Riordan 1996; Morgan 1995). In many cases these are rather small in scale and, until recently, received little public funding.

Two of these access programmes are of particular interest in the present context since they have a North-South dimension, viz. the BITE programme (Ballymun Initiative for Third Level Education) and the HELP project in Derry (Higher Education Liaison Project). The links between these projects arise from having a common funder which has resulted in joint planning as well as sharing of experiences and expertise.

Among the features which both projects have in common are students tutoring pupils, involvement of parents, summer schools and efforts to raise student expectations through encounters with appropriate role models.

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However there are also significant differences between the projects. In the case of BITE, scholarships have been available to second level students as well as additional supports (on top of the normal grant). In addition there is an arrangement whereby students from the catchment area can be admitted to Dublin City University, provided they have matriculation requirements.

There is evidence that these programmes have been very successful. With regard to BITE, the number progressing into higher education increased from 8.5% to 14.6% in the first years of the programme. It has also been found that those students admitted to DCU under the 'special entry requirements' did as well as students admitted in the normal way. There are also indications of a positive impact of the HELP programme on the attitudes and achievements of students in the programme (Lynch and O'Riordan 1996).

2.4 Recommendations

The evidence considered here indicates that in common with many countries, the governments in both jurisdictions face major problems in ensuring greater access to further and higher education by educationally disadvantaged groups. The indications are that the initiatives that have been tried have enjoyed limited success to date. What is needed is a programme of research, policies and evaluations to tackle this matter. Because of the scale of the problem, the shared experiences in both jurisdictions may enhance the likelihood of success. Such an approach might be guided by the following considerations:

1. **There is a need to address the low levels of performance of children from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds before entry to post-primary school, rather than merely expecting that post-primary schools can offset the effects that have accumulated during the primary school years and indeed before entry to primary school. Action at pre-school and primary level are needed to avoid problems persisting into adulthood.**
2. **There is a need to examine forms of assessment for entry to higher and further education. The evidence that there is a correlation between such results and results in higher and further education may reflect the similarity in what the examinations measure rather than being a reflection of the validity of the examinations at the end of post-primary education.**
3. **The precise activities that help develop fruitful partnerships between institutions of further and higher education and local schools should be identified.**



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4. **Institutions of higher and further education should set targets for numbers of under-represented groups who are admitted and who complete courses and the achievement of these targets should be monitored independently.**
5. **The factors creating success in examinations and completion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds should be examined.**

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THIS chapter is in four sections. Firstly, literacy skills among the 16+ age group are examined with particular reference to results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). The second section examines the policy reactions (North and South) drawing mainly on the Moser report (in relation to Northern Ireland) and on the Green and White Papers on Adult Education (in the case of the Republic of Ireland). A third section examines recent research and thinking on the most effective approaches to adult literacy interventions, while the final section sets out the recommendations in the context of North-South joint initiatives.

3.1 Literacy problems and their implications

When the results of an international comparison of the literacy skills of Republic of Ireland adults were published (Morgan, Hickey and Kellaghan 1997), they attracted considerable attention. Since then they have been the subject of much media comment as well as being the focus of the work of an Oireachtas sub-committee. The largely similar findings of a study in Northern Ireland (The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) 1998) generated a less intense debate in the media but nevertheless received a good deal of attention.

The most striking feature overall was that nearly a quarter of Irish adults (both North and South) have problems with even the simplest literacy tasks. This contrasts with Sweden which has only just over 6% at this level, while the corresponding figure for the Netherlands is 10%. However it is also worth noting that the percentage at this lowest level in the US is very similar to that for Ireland. Similarly, the figure for Britain is within a few percentage points of the figures for Northern Ireland and the Republic.

It emerged that about one-sixth of the Irish population score at the highest level. Here too the results for the North and South are almost identical. Again this contrasts with Sweden where about one-third of the population are at this level and with the US where around 20% are at the highest levels (the US performance is more variable than most countries; it has more people at the extremes).

As might be expected there were rather large differences between age groups in performance in the literacy tests in both the North and the South. For example, only about one-fifth of those in the 16-25 age-group scored at Level 1 (the lowest level), while the corresponding figure for the 55-65 age-group was over two-fifths. A major factor is the substantial differences in levels of education between younger and older age cohorts; younger groups tend to be better educated than older age groups and this is especially the case in Ireland. For example, in 1998 in the Republic, 67% of those in the age-group 25-34 years had completed at least upper secondary education, but this was true of only 31% of those aged 55-64 years.

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Table 3.1: Literacy Level and Age-Group in the International Adult Literacy Survey

Age-group	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Levels 4/5
16-25 years	15.9 <i>21</i>	28.5 <i>26</i>	40.3 <i>35</i>	15.2 <i>19</i>
26-35 years	16.3 <i>18</i>	30.5 <i>31</i>	38.8 <i>35</i>	14.4 <i>17</i>
36-45 years	21.5 <i>22</i>	29.9 <i>30</i>	33.4 <i>32</i>	15.2 <i>15</i>
46-55 years	33.5 <i>28</i>	29.1 <i>31</i>	28.2 <i>28</i>	9.2 <i>13</i>
56-65 years	38.9 <i>40</i>	31.3 <i>34</i>	20.7 <i>19</i>	9.1 <i>7</i>

Note: Table entries are percentages of the sample at each literacy level (prose literacy). For each age-group, the first row gives the results for the Republic of Ireland; the results for Northern Ireland are in bold italics.

It is important to stress that the long-held belief that intellectual capacity declines in middle and old-age is a myth. The evidence (particularly from longitudinal studies) is that adults continue to develop those abilities that they use regularly. The abilities that decline are those that require solutions to new problems or demand speed. There is also substantial evidence from other studies of great differences between people, with some maintaining high intellectual functioning into advanced old age while others show an early decline.

Fairly minimal gender differences were found in both parts of Ireland and tended to depend on the domain of literacy that was involved. For example, in the Republic women tend to do slightly better in prose literacy while men have a slight advantage in quantitative literacy. In the North slightly more women were at the higher levels in both prose and quantitative literacy. However it should be stressed that the differences in question are very small indeed. This pattern of finding suggests that cognitive gender differences are continuing to decline and wherever such differences are found, they are likely to have a cultural, as opposed to a biological, origin.

In the North, the IALS has implications for the equality agenda in that many young Catholic males were found to have inadequate literacy skills for participation in the labour market. Although community differentials in literacy levels have been narrowing in recent years, this is largely due to improvements among Catholic females. For young Catholic males, the gap with Protestant young males was equivalent to almost two years of schooling (Willms 1998, p76).

Of the various factors that are associated with literacy, level of education is predictably the strongest. In the Northern survey close to half of people with

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degrees or equivalent scored at Levels 4/5 on the literacy scales while less than one tenth of this number scored at this level among people who had no qualifications. In the survey in the Republic, the differences were even more dramatic. On the documents scale more than two fifths of those with university degrees (41.3%) were found to have literacy skills at Levels 4/5 while this was the case for less than 2% of those who had left school without any qualifications. This pattern of findings shows clearly that attempting to address literacy problems is to intervene in a central area of educational disadvantage.

Consequences of literacy problems

As might be expected, there was an association between income and literacy level in the IALS. In Northern Ireland it was found that that people whose income was in the lowest two quintiles (bottom 40%) were more likely to perform at Level 1 than those with a personal income in the highest two quintiles (top 40% of earners). In fact about half of those in the top quintile (top 20%) performed at the highest literacy level compared with less than one-fifth in the three bottom quintiles. In the Republic the association between income and literacy level was equally strong. For example, more than two-fifths of those in the top quintile of income were at the highest literacy level (quantitative scale) while only about one-fourth of this number were at the highest literacy level among those people in the two bottom quintiles of income.

Table 3.2: Literacy Level and Income in the International Adult Literacy Survey (Quantitative Literacy)

Income	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Levels 4/5
No wage income	34.1 <i>not given</i>	30.2	25.5	10.1
Quintile 1	31.9 28	31.5 30	24.4 31	12.1 11
Quintile 2	26.7 34	32.1 34	32.5 22	8.6 10
Quintile 3	17.5 24	31.5 29	34.7 34	16.4 13
Quintile 4	9.6 10	23.4 21	39.1 41	28.0 28
Quintile 5	8.1 5	12.4 13	37.9 34	41.7 48

Note: Table entries are percentages of the sample at each literacy level (quantitative literacy). For each quintile of income (where quintile 1 is the lowest income group and quintile 5 is the highest), the first row gives the results for the Republic of Ireland; the results for Northern Ireland are in bold italics.

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There was also quite a strong association between literacy and employment in the IALS. Interestingly in both Northern Ireland and the Republic, people who were unemployed were twice as likely to score at Level 1 than were people in employment.

Of all of the consequences of literacy problems, one of the most striking is the association between low levels of literacy and the reluctance to embark on adult learning. In the Republic only one-tenth of people at Level 1 indicated that they had been involved in education or training during the previous 12 months. On the other hand, people at the highest level of literacy were more than five times more likely than this to say that they had taken such courses. These findings show the self-perpetuating nature of poor literacy skills, since they result in non-participation in the very activities that might enhance such skills.

Role of literacy in everyday life

The IALS revealed an important dimension of social exclusion when it showed that there was a strong association between participation in literacy activities in everyday life and literacy performance. People with strong literacy skills are more likely to be involved in non-literacy activities including attending films, plays and concerts, as well as community activities. For example in the Republic only just over a quarter of people at Level 1 reported attending either a film, play or concert once a month or more often, while this was true of two-thirds of people at Levels 4/5. Similarly, people at the highest levels of literacy were about twice as likely as those at the lowest level to participate in community activities.

Even more remarkable is the finding that people with better literacy skills were more likely to have participated in sporting activities than those with worse literacy skills.

In fact, people with good literacy skills are more likely to be involved in every kind of cultural activity with but one exception viz. watching television. In Northern Ireland, of those who watched more than five hours of television each day, 46% were at Level 1, compared with only 5% at Levels 4/5. It could be that literacy activities provide an enhancement and enrichment of people's lives so that they are more likely to have a broad range of interests in artistic, sporting and community events. Conversely people with poor literacy skills have a more restricted lifestyle resulting from the reduced choices that follow limited access to literacy activities.

Conclusions from IALS

A number of conclusions are warranted on the basis of the evidence summarised here. Firstly, the pattern of results in the North and South of Ireland is very similar, with regard to the extent of literacy problems and the factors and consequences associated with them. While modern conceptions of literacy avoid

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the simplistic dichotomy of 'literate' and 'illiterate', it is evident that close to one-quarter of the adults in each jurisdiction have problems with anything other than the simplest literacy tasks. Furthermore, the percentage with such problems is higher among the educationally disadvantaged i.e. the target group of the present study. A further quarter of adults, who are on Level 2, lack the skills they need to live and work effectively in modern society (CERI 1997).

Secondly, it is evident that the effects of literacy problems extend to domains of people's lives that are broader than involvement in reading and writing. In particular, those with poor literacy skills are less likely to be involved in several non-literacy activities, including community participation, that at first glance seem not directly related to literacy skills. Improving literacy levels can, therefore, reduce social exclusion among such people. Furthermore, people with poor literacy skills are less likely to embark on further education thus creating a situation where the effects are perpetuated.

3.2 Policy statements on literacy problems

Below we consider the policy reaction in both jurisdictions. For Northern Ireland the main source is the Moser report (1999) and for the Republic of Ireland the Green Paper and subsequent White Paper on lifelong learning. The Moser report examines the policy implications from a UK perspective and puts forward a number of recommendations to deal with the issues. There is a similar analysis in the South's Green Paper on Adult Education, while the follow-up White Paper makes specific recommendations in the context of lifelong learning (Department of Education and Science 2000).

The tone and lines of argument of these documents is quite similar in a number of respects. The major points of similarity have to do with the scale of the problem, issues of unawareness, the inadequacy of current provision and the need for a new strategy. Each of these is considered in turn, drawing on the relevant policy statements.

Scale of the problems

Both sets of policy statements emphasise the scale of the problem. The Moser report in the UK proclaims: "One in five adults, if given the alphabetical index to the Yellow Pages, cannot locate the page reference for plumbers". The Green Paper in the Republic is also concerned about the fact that "so many of the Irish population perform at best tasks which require the reader to locate a simple piece of information in a text".



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Lack of awareness

The Moser report draws attention to the discrepancy between tests of adult literacy and people's perceptions of their own problems. "Less than 5% of adults say they have a problem with reading and much the same small proportion acknowledge a difficulty with numbers. Only spelling is acknowledged as a problem by significant numbers" (1999, 2.22).

In the IALS 'Results for Ireland' (Republic of Ireland), an interesting pattern of self-assessment of literacy skills emerged. Specifically people whose skills were good never rated them as poor, while those whose skills were poor frequently rated them as adequate. The Moser report takes the view that this lack of awareness "reflects the low educational aspirations felt by so many. We cannot take for granted.....that the importance of education and of wanting to improve it is felt by most people" (2.23).

This feature of the results is crucial since they show that many people are unaware of a problem. Because they are unaware, for whatever reason, they are unlikely to be motivated to do anything about the 'problem'.

Literacy as a priority in adult education

The Green Paper in the Republic suggests that "tackling low literacy/numeracy levels must rank as the primary adult education priority in Ireland" (p.69). It argues that failure to give it this priority will not only constrain the life chances of the individual but will also limit overall progress. It also makes the point that in a technological society in which so many aspects of life increasingly assume literacy competence, low literacy levels will result in the disengagement of a larger proportion of the national population from the daily life of society. The White Paper reaffirmed this concern and said that IALS had elevated concerns about the adult literacy problem to centre stage in educational policy (p.86).

The Moser report in the UK makes the same kind of argument and adds some other significant matters relating to families and communities. "We are particularly concerned about 'intergenerational effects' of poor basic skills. When parents have trouble with reading, writing or numeracy it is more likely that their children will start with a similar disadvantage in school" (3.7). It also points to the significant consequences for local communities, for the criminal justice system and for public health. While acknowledging that poor basic skills are not the sole cause of such problems, it indicates that there is a strong link between poverty, deprivation and literacy skills.

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Current provision is limited

The main funding for adult literacy programmes in the Republic comes from the Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme (ALCES) by which funds are provided through the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) to enable disadvantaged adults to pursue adult literacy and community education free or at nominal cost. The White Paper estimates that the financial allocation for literacy provision rose from £850,000 to £7.8 million between 1997 and 2000, and that the number of people benefiting rose from 5,000 to 13,000 over the same period. However this is thought to be quite inadequate as reflected in the doubling of the budget to promote the National Literacy Strategy.

The Green Paper in the Republic recognises the value of the student-centred developmental approach to literacy training by organisations such as NALA (National Adult Literacy Agency). However, there would appear to be a number of major problems with current provision. While voluntary provision has many desirable attributes, the issue, according to the Green Paper, is much too important to warrant anything less than a comprehensive national framework. Secondly the gap between provision and need is identified as being great. The third major gap identified is the scarcity of literacy tutors, the absence of a recognised qualification to work in the area, together with unstable conditions of employment and the lack of a career structure for literacy tutors. The White Paper is less explicit in advocating a comprehensive national framework, but otherwise supports the need for a systematic approach to tackling literacy problems (pp.88-89).

The Moser report in the UK makes similar kinds of argument. It indicates that there are "many examples of good practice developed over 20 years that will help in the future, including some basic skills teaching and learning" (4.3). However it also recognises that "the scale of current provision is much too limited and too patchy" (4.5). The limitations are said to be due (among other things) to poor targeting of some groups of learners and lack of knowledge of the opportunities that do exist, a 'tip of the iceberg' scale of provision, too little diversity of opportunity and poor evaluation of some initiatives. For example, with regard to poor targeting, it points out that adults with basic skills problems are not a single homogenous group, but frequently they are treated as if they were, resulting in some groups (perhaps those with the most severe difficulties) being under-represented. With regard to the scale of provision, it suggests that this is characterised by a "random patchiness". Whether provision exists in an area largely depends on whether a provider such as a college or a local authority service think it is important.



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A new strategy is required

There are a number of common features in the UK's Moser report and in the Republic's Green and White Papers on the new approach that will be required to solve the problem. The first element of the new approach is entitlement. The Moser report is quite explicit on this point suggesting that "individuals without a recognised qualification in English or maths (and everyone for whom English is not their first language) should be entitled to a free confidential assessment of basic skills...through libraries, job centres, community centres and online" (7.2).

The Green Paper places particular emphasis on the need for public awareness using a variety of printed and oral media, leading to referral of people most in need. It places particular emphasis on "the establishment of referral networks on an area basis involving key actors...the purpose of the networks is to promote awareness of the service, to provide a structured mechanism for the identification of area needs and the referral of those in need of the service" (p.76).

While the White Paper avoids the language of entitlement, it aims to help 113,000 people in the period of the National Development Plan 2000-2006, giving priority to those with the lowest literacy skills. It plans to adopt the National Adult Literacy Agency's Consortia Framework proposal to ensure people with literacy needs are referred to suitable education and training programmes as an integral part of the Employment Action Plan. Among the key target groups are long-term unemployed people, people with disabilities, the homeless, Travellers, refugees and asylum seekers (p.89).

A second point of emphasis common to both countries is the need for expanding and improving opportunities in dealing with the literacy problem. The Green Paper refers to the need for "new approaches...including family based programmes targeting parents and their children, new outreach strategies, intensive programmes targeted at those most in need, a small number of demonstration centres and distance learning" (p.76).

The Moser report suggests that "while expanding the scale of what is available, consistency and quality need to be assured...another let-down will discourage further attempts" (8.2). Among the strands suggested are the following:

- key skills programmes as an integral part of apprenticeships and traineeships to enable young people (aged 16-19 years) to improve their literacy and numeracy as part of these qualifications or as a free-standing qualification;
- programmes for the unemployed;
- workplace programmes – the report draws attention to the difficulty of persuading the great majority of employers of the value of basic skills as part of overall training;

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- trade unions – Moser notes that union-led programmes are often seen by employees as safe, credible and relevant;
- University for Industry – the learning centres proposed will draw in new groups of learners and develop a range of high quality distance programmes using modern technology;
- community-based programmes – such organisations are often close to those who are not participants in formal education and work in several spheres including housing, crime prevention, credit unions, self-help groups and social action bodies;
- family based programmes – the report indicates that such programmes can have the effect of preventing early failure among young children and also of improving the literacy and numeracy skills of adults.

As noted above, **quality** is emphasised in both sets of reports. The Green Paper in the Republic indicates that a “key goal is to inform future practice, to identify and share the most successful strategies and systematically enhance the capacity of the system to address literacy needs” (p.76). The White Paper states the intention to implement a quality framework to monitor the effectiveness of the adult literacy service (p.88).

The Moser report in the UK takes the view: “Every bit as important as the diversity of opportunity is that the standard of what is on offer is uniformly and dependably high...high quality provision is a positive encouragement not least to people who have experienced failure earlier in their educational lives” (9.1).

3.3 International literature: recent themes

It is informative to look at some recent thinking on how literacy problems should be tackled with a particular focus on practice and policies in other countries. While there is almost complete acceptance that literacy has a profound impact on life chances and income around the world, there is somewhat less agreement on how adult education programmes should progress. However, there is agreement on a number of matters that are summarised below (Wagner and Venezsky 1999).

The first point is that there is a need for suitable instruments to direct instructional practice. It is doubtful if reading ages as such are of much value. Rather there is a need for diagnostic instruments to provide a profile of learners’ strengths and weaknesses and which will give more useful information for instruction than traditional standardised tests. Equally it is important that the tasks involved in such tests should be representative of the everyday literacy challenges encountered by adults.



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A second point on which there is agreement is the need to achieve a balance between general instruction in basic skills and the ability to apply these skills in specific contexts. There is considerable evidence that relatively little transfer occurs between general skills and specific performance situations. In contrast to children's learning of literacy skills, adults need a better sense of specific purpose to which the skills will be put in order to balance them against the time and effort needed. It has been demonstrated in vocational literacy training (in the army, and with motor mechanics) that there are substantially more learning gains when people learn with the specific focus on the context where skills will be used.

A third important consideration has to do with quantitative literacy, which has received little attention until now. Given the increasing use of graphs, charts and statistics in telecommunications (such as the World Wide Web) this is likely to receive much greater attention. There is also some evidence that a relatively smaller percentage of teachers in adult education have a special interest or competency in quantitative literacy than other features of literacy.

A fourth matter has to do with the number of people who are likely in the future to need instruction in English as a second language. The research in this area has been concerned with whether ESL (English as a Second Language) adult learners benefit from literacy in their native language prior to learning to read in English. The evidence on this point has been summarised by Wagner and Venezky, who conclude that there is a substantial benefit from native language literacy skills irrespective of the scripts involved. This review also concluded that speaking in English was less important than had previously been thought; ESL learners could go directly to beginning to read in English without becoming skilled English speakers.

A fifth conclusion from the literature is that family literacy programmes offer a more promising avenue than traditional forms of instruction. A review of these programmes by De Bruin, Paris and Seidenberg (1997) revealed they had a number of advantages. For one thing, they were more attractive to many families because they offered more services (like childcare). As a result the rate of completion was about twice as high as in conventional adult education programmes. Even more important was the conclusion that parents' expectations for their children's achievement increased significantly after family literacy activities. Finally, there is evidence that the success of family literacy programmes is partially dependent on the extent to which they can link with other support mechanisms to help disadvantaged families. These positive features are seen in family literacy programmes run by some Northern further education colleges along with primary schools.

A number of key features of family literacy programmes have been identified. These include providing help to families from the very beginning i.e. during infancy.

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Another important feature is encouragement of language development and interactive play as precursors to emergent literacy. They also involve providing books and print materials that are appropriate to the literacy levels of family members. Another important feature is the link with access to medical, social and educational services that go beyond literacy learning activities.

A sixth conclusion in the literature centres on the need for professionalisation and standards. In most countries (including Ireland) the vast majority of instructional staff are part-time (often volunteers with a high turnover). Research in this area indicates the need for new approaches to professional development. In particular there is a need for approaches that enable teachers to be responsive to such factors as individual needs and contexts, as well as the importance of their role in determining appropriate content and processes.

Finally, the importance of technology in literacy programmes is not fully recognised. The finding in most countries is that literacy programmes have lagged behind other areas of learning despite some indications of the real potential of the use of such tools. In particular, technology holds promise for the future because it can reduce the isolation that is often a feature of such learning.

3.4 Recommendations

The recommendations put forward below are addressed to the relevant government departments in each jurisdiction as well as to the agencies that have a special interest in literacy i.e. the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) in the South and the new Basic Skills Unit in the North. It is not our intention to be overly directive in the recommendations that are made, and we recognise that both jurisdictions have been stepping up their efforts to tackle the problem. Nevertheless the research summarised above indicates the extent to which there are common problems in each jurisdiction. Our conversations with all those involved in both jurisdictions indicate a particular willingness to co-operate in joint initiatives, particularly in the light of the need for cost-effectiveness in an area where the needs are great and where the campaigns in earlier generations to deal with 'the illiteracy problem' experienced little success.

These recommendations are concerned with the need for relevant research, for training of trainers and for work in the areas of family literacy and workplace literacy.

1. **Only recently has attention been given to research in the area of adult literacy. There is a particular need for research on instructional methodology, effectiveness of current methods of instruction and on teaching methods that are distinctive to adult literacy. In addition, there is a need for developmental work on learning supports including textbooks, use of**



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technology and assessment. As an example, it is striking that there is a scarcity of appropriate tests that are suitable for adult learners. We recommend therefore that a joint North-South testing-development programme should be initiated. This would encompass literacy in the broadest sense and would reflect the shared philosophy of the organisations concerned.

2. While Information and Communications Technology offers some of the most promising avenues to tackling adult literacy problems, it is also true that adults with literacy problems are unlikely to have the access to the technology or the confidence to use the appropriate tools. We recommend that the research programme give particular attention to how ICT can be best utilised.
3. Given the scarcity of trainer programmes for literacy and in particular the absence of a systematic programme of theoretical input to such programmes, there should be a joint programme of training of trainers for literacy .
4. Family literacy programmes offer one of the best approaches to the literacy problems encountered by both children and adults. We recommend that a joint resource centre should be developed that would collect the information on best practice in this area and provide guidelines for the development of family literacy programmes.
5. Since the evidence demonstrates the potential of workplace literacy programmes and since such programmes are not much in evidence, a joint programme involving a number of sites, North and South, should be developed. These would be particularly relevant in workplaces that attract employees from across the border.
6. Because of the current involvement of further education colleges in literacy in border counties and their willingness to extend their involvement beyond the small number of centres they already have in the South, this work should be extended and formalised.

Community Education and Training

THIS chapter begins with a brief introduction to community education, followed by reviews of provision in both jurisdictions and along the border in parts 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4. A discussion of relationships between colleges and communities is contained in part 4.5, leading to recommendations in part 4.6.

4.1 Introduction

Community education and training is an aspect of lifelong learning that is still severely under-developed in both parts of Ireland. In recent years it has received official recognition and endorsement, but little progress has been made in converting this into financial support.

Yet community education is an excellent and proven means of reaching people from disadvantaged groups, using innovative ways of giving them a voice to identify their needs, and finding ways to meet them. It combines concern to deal with people as members of a community with meeting their individual learning needs, unlike some apparently people-friendly approaches. One international study has warned that, whereas some learning programmes promise flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of individual learners, they may perversely reinforce patterns of exclusion by ignoring social and communal involvement (Nash and Walshe 1999, p24).

Moreover community education is part of the process of community development and gives disadvantaged individuals and communities the skills and confidence to seek improvements in their lives and find ways of achieving them. By building the capacity of communities through education and training, we help to create a society in which everyone can participate and from which all can draw benefits. Social exclusion is not just a result of low educational achievement, it is also a cause. People blighted by multiple deprivation, such as poverty, disability or discrimination, may have difficulty in recognising the relevance of education and face great hurdles in gaining access to it. We cannot improve educational standards among adults unless we tackle the root causes. The director of the UK Economic and Social Research Council's Learning Society Programme, Professor Frank Coffield, summarised it like this:

"Policies which concentrate on widening access are likely to have limited impact unless they are integrated with wider, well-resourced strategies to combat poverty and social exclusion".
(Coffield 2000).



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In its broadest form community education could be described as education for adults which is offered in consultation with the people involved and provided in a democratic manner in a place and form that meet the needs they express. Its advantages are that:

- initiatives are usually taken by community activists in response to local needs;
- course provision is tailored to the needs of learners;
- the timing and location of courses are flexible;
- innovative forms of delivery are geared to the aptitude and previous educational experience of learners;
- it does not suffer from the false distinctions between education and training that are common elsewhere;
- new learners are less inhibited than they might be with mainstream providers;
- pathways have been created to allow learners to progress, often with accreditation, to higher levels.

As a result, community education offers excellent opportunities to reach the learning poor, especially members of disadvantaged groups such as people lacking basic skills, the long-term unemployed, members of ethnic minorities (including refugees and asylum seekers) and people with disabilities.

Some of the advantages are also, on occasion, drawbacks. One is that activity is often sporadic, partly because the needs of learners inevitably change. Another is that community education depends greatly on short-term funding, such as European Union programmes. A third is that community education lacks the career progression structures that exist in mainstream institutions. A final drawback, exacerbated by the other three, is that there is often rapid turnover among paid and voluntary workers.

As will be apparent from the examples below, much can be done on a cross-border basis to build on the strengths of the community education movement and mitigate the disadvantages. This can and should be done both within the community (in its broadest and most diverse sense) and in other institutions involved in lifelong learning for adults. There is great scope for partnerships involving both. Many colleges and training bodies already make a useful contribution to community education and enrich their provision by espousing the good practice inherent in it. In turn, most people active in community education recognise the need to draw on the resources of mainstream institutions; very often their community learners progress to established colleges, universities and training centres to take courses that cannot be provided at local level.

Community Education and Training

This chapter draws on published sources and interviews with people involved to look at some of the issues involved in creating a better partnership in two directions:

- between community education and the statutory sector;
- between community and statutory sectors on both sides of the border.

4.2 Community education in the South

The community education sector in the South is characterised by a number of features. The first relates to the amount of funding, the sources for it and the flexibility of its allocation. A study by McKeown (1998) on behalf of the Conference of Religious of Ireland (CORI) noted the relatively small amount of spending in the sector, which it estimated at just over £7m per annum. A later CORI publication (1999) pointed out that only one-fifth of expenditure on community education comes from the Department of Education and Science. Most comes from the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs or from the EU funded Programme for Local, Urban and Rural Development. It also claimed that the funding mechanisms are often confusing to those involved. CORI argued that funding for community education needs to be flexible, since conventional funding mechanisms like capitation or annual budgets are usually not suitable for community projects.

The second feature is that, as noted in the Green Paper on Adult Education, a “focus on marginalisation has tended to underpin the changing character of community education practice in Ireland” (p.89). The creation of the Community Development Programme in 1990 by the Government in the Republic made a major contribution to the development of the sector. This was set up to assist in the staffing of locally-based community development resource centres in areas affected by high unemployment and disadvantage. The number of projects funded under the programme rose from 15 in 1990 to 90 in 1998.

A third important feature arises from the hope that community education will reach those in greatest need. A well-established finding from most countries is that there is a strong positive relationship between the level of formal education and participation in adult education. Thus the International Adult Literacy Survey found that graduates were more than six times more likely than people with a primary education only to have taken adult education courses.

Related to this last development is that the biggest success of community education in the South is that it has managed to reach some of those who otherwise would have no involvement in education. This usually happened through community development projects, women’s groups and family



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development projects (CORI, 1999). In many cases the point of departure has been some issue of local concern to a group which features an educational component designed to provide the community with skills that are directly relevant to it. The example given by CORI is the Department of Education and Science's home-school-community liaison scheme in which the co-ordinators become, in effect, outreach workers who help parents to identify their educational needs.

The White Paper on Adult Education gave an enormous boost to community education, which appears as a key component throughout the document as well as enjoying a chapter of its own. Some of the recommendations put forward in the White Paper had earlier been signalled in the Report of the National Education Convention (Coolahan 1994). The section on adult education in the White Paper, in the context of its vision for society, says that:

"Community development refers to the contribution of adult education to the development of a structural analysis and a collective sense of purpose amongst marginalized people who share common problems and who aim to become actively involved in solving these problems" (DES 2000, para 1.4.7, p29).

Likewise, in setting out the core principles, the White Paper includes:

"the development of the community dimension of provision, with integrated linkages between the work of the education centre/school and those of youth, adult and community interests, and with other agencies in the community, particularly in the employment, health and welfare and local development fields" (*ibid* para 1.5.2, p31).

The White Paper accepts the criticisms made in consultations that the growth of community education has been constrained by the low levels and uncertainty of financial and other resources, separation from other sectors of education and inadequate research support. It says the government is concerned to provide:

- a more streamlined funding mechanism;
- long-term funding;
- a separate budget for community education in the voluntary and community sector (para 5.8, p116).

An extra £20million will be allocated over the period to 2006 from the Department of Education and Science budget, supplemented by money from the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. However, unlike the proposed new scheme for funding adult education activity in other sectors, such

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as secondary schools, funding will not be guaranteed or seen as an entitlement. Rather providers will have to compete through a competitive bidding process under a new national scheme and normally on the basis of three-year programmes of activity (*ibid*).

Referring to the lack of research support, the White Paper proposes that the new National Adult Learning Council will have a research role and will be given staff and resources to carry it out. It notes that there is a particular dearth of data, among other issues, on participation in adult education by groups such as Travellers, students with disabilities and immigrants, on processes and outcomes in community education, and the effectiveness of outreach strategies. The new council will focus particularly on such issues.

Chapter 10 of the White Paper proposes new structures and appropriate support staff to meet the educational need of adults. At ground level it suggests 33 Local Adult Learning Boards, on which the local voluntary and community sector would have four representatives. A National Adult Learning Council would mirror these at national level, working through four units:

- adult learning and the formal education sector
- workplace learning
- community education
- research.

4.3 Community education in the North

Northern Ireland shares many of the characteristics of community education in the Republic. Funding, for example, is difficult to get, comes from a wide variety of sources and is usually short-term. The European Peace and Reconciliation (P and R) Programme and the European Social Fund have, together, been the largest source of money for both capital costs and running expenses, but these financial streams have often flowed for only one or two years for any particular project. Since money was channelled through a bewildering number of intermediary funding bodies, operating at both district council and regional levels, it became difficult for local groups to keep track of what was available and the differing application systems. Other important sources of money include the National Lottery Charities Board, the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, the International Fund for Ireland and Co-operation Ireland.

These funds have prompted a huge growth in community development work generally, including community education. It has been estimated that the P and R Programme alone led to



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the creation of 1,000 jobs (McGill 1998), although most of these have not been sustained. Several reports have noted the contribution of community education in women's groups, inner cities, town centres and rural areas, and their success in attracting and serving the needs of new learners.

An important event was the Northern Administration's creation of the Voluntary Activity Unit (VAU), which has adopted a progressive approach to community development. Like the Southern White Paper, the VAU has recognised the importance of education and reflection in the process of giving power to local people:

"Feeling disquiet about a problem does not necessarily indicate an understanding of it. It is only on the basis of understanding that it is possible to determine an effective strategy. Central to the empowering process, therefore, is the opportunity to analyse problems, drawing both on knowledge from others and by reflecting on your own experience" (VAU 1996).

While similarities exist at conceptual and practical levels between the North and South, a number of important differences exist as well. One is that the further education colleges (FECs), unlike the Republic's Institutes of Technology (ITs), have a community education role in partnership with local groups. A study for the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (one of the European P and R Programme's intermediary funding bodies) found a generally close working relationships between FECs and university outreach centres on the one hand and community groups in disadvantaged areas on the other (McGill 1999), though there is still a considerable barrier of ignorance and mistrust.

A second difference is that community-based training has been an important feature of the scene, though less so since the ending of the government's Action for Community Employment (ACE) scheme over the last few years. At one time more than 10,000 adults were employed with a target budget of £52 million (T and EA 1996) on this programme, which included at least a day per week in formal training. Another difference is that the Department for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (formerly part of the Department of Education Northern Ireland) has been responding slowly to the need to maintain support organisations. It has for many years been financing the Workers' Educational Association and last year it added the Educational Guidance Service for Adults and the Ulster People's College to the list of bodies given core finance.

The way ahead for community education was sketched out in a Government report in 1999 which proposed a strategic collaboration fund for FECs to promote "innovative, local strategic partnerships which are inclusive of all the major local interests and can co-ordinate activity to meet local needs". It added:

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"The Government wishes to see the voluntary/community sector playing an important role, in compact with the statutory further education and training sectors, in the development of a culture of lifelong learning. The voluntary/ community sector has a special entrée to those groups which are currently under-represented in adult education. As the Kennedy Report strongly recommends and *The Learning Age* endorses, more effort has to be made to reach out to and motivate 'the learning poor'. Frequently, the first step on the learning ladder for an individual is through contact with a community group". (DENI 1999, para 6.2, p24)

4.4 Border areas

The Southern border counties share some of the features of the Northern system insofar as they have suffered from 30 years of violence and, on the more positive side, are eligible for additional funding under the European Peace and Reconciliation Programme. A useful innovation is the unified support structure for community development provided by Area Development Management (ADM) and the Combat Poverty Agency (CPA). By the mid 1990s the ADM/CPA educational disadvantage initiative had generated 21 projects across all of the Southern border counties with funding of £550,000 (Rourke and Shiels 2000). However these were geared to preventing young people leaving school early without qualifications and offering alternatives to young people who had already left early. While the evaluation of this work gives some valuable insights into the causes and distribution of disadvantage and means to counter it, the focus of the present research project is on older disadvantaged adults.

Having said that, the evaluation study helps identify some of the main characteristics of the learning poor. One is that they are far less likely to be in employment than people with qualifications. Research for ADM/CPA showed that 69% of those who left school without qualifications were out of work a year later, compared with only 16% of those who left with the Leaving Certificate (Rourke and Shiels, p.8). Moreover the study suggests that there is a big problem of educational disadvantage among adults along the border. Using data in the 1996 Census, it showed that 58% of adults there had left school before the age of 16 compared with 48% nationally (*ibid*, p.9).

As we will indicate in this report, there is scope for co-operation in community education throughout Ireland. In addition, there are natural communities that extend across the border, many of which were split by the closing of border roads during the 'troubles'. In these areas there are additional things that can be done to tackle the severe problem of educational disadvantage that exists.

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Some projects already do this, such as a project linking men's health groups, boat restorers, ex-servicemen and theatre groups in west and east Belfast with their counterparts in Sligo, and 20 local history projects served by a resource centre in County Cavan (Co-operation Ireland, undated). The Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (ATGWU) and the Workers' Educational Association have combined to offer a series of courses on the theme of 'cultural identity' to trade unionists and community activists along the border. In addition the ATGWU, which has members throughout Ireland, has an extensive education and training programme, just as the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) itself does. The OWL project brings women's groups on both sides of the border together for education and training. The following additional cross-border projects were visited as part of the research for this report.

- LEO (Louth Enniskillen Opportunities) runs a successful scheme to train local people as information technology trainers and thus contribute to economic and community development.
- Newry and Mourne Confederation of Community Groups organises a range of courses that serve people living in South Down, South Armagh and across the border.
- Erne East and Slieve Beagh naturally serve communities stretching across the border from Fermanagh to Monaghan.

4.5 Colleges and communities

Both North and South we have identified the difficulties facing community organisations in attracting and holding onto funding for educational projects. In both parts of the country there is an official preference, expressed in the two White Papers, for communities to work with the statutory sector.

In our interviews we found that the Southern colleges did not see community education as part of their business; they felt it was a responsibility of FÁS, the State training authority. In the North, by contrast, most FECs are committed to and closely involved in outreach work; although this can often be more accurately described as education in the community rather than community education, it does undoubtedly reach out to disadvantaged groups. However, although colleges believed they were doing a good job, community representatives were invariably less enthusiastic. Their reaction to what colleges were doing ranged from accepting that they were doing their best to a view that they were patronising and empire building. That works both ways, because some college representatives believe that some community groups are building up educational facilities, including computer suites, at great cost – almost like a

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status symbol – but not putting them to good use. In some cases, the colleges' dedicated outreach workers were seen as helpful, but lecturers delivering courses were out of sympathy with a community development approach to education.

The key point is that it is possible to make a success of the relationship between colleges and communities. This requires better communication, the building of trust on both sides and a commitment to serve the learning poor rather than vested interests. If it is made to work, everyone can benefit.

One way ahead is for democratic community organisations to continue to assess local needs, and decide on the education programmes best suited to meeting them and the forms of delivery that will suit local people. But instead of employing tutors directly, they can work with the local college, which can draw down the funds to pay for tuition. College representatives indicated in interviews with us that they would also be happy to provide training for tutors to improve their effectiveness and ensure they met the requirements demanded of further education lecturers. In this scenario the colleges meet their obligation to serve the local community, especially the most disadvantaged, while the community organisation retains control of its educational activities without having to worry about attracting project funding.

There is a cross-border dimension to this as well. If Northern FECs have expertise in community education, they could share it with their Southern counterparts. Faced with a substantial decline in the number of traditional school-leavers, Institutes of Technology (ITs) have already begun the search for a wider remit. Throughout the 1980s, for example, the number of births in Ireland fell by just over 30%, tumbling in total from 74,388 in 1980 to 51,659 in 1989. Some of the shortfall will be made up by people returning to Ireland and by new immigrants, but the IT sector will still see a substantial decline in its core group of young, full-time students. One option is to develop more fully into the area of community education.

4.6 Recommendations

1. **There is undoubtedly immense scope to develop fruitful relationships between colleges and local communities in order to reach out to the learning poor. It is, however, difficult for institutions to develop new roles from limited internal resources. We believe that governments should create mechanisms to encourage links and give financial incentives to both sides to build on what already exists, taking account of what we said earlier in this chapter. They should also ensure that good practice in relations between colleges and community groups is disseminated effectively.**



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2. In addition, we believe that the fund to encourage co-operation between Northern and Southern colleges, recommended on page 102, should contain specific headings to allow community groups on either side of the border to use the expertise of colleges on the other side and to spread good practice in this sphere as well.
3. In developing links between colleges and communities on both sides of the border, it is important to ensure that all financial power is not given to colleges. Under present public finance rules it is easier for colleges to draw down money, but it would be possible to introduce community learning accounts, similar to individual learning accounts, which would give more economic power to local groups. Whether or not this is done, it is important that the core costs of running groups are met on a guaranteed, long-term basis rather than leaving them dependent on short-term project funding.
4. Consideration should be given to creating a system of accreditation and certification, building on small blocks of learning such as might attract new learners and giving credit for prior experience. This work should draw on the experience of bodies such as the Northern Ireland Open College Network, which accredits many courses in community education. It could also adopt some of the methodology of the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System, which is working towards a unified system of accreditation built on blocks of learning with defined values that can be put together for various qualifications (*see page 110*).
5. The research unit within the National Adult Learning Council proposed by the Southern White Paper could be the nucleus of a body to carry out research throughout Ireland, offer a resource to community educators and take a lead in disseminating good practice.
6. The NALC, or a body serving the whole of Ireland, could play a role in developing quality assurance and auditing methods appropriate to community education. The claim is often made that the financial and administrative burdens on projects arising from the demands of funders are excessively onerous, even when relatively small sums of money are involved. On the other hand, it is important that projects account for the expenditure of public money, whether from Belfast, Dublin or Brussels. Cross-border projects could investigate these difficult issues and reach reasonable compromises, especially since both governments are involved in EU programmes.

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7. The White Paper proposes the creation of a Forum for Adult Education Practitioners (DES 2000, para 8.2, p.153). This too should operate on a cross-border basis since the functions envisaged (exchange of ideas, good practice and new thinking, influencing policy development and contributing to solidarity and peer support) can be enriched by bringing together the different perspectives of adult educators North and South.
8. Support services are a key area of community education, from the creation of databases of learning opportunities and the advice and guidance needed to make sense of them through to helping with learning skills and careers advice. Similarly there is a great need for support for community groups. In these areas, too, much can be learned from both North and South and structures should be created to ensure that new support services are planned and delivered in an integrated manner. This should ensure that services are better and more cost effective.
9. A specific area of support should be the joint training of adult educators and the voluntary management committees responsible for community education projects. There is much expertise in this area both North and South and it should be shared as much as possible.



Enhancing Participation of Adults Through ICT

THIS chapter is in four sections. Firstly, some features of the international literature on lifelong learning, with particular reference to mature students, are examined. Secondly, the provision for mature students in Ireland is examined. The third section sets out some ideas as to how Information and Communications Technology (ICT) might be used for fairer and more effective provision for mature students, while the final part sets out recommendations.

5.1 International literature on lifelong learning and ICT

Below a number of aspects of the international literatures on lifelong learning are examined. Particular attention is given to:

- i. the rationale for lifelong learning;
- ii. features of such learning in selected countries;
- iii. organisation and management of resources to facilitate lifelong learning

i Rationale for lifelong learning

The rationale for lifelong learning has been stated in several publications and in the international literature in the OECD (1996) study. This latter work put forward five reasons for the importance of lifelong learning as follows:

- the economic argument, particularly the dependence of economies on knowledge and information;
- the speed of technological change;
- the fact that traditional policies for redistribution of wealth have ignored the life-cycle pattern of the income of individuals;
- the need for the promotion of psychological as well as physical well-being of people during all of their lives;
- the need for social cohesion, which stresses that people who miss out in contemporary society either early on or in later life may experience social exclusion.

ii Lifelong learning in the Netherlands, Denmark and Austria

Individual countries have varied somewhat in their approach to lifelong learning and in the emphasis placed on particular aims. In the Netherlands, there has been a long established tradition of provision for people outside mainstream education.



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A number of features of this approach are of interest. Firstly, it has been marked by co-operation between government and private agencies as well as the voluntary sector, and this enabled the Netherlands to provide diversified provision including correspondence education, the open university and several other part-time alternatives. A second feature has been the linking of vocational training and business, particularly in the context of providing for the unemployed. A final and more recent line of emphasis had been a re-orientation of the whole educational system so that the lifelong learning perspective is as important in primary and post-primary as it is in the provision of courses for adults.

Many of the features of lifelong learning in Denmark are similar to those of the Netherlands. However, there are other additional features in the Danish approach. These include an emphasis on provision for educationally disadvantaged people and the use of technology to broaden opportunities.

In Austria, the emphasis in lifelong learning is on vocational education and training, while features of social, cultural and personal development are regarded as of secondary importance (OECD 2000). Many of the initiatives in lifelong learning in the Austrian system take this emphasis as their point of departure. They include efforts to ensure that vocational education and training has equal status and funding with traditional forms of higher education, and a programme to allow employed people to be re-employed in their workplace following leave for participation in education and training.

iii Financing and management of lifelong learning

A major problem in every country is to ensure a balance of equity and efficiency in the funding of lifelong learning. One approach has been for central government to allocate budgets to regional authorities where programmes are developed and financed. The hope is that this greater autonomy will result in greater efficiencies and will have the effect of bringing local communities closer to the centre of decision-making about programmes. This policy is evident in a number of countries including Austria, Italy, Norway, the Netherlands and Sweden (OECD 2000).

A second approach is through incentives to employers and employees so that work-related lifelong learning can be developed. One way in which this is done is through tax concessions for spending on training. However, while such ideas are frequently advocated, a recent review concluded that comprehensive policies and practices were lacking (OECD 2000).

A final approach is through re-allocation of funds from existing sectors to lifelong learning, sometimes as a result of demographic changes that make it possible to switch funding from primary and post-primary to lifelong learning. Any such move would merit severe scrutiny and has not happened on any significant scale (OECD 2000).

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5.2 Mature students in further and higher education in Ireland

Existing provision in the South

It has been well established that the number of young people progressing from post-primary to further and higher education has increased substantially over the last two decades. In 1997 72% of all school-leavers entered further or higher education or training, a figure which is projected to increase to 82% by the year 2004 (HEA 1999). It is particularly interesting that there is a major difference between school-leavers who have and who have not completed the Leaving Certificate. Of those who completed the Leaving Certificate, 54% went into higher education, while a further 29% went into further education or training and 17% went directly into the labour market. In contrast, of those who left school without completing the Senior Cycle, less than one-third went into any form of education, while the remainder went directly to the labour market.

While this represents a huge increase, the proportion of mature students – which has been extremely low by international standards – has remained static over the years. Even in recent times the total number of mature students is only about 5% of those entering further and higher education.

There are two routes of application into further and higher education for mature students. Firstly, they can apply through the normal Central Applications Office (CAO) applications process, based on their Leaving Certificate results. Secondly, they can apply through the 'non-standard' procedure, which in some cases is linked to mature student quotas in certain fields of study. The 'non-standard' procedure covers a range of procedures, including interviews, with a view to assessing whether candidates are able to embark on their chosen course of study.

The most recent information about mature students in further and higher education (HEA 1999) indicated that more than half were between 23 and 30 years old and only 15% were over 40 years. It was estimated that about 42% of mature students were in universities, while 55% were in institutes of technology and the remainder in colleges of education.

It is also interesting that mature students make up a large number of those attending part-time higher and further education courses. This is a substantial number: in 1997 it was estimated that there were 22,800 part-time students in higher education, of whom nearly 60% were in the vocational/technological sector.

The social background of mature students in the Republic of Ireland is of particular interest. There is evidence that mature students are predominantly middle class, with a large number from non-manual and lower professional backgrounds. One study showed that just over one-fifth of mature entrants to higher



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education came from the four lowest socio-economic groups, although these groups make up more than two-fifths of the population (Lynch 1999). On the other hand, the very highest socio-economic levels also tend to be under-represented, especially higher professionals, mainly because they are very likely to have entered third-level education as school-leavers. In turn this suggests that there are systematic differences between mature students and school-leaver entrants to further and higher education. In particular, it would seem that the lowest socio-economic level is slightly better represented among mature students, that lower middle class groups are better represented and that higher socio-economic groups are less well represented. This profile is of considerable importance in planning expansion of provision for mature students.

Need for further provision: policy statements in the South

The need for greater provision for mature students is apparent from a comparison of the educational profile of people aged between 25 and 44 years. For example, a comparison of the age group 35-44 indicated that 54% of people in Ireland had upper secondary qualifications compared with over 80% in the top quarter of OECD countries (OECD 1998). With regard to those between 25 and 34 years, the picture is not as bad, with 66% of this age cohort having at least upper secondary qualifications.

Comparing older and younger people in the South throws up even starker contrasts. As noted above, about two-thirds of the age-cohort 25-34 have at least upper secondary qualification while 54% of those in the 35-44 age-group have such qualifications. On the other hand, the corresponding figure for those in the 45-54 age-group falls to two-fifths, while less than one-third of those in the 55-64 age-group have at least upper secondary qualifications. These age-based differences in educational attainment, while found in nearly every country, are particularly acute in Ireland and reflect the relatively late development of post-primary education. The White Paper on Adult Education (2000) makes the point that concentrating on increasing participation among younger cohorts without making provision for older adults will make the task of enhancing the educational level of the population a very slow one.

It is also of interest that the effort to boost the percentage of young people completing secondary education seems to be losing momentum. The current indications are that just over 80% of young people currently leave school having completed the Leaving Certificate, a figure that has remained stable over the last three years (McCoy et al. 1999). The aspiration in the White Paper that 90% of the age cohort would complete the Leaving Certificate by the year 2000 was certainly not achieved, while the aspiration put forward in the National Anti-Poverty strategy of a 97% completion rate by the year 2007 must also be in doubt.

The relationship between life chances and educational achievement, and indeed the implications for economic development in the present labour market, are

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revealed in the Household Survey (Central Statistics Office, 1999). This is especially true in the case of women. For example, for women in the 45-54 age group, with lower secondary education or less, only one-third are in the labour force. On the other hand, among the corresponding age group with upper secondary education, half are in the labour force. Among women with third level education in this age group, nearly three-quarters are in the labour force.

In response to this, there are plans to increase the number of mature students in further and higher education. The 1999 HEA report on the provision of places in post-secondary education and training suggests an additional stock of 10,000 places for mature students which should be built up over a number of years. This report also recommends that before such places are provided, it would be important to validate the demand through market research on the courses sought and the most appropriate method of delivery. Given that 80% of mature students are now part-time, it also recommends that "the proportion of flexible places within any additional provision should be at this level."

In addition, however, there is a need for additional places for adults who have not completed secondary education; indeed the main focus of this report is on the needs of these learning poor. While there may be some improvement in the number of adults in full-time study in higher and further education, there is an even greater need for a system that will allow for 'second chance' education. This will require a more flexible approach than has previous been the case in adult education. It is particularly noteworthy that it emerged in the IALS that the kinds of courses being taken by adults tended not to be distinctively 'adult' in nature. Rather they were the traditional courses like those for the Leaving Certificate, and they tended to make use of traditional classroom teaching methods rather than innovative or modern ways of delivery.

Mature students in further and higher education in the North

Two features of the involvement of mature students in Northern Ireland are of particular interest. Firstly, while relatively more mature students enter further and higher education than in the Republic, the numbers involved are less than for the rest of the UK. In 1997-98 13.4% of full-time undergraduates were aged 21 years or over in the UK as a whole, while the corresponding figure for Northern Ireland was 9.3% (NIHEC 1999).

The other point is that the case has been made that the traditional relationship between initial education and further/adult education (under which the more initial education people have, the more likely they are to take part in continuing education) does not apply in Northern Ireland (Field 1999). Specifically, 52% of Northern Ireland adults indicated that they had no involvement in organised learning since they left school, although this was true of only 36% of adults in the UK as a whole (Field). Field's view is that certain social norms inhibit



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such involvement and provide a legitimisation for low aspirations among adults in Northern Ireland. Another factor may be the industrial structure of Northern Ireland, which has more small companies and more low-paid, low-skilled and low value-added companies than Britain; only recently has the need to improve the skills of the workforce and the economically inactive been given co-ordinated top-level backing (DED 1999).

5.3 New ideas on ICT North and South

Developments in the Republic

A number of reports and symposia over the last two years show a convergence on how ICT can be used in adult education. This convergence has to do with the potential of ICT for adult learning, particularly for people who prefer flexible learning arrangements and including people who have not fared especially well in the traditional system. These reports and symposia include the report of the Information Society Commission, the Symposium on Open and Distance Learning and the White Paper on Adult Education.

Report of the Information Society Commission

The 1999 Information Society Commission (ISC) report emphasises the importance of modern information and communications technology in creating a new approach to learning, with a particular focus on lifelong learning. It explores the issues and makes recommendations under three headings viz. learning in the community, learning in the formal educational system and learning in the workplace.

Among the ideas put forward in the ISC report is the need for a programme that supports the implementation of a multi-faceted adult literacy programme, which would have the benefit of exposing participants to the use of new technologies while aiding literacy and numeracy skills. It proposes an ICT literacy initiative to build partnerships with all those who provide adult learning and training opportunities. The reports also draws attention to the need to address educational disadvantage and places strong emphasis on increasing the rates of retention in post-primary schools. A related point is the emphasis on examining the relative merits of full-time versus part-time study, and the need to see whether present structures may be reinforcing full-time provision to the exclusion of part-time provision. Another recommendation is that there should be a curriculum development initiative based on ICT involving professional development of teachers.

It also draws attention to the need to facilitate the accreditation of prior learning and prior experiential learning, and to the need for appropriate mechanisms for the financial and social support of those who enrol in 'second chance' education programmes.

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Symposium on Open and Distance Learning

The Symposium on Open and Distance Learning (HEA and OSCAIL, 2000) featured the main players from the Republic and some foreign experts; there were no participants from the North, highlighting the scarcity of cross-border collaboration. The symposium is important because the participants included high level representatives of third-level education. A particularly interesting feature of the symposium was the discussion, summarised by the rapporteur, Professor John Coolahan.

Among the issues considered was the extent of collaboration between institutions. It was thought that 'it was possible to design arrangements within which the cutting edge of competition could be incorporated as a constructive element of collaboration' (p.73). There was consensus that there would be great value to society in having a genuinely collaborative national centre for Open and Distance Learning (ODL). The aim should be to work with a view to facilitating a variety of institutional providers rather than seek to establish hegemony in the field. It was also agreed that the national centre should be structured so as to allow for genuine involvement by collaborating institutions and other stakeholders such as the social partners. The general view was that the centre should be independent of any single institution. Such a centre should also have a high research profile and be in a position to promote best practice in the provision and operation of courses.

With regard to access, the agreement at the ODL symposium was that it seems to suit autonomous learners i.e. those in need of least support. The view was expressed that when material is delivered through technology, it is likely to favour those with access to, and who are comfortable with, technology. "ODL may overcome barriers of distance and working hours, but is it unlikely to address the social inclusion agenda unless there are developments in access and support" (p.75).

Another point made was that access to varied forms of ODL presents problems to many adult learners, particularly the fact that many adults do not have access to the necessary equipment, nor have the skills or competence to engage with it. It was also mentioned that a wide variety of teaching and learning methods was needed in ODL and that not all methods of learning should be conceived within an ICT framework. It was emphasised that there was a need to present materials in ways that enhance the chances of success, and also to motivate students.

With regard to qualifications, the general view was that the provision of ODL courses should be linked to certification in partnership between the national centre and other third level institutions. The experience was that ODL learners were generally interested in certification of their achievements and were alert to whatever certification practices that existed. It was said that the imminent



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establishment of a National Qualifications Authority in the Republic would be beneficial. A related concern was that it would be necessary to ensure parity of esteem between the awards for performance in ODL and those achieved in traditional programmes.

White Paper on Adult Education

Enthusiasm for ICT is evident in the White Paper on Adult Education. As well as dealing with the opportunities which ICT presents, the White Paper sets out reasons for integrating ICT into the system and proposes a National Basic ICT Skills Programme as part of the Back to Education initiative. It notes that educational institutions in Ireland, while to the forefront in teaching about ICT, have been slow in utilising ICT in their teaching, particularly in the development of out-of-classroom teaching. It suggests that if Ireland is to maintain its position vis-à-vis other countries, it is imperative "that learning blocks in accessing ICT be removed" (p.99).

Three reasons are advanced for integrating ICT into the education and training systems. The first has to do with vocational and economic factors, with particular emphasis on employability. The second set of reasons has to do with pedagogy. The White Paper argues that ICT can improve the quality of the educational experience, with a particular emphasis on the level of motivation that can be induced by the technology. Thirdly, reference is also made to social benefits. The White Paper points to the importance of avoiding the creation of a two-tier society, given that there is already a major difference in the educational levels of older versus younger generations in Ireland. It stresses the danger of an even greater gap between older and younger age groups in the ICT area.

A major proposal in the White Paper is the provision of a National Adult Basic ICT Skills Programme as part of the Back to Education initiative. This programme is considered to be an essential element in the national infrastructure for adult education. Among the priorities identified in this programme are "training in the IT area itself, literacy, language training and the development of a global civil society".

ICT and disadvantage

A survey of the actual use of technology among the general population in the Republic reveals a number of interesting findings (ISC 2000). Firstly, there has been a major improvement over the last two years. Just 47% of people have access to a PC or laptop, a considerable increase on the 28% figure two years earlier. Access to the Internet has improved even more rapidly, from 16% to 41% of all adults. Usage has increased substantially as well: 42% now use PCs or laptops compared with 22% in 1998 and Internet usage has more than tripled from 11% to 35% of adults. Furthermore the proportion of adults who are uncomfortable with PCs has roughly halved to 9% of those men and 15% of those women who have access to them.

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However evidence of the 'digital divide' was stark. Among those at work, 42% had used the Internet, as had 69% of students, but this was true of only 13% of those out of work. People not in work were far less likely to be familiar with PCs (30%) than were those in work (64%) or students (87%). Among those in work, the survey confirmed the expected finding that the type of job greatly influences the results: only half of skilled manual workers were familiar with PCs, compared with 87% of support and office staff.

Almost one-tenth of adults were classified from the survey findings as 'early adopters' i.e. people who are familiar with and users of most of the technologies listed in the questionnaire. In addition to PCs, Internet and e-mail, these included mobile phones, internet banking, DVD and WAP. White collar workers accounted for 76% of early adopters, exactly twice as high as their share of the total population. Early adopters are typically middle class, young and based in Dublin.

Employment status was closely related to early adopter status. Those in work made up 74% of the total and students made up another 21%. There were two seriously under-represented groups: housewives accounted for only 2% of early adopters even though they make up one-fifth of the adult population, and unemployed people made up the remaining 3% of early adopters, well short of their 17% share of all adults.

Most dramatic of all perhaps are the age differences that emerged. Looking first at the results by age, the survey showed a dramatic fall in the likelihood of receiving training as people get older; in addition people out of work are far less likely to get training than employed people. This is shown in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1: Percent who had received ICT training by age and employment

By age	% receiving training
15-24	72
25-34	57
35-49	49
50-64	30
65+	9
By employment	
Working	55
Not working	24

Source: ISC 2000

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Innovations in the UK: University for Industry

Because of the centrality of the Ufi *learndirect* initiative for lifelong learning and its potential for collaboration, detailed attention is given to this initiative below. Firstly, the main features are described, following which the reactions of key players to this initiative are set out.

Features of University for Industry (Ufi)

The Ufi *learndirect* initiative in the UK has the following aims:

- to help build a learning society in which people and businesses are able to take control of their own destinies and build their futures;
- to encourage lifelong learning to raise business competitiveness;
- to help adults to improve their knowledge and skills, from basic literacy and numeracy through to advanced management techniques;
- to help promote and support the habit of effective and purposeful lifelong learning for all adults.

While Ufi is especially identified with ICT, there are a number of other features of the initiative that are worth mentioning. The first is a brokerage service, which attempts to match learners to courses, especially among those who have little contact with education. It involves collecting a huge electronic database of all learning opportunities in the UK and promoting learning through advertising and other forms of marketing, both nationally by Ufi and locally by local learning consortia, known as the hubs. An important link is the freephone which enables anyone in the UK to enquire free and receive advice on what courses might meet their needs and where they can access them. In Northern Ireland, both these services (database and freephone) are handled by the Educational Guidance Service for Adults, which has operated a database and guidance service for many years.

The second feature is the development and provision of learning materials in specific areas. These include ICT, basic skills, business and management, environment, retail and distribution and multimedia skills. It is evident that there is a strong vocational emphasis in these, with little emphasis on humanities or social and personal development.

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The third feature is the emphasis on non-traditional learning principles. In particular, there is a major effort to make the learning engaging, even to be enjoyable to do. In addition most of the materials are in 'bite-sized' chunks, so learners can do them when they want and without being committed to a long course. There is a particular focus on accessing the Internet and individualisation of learning.

A fourth feature is that while there is a strong emphasis on quality assurance, the initiative does not have specific plans for accreditation.

Reaction of policy makers to Ufi

The authors of the present report carried out a study on behalf of the Centre for Cross Border Studies on the Ufi *learndirect* initiative with special reference to possibilities of extending its activities to the Republic (McGill and Morgan 2000). As part of this exercise, a seminar was held to explain and demonstrate the most important features to key people in the further and adult sector in the South. The need for the seminar arose from the fact that Ufi is virtually unknown in the South. This seminar was followed by a questionnaire to gauge the opinions of the participants.

A number of conclusions are warranted on the basis of the analysis of the questionnaires. Firstly the respondents were very positive about the potential of the Ufi *learndirect* enterprise, the scale of the initiative and the planning for its implementation. This view was shared by all the participants from the South, a finding of considerable importance given the influential positions that some of the participants occupy. They took the view that the work put the UK in a leadership position in this regard. Three main features were considered to be the most promising. The first was the database that has been constructed and which consisted not just of Ufi courses but others that were relevant for adults. The second point mentioned was the design of courses and the ease with which students could access those that were of special relevance to them. Thirdly a number of participants identified support services as being praiseworthy.

When asked about features likely to limit the possible impact of Ufi, some of the participants raised questions about the direction and emphasis of the project. Nearly half believed that students might be discouraged if they were not good with computers. Others were concerned about whether the aims of Ufi are primarily commercial rather than social, while some others drew attention to the lack of accreditation for courses.

In reply to questions about areas of learning, it is particularly interesting that all of the participants took the view that it was very suitable or suitable for computer skills. The majority of the respondents took the view that the initiative was suitable for several other areas of learning including workplace skills,



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language skills, problem solving and mathematical skills. On the other hand the participants at the seminar were somewhat less enthusiastic about other areas of learning, especially those concerned with personal and social features.

Most of the participants were positive about possible co-operation with the South. A number of respondents commented on the possibility of future development of courses where there would be common interests. The point was made that much material had already been developed in other countries, notably the USA, and that it would help if there were a joint approach in the adaptation of such materials.

Another point made was that while there may be opportunities for co-operation, it will be necessary to do an appropriate needs analysis in the South to determine where the needs are. It was pointed out that the national distance education programme was currently being re-vamped. Similarly the Open University has been making a successful effort to expand its involvement. In addition there are various forms of provision by institutes of technology, universities and vocational colleges, making it important to determine what needs exist and how they are being met.

Other participants drew attention to some difficulties that might prevent the full potential of such co-operation being realised. Two mentioned the issue of accreditation of courses. Two others made the point that the level of awareness of new developments in open learning and of Ufi specifically were very low in the South, even among professionals.

A key point made by participants has to do with the policy framework for lifelong learning in the South, where the priority group for further education is disadvantaged students who are not well placed to benefit from self-directed learning. Attention was also drawn to the lack of development of infrastructure and technical support and guidance. In particular the South needs to have a strong focus on staff development initially.

Despite these problems there was substantial support for co-operation, particularly on matters like support services, a 'helpline' and, at a later stage, on reciprocal links and data. There seemed to be less support for direct importation of courseware that had been developed in the Ufi context in the UK.

5.4 Recommendations

The further involvement of mature students in the education system in both the traditional and 'adult' sectors is likely to be an important future development in both Irish jurisdictions. The evidence indicates that there are major needs in both systems when compared with either the UK or other OECD countries. Recent policy statements have generated considerable debate and the action plans that

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are likely to follow will shape this sector for some considerable time. This context suggests the possibilities of cross-border co-operation on a number of fronts. Four possible areas of cross-border co-operation are considered here.

1. There is considerable scope for a joint research and development programme on adult learning, with particular reference to the current plans for lifelong learning. This is especially appropriate given the meagre level of research on adult learning and its status in the education system. Such a research programme would focus not only on the 'supply' side (making new programmes available), but also on the demand side, giving attention to matters like motivation, perceptions and expectations of potential clients.
2. Particular attention should be given to the professional training of adult educators. This training might be linked with the training of literacy tutors, recommended in an earlier section.
3. Given the potential of the Ufi *learndirect* initiative, discussions should be held on a framework under which extension might be achieved, in partnership with existing education and training bodies in the South, reflecting the fact that separate government, semi-state, local government, trade union and voluntary and community bodies exist in the Republic. The framework should include:
 - i conditions under which *learndirect* centres might be created and run;
 - ii procedures for the production or adaptation of course materials;
 - iii collaboration on the creation of cross-border data bases of learning opportunities;
 - iv co-operation in the creation of information and guidance services;
 - v financial arrangements for charging for the use of Ufi materials and services.
4. While the framework for extension would cover the entire Republic, special consideration should be given to the creation of learning centres along the border, in which Northern and Southern education and training providers would collaborate to meet local needs. This would fit well with the recommendation of the Technical Working Group of the Review of Outreach Centres in the South for the creation of Mixed Mode Outreach Centres of Education (MMoces). Funding could be available from the Republic's Community Application of Information Technology (CAIT) Initiative.

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ONE of the recurring themes in interviews for this report was the difficulty in finding money to support education for disadvantaged groups, the lack of flexibility in how it is spent and the particular restrictions that affect cross-border work. The first part of this chapter deals with these issues in some detail, though without entering the debate about the overall adequacy of funding in this area. Part two makes some comments on student support in the context of the debate on promoting social inclusion and helping the learning poor, and is followed by a discussion of the issues in section three. The fourth part looks at national and local structures for cross-border co-operation and we conclude with some general observations and recommendations.

6.1 Funding adult education

Traditionally the funding of educational institutions and of the students who attended them were seen as separate spheres of activity. It is worth remarking here that the distinction is becoming blurred in Northern Ireland, which has followed the British model of giving power to the consumer in the form of individual learning accounts, which adults can use to buy part-time courses of their choice. The Republic, by contrast, has held to the model of funding institutions directly. In both parts of Ireland, there is also an overlap between institutional and student funding to the extent that students contribute fee income.

An initial point to make is that the funding of full-time students is statutory and largely free in both parts of Ireland. Courses are provided by public institutions – universities, institutes of technology, colleges of education and so on – which have guaranteed annual allocations from the two governments, normally based on a formula which combines overhead costs, student numbers and special project funds.

Within these broad similarities, there are some interesting features to the funding of further education in the North. One is that there is a Targeting Social Need element in the funding formula, just as there is in schools, so that colleges receive extra money if they recruit students who are unemployed or from disadvantaged areas. In principle this is a good idea since it encourages colleges to recruit non-traditional entrants, but the premium for so doing is insufficient, bearing in mind the cost of recruiting such students and supporting them through to completion. Much expensive fieldwork is needed to locate groups, win their confidence, help them identify their needs, provide ongoing support and run courses, especially in rural areas.

Another feature has been introduced to the Northern system in recent years, namely an output-related element in funding. It is not enough simply to recruit students and have them on the books on the qualifying date for public funding. The



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mechanism for this is to divide funding into three main parts: an element for recruiting students, another for teaching them and the third related to successful outcomes. If students do not complete the course the institution loses money.* On the one hand, this aims to provide an incentive to the institution to give students the support they need to succeed. On the other hand, there is the danger of colleges and other providers going in pursuit of the students who are most likely to succeed at the expense of those who most need help (Kennedy 1997, p.3). In the Republic the notion of performance related funding has not taken root. A final feature in the North is that there are some incentive payments for students, who can gain cash bonuses of up to several hundred pounds if, for example, they achieve a certain NVQ level.

Unlike provision for full-time students, funding for part-timers is more variable. Sometimes it comes from private firms buying courses, sometimes from student fees and, in the case of community education, from a large number of funding bodies, especially the European Social Fund and EU Peace and Reconciliation (P and R) Programme. Much of the work of further education colleges in community education relies on such short-term funding, as does all of the funding of local community organisations for educational programmes.

This obviously puts community education at a severe disadvantage. Firstly, it can be difficult to gain funds even if severe, longstanding needs exist in the community. Secondly, if the organisation succeeds in getting money, there is no continuity of work, either in the sense of recruiting annual cohorts of students onto courses or in ensuring that people progress to a higher level. Capacity building in disadvantaged communities is a long-term process, not one that can be solved by a few short-term courses. Thirdly, there is a tendency for staff to leave as contracts come to an end, causing a loss of both expertise and enthusiasm. Under the P and R Programme some groups have tried to counter these adverse effects by training up local volunteers to take over the work of organising and tutoring (McGill 1999), but it is too early to say if these efforts have been successful. Fourthly, paid staff and volunteers spend so much time filling in applications and compiling differing monitoring returns for their various funders that they have little time to devote to creative community development and educational work.

There is no obvious reason why the education of young and full-time people should be guaranteed whereas the education of disadvantaged adults should be discretionary and subject to the prevailing economic circumstances, except perhaps that it has always been so. If the new creed is lifelong learning, the entire rationale for funding post-school education needs to be re-examined.

* This could amount to as much as 30% of the total in programmes such as Jobskills

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No such fundamental re-examination is proposed either North or South. As mentioned earlier, the former has begun to give financial power to adults through individual learning accounts (ILAs). Anyone aged 18 or over who contributes £25 towards the cost of a learning opportunity can draw up to £150 in public finance or receive a discount of 80%, up to a limit of £4,000 in any one year, on some computer or mathematics courses. Employers can also contribute to their workers' ILAs.

ILAs have proved popular. They were launched in September 2000 and by the end of January 2001 almost 11,000 people had taken out accounts; on the downside, there was no evidence that they were helping the learning poor. They have been allocated on a first come, first served basis. This is contrary to the notion of targeting social need and promoting social inclusion, and reneges on the promise in the UK White Paper in February 1999 of a framework for ILAs that "allows scope for targeting resources at those people who would benefit most; a particular target group will be low-paid workers to enhance their career prospects" (DENI 1999, p41).

Apart from the introduction of a limited number of ILAs, the governments North and South propose to continue with the present inequitable system of funding. The Southern White Paper will perpetuate the divisions even within the adult education sector. For example, schools will be entitled to financial benefits e.g. a post of director of adult education, start-up grants for adult work and the allocation of extra teaching hours (DES 2000, pp103-105), whereas community education providers will have to access funds through a competitive bidding process, normally for three years (*ibid* p116). It is clear that money will not be easy to get because the White Paper emphasises: "Clearly, the level of funding available will require that criteria for a rigorous prioritisation process are developed, and that joint frameworks for accountability and quality assurance form an integral part of the approach" (*ibid* p117). There are no such provisos about priorities and quality assurance in the case of schools.

Subsidising work with disadvantaged groups

Newry and Kilkeel Institute in Co Down originally appointed a community liaison officer with funding from the Educational Guidance Service for Adults, but now subsidises the post from its own resources to find out the needs of local communities. It runs short sampler courses free of charge, which new learners might follow up with a ten-week pre-foundation course, followed perhaps by a two-year foundation course accredited by the University of Ulster and leading to entry to higher education. Some of the courses are run in the South, such as caring and counselling programmes in Dundalk, but these are on a full cost recovery basis, so they can be expensive. The Institute's director believes there is a big potential demand for courses



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from community groups on both sides of the border, which could draw on the college's expertise in areas such as adult literacy and information technology.

"We don't turn anyone away for lack of funds. If someone is unemployed we give them a reduced rate, normally £20 for a 30-week session, which we pay for from other areas. We give a hidden subsidy of £200,000 to £250,000 per year. We could do this on a cross-border basis."

His counterpart in North West Institute in Derry noted that they often write-off fees altogether for groups like long-term unemployed people, including people from Donegal, but asks why the college should have to subsidise them from a budget which he believes has always been inadequate. We return to this question at the end of this chapter.

There are problems in accessing money even when only Northern students are involved. The director in Fermanagh Institute gave the example of a counselling course they ran in Cootehill, Co Monaghan: even though all the students were from Fermanagh the college could not draw down funding.

The college has a mobile computing unit, which travels across the border, where people can do ten-week courses. This too is subsidised by the college because, in the view of the director, the funding formula does not reward part-time courses, despite the government's support for lifelong learning.

"We have far more part-time students than do Institutes of Technology in the Republic. The structure is there but we need the mechanism to move into Leitrim, Sligo and Monaghan. There should be a funding transfer between the South and the North. Using the flexibility we have to work across the border would be very helpful; there is no point in duplicating in the South what we have here."

A new dimension opens up when distance learning is considered. For example, some students take online courses from the South and an anomaly in the funding system means they are financed by the Northern exchequer. "We can get funding for them because they are getting support here in Enniskillen, even if they are online in the Republic", the director noted. There is clearly scope to extend such work e.g. Fermanagh Institute runs online courses for 34 farmers in remote parts of the Sperrins on farm accounts, a subject that would be well-suited to farmers in the South, apart from differing tax systems.

North West Institute has four half-posts to develop outreach work. The management believes that in the past it often parachuted courses into local areas, but now it takes care to ask local people what they want and to work in partnership with community organisations and build up their trust.

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Most of the cross-border work is linked with industrial development, such as a small business support service, but there are occasional forays into other areas of work, such as a counselling course in Inishowen (which is in Co Donegal but closer to Derry than to Letterkenny) and vocational training in Sligo. In its mainstream full-time work, there has been a big drop in entrants from Donegal because North West Institute charges fees and Letterkenny Institute of Technology does not.

If funding issues were resolved, the Derry college believes there is “massive capacity for the expansion of community education in the Republic”. The college suggested it could run courses in the South in the normal way but the Northern government could claim the money back from the Republic, and vice versa for Southern providers in the North in a ‘knock for knock’ system. Alternatively there could be a separate funding body with a budget for North-South projects.

“The mechanism is not important so long as the rules are clear. Full cost recovery is £50 per hour plus examination fees and child care and travel so it is not attractive to the poor or learning poor. Also there are audit problems if the group is funded to buy in the course because there would not be an audit trail for every group and there could be a temptation for fraud if they were funded on a body count.”

There are funding issues specific to the South, one of which was raised in interview by the director of Letterkenny IT. At the time of the Fruit of the Loom redundancies FÁS carried out research on the people being made redundant. Various agencies were co-operating to encourage people, especially younger workers, to retrain, but they were not eligible for the ‘Back to Education’ grant because they had not been unemployed for six months.

In general, the Letterkenny director believes that “we have to make it easier for long-term unemployed people and people with low skills, but we are putting barriers in their way.” Like the Northern Ireland colleges, Letterkenny has to subsidise its outreach work. For example, it runs a one-year foundation certificate for adults who have not studied in college before and may not have done Leaving Certificate, to give a taster of different subjects such as business, science and engineering, but this gets no government funding at all. Another example is a pilot part-time National Certificate in Community Studies, being run with Dundalk IT for community activists; they have to try to find the money before this can proceed. Yet another problem is that the Letterkenny Institute gets no funding for out-centres, despite the large area it serves, though this is beginning to change following the Higher Education Authority’s review of outreach work (HEA 1999).



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Funding for community groups is even more difficult. There is a perception that there is abundant money from sources like the European P and R Programme, through the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust and ADM/CPA, and Co-operation Ireland for cross-border work. Certainly there are examples of fruitful work: groups in Newtownbutler and Clones, for example, worked together to create a shared computer suite.

However, while it is often possible to get money for specific projects, it can be difficult to fund continuing core activities. One community worker mentioned that their cross-border work is entirely voluntary; while they are happy to do it, they have to pay out of their own pockets the travel costs for visiting groups to discuss education and training needs.

Apart from organisations with specific budgets for North-South work, the existence of the border can be a barrier, as one Northern based community worker in an area straddling the border noted:

“It is difficult to access funding for just the North or South which cuts out some sources. For example, the UK Lottery said we could not prove people from the South would not be benefiting so we did not get funding. The New Opportunities Fund says ‘no’ to cross-border work and we have to identify it as dealing specifically with the North. The Northern Ireland Arts Council is funding an arts programme and we are supposed to be able to prove that it only benefits Northern Ireland, though that is not too difficult because we get 90% of our money from Co-operation Ireland.”

“We would not have a problem if we only ran courses in Northern Ireland, but if people from the South can come to university in the North, why can they not come to a course we run here?”

A different interviewee mentioned that Proteus, one of the intermediary funding bodies for the Peace and Reconciliation Programme, was strongly against Northern Ireland money being spent on the Republic. In a catering programme, people from the South could benefit if they worked in restaurants in the North, but institutions in the South were not covered even if people working in them were from the North.

It should be noted, though, that Proteus and others are merely following normal Department of Finance rules in both jurisdictions. A permanent secretary confirmed to the researchers that government departments generally cannot spend money to benefit people outside the jurisdiction. This requirement in turn is imposed on recipients of grants. A community group in Dublin decided to use the Ulster People’s College for training, but could not sustain it beyond the first year because of such financial problems.

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In rural areas some of the funding problems are particularly acute. Travelling to the local town can be expensive and difficult and organised childcare facilities are hard to find. Representatives in Roslea, Co Fermanagh, mentioned that there is one public service bus a week to Enniskillen and, whereas Monaghan is much closer, they cannot easily attend courses there because of the regulations. On the other hand, if the local college does outreach work, it can be difficult to attract enough students to make the courses viable: 12 may be a reasonable class size in a city, but it is very difficult to achieve in rural areas.

6.2 Student support

It is beyond the scope of this report to examine in detail the complex issues of student support and the related matters of the operation of the taxation and social welfare systems on both parts of the island. However, it is useful to point to some important overall issues that are common to the North and South.

The first is that our elitist system of higher and further education means that it is the learning rich that gain most of the substantial public subsidy. The idea that the brightest should get the best is deeply embedded in our psyche. We have not begun to face up to the revolution in thinking demanded by the idea of lifelong learning. The best qualified school-leavers gain places at universities and colleges, where they benefit from free or virtually free tuition for several years. In a retrograde step, the Republic abolished fees for full-time students in 1996, with the result that the middle class makes no contribution to tuition fees.

The UK went in the opposite direction in 1998 by introducing fees, now charged at £1,050 per year, but only for students from higher income families. The threshold at which parents begin contributing to fees is a residual income of £17,805, but it is proposed to raise this to £20,000; they pay the full fee on a residual income of £28,505. This £1,050 fee represents only between 7% and 18% of the cost of tuition, which ranges in the North from £5,764 to £15,323 per year (NI Assembly 2000, p.8), so the middle class continues to receive a substantial public subsidy.

At the same time, there is recent evidence that investment in education pays large personal as well as social dividends, more so for female than male graduates and more so for Northern Ireland than British graduates. Paying a fee of £1,000 for three years only marginally reduces the net return on higher education to 9.6%.* Using alternative means of calculation, the rates of return are higher, some 15% for men and 24% for women (Harmon and Walker

* Net return to the investment in education can be described as the additional income gained as a result of participating at a certain level (e.g. degree as opposed to A level or Leaving Cert), taking account of the direct costs involved, such as fees and books, and the income foregone.



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2000, p27). There is, therefore, a strong economic rationale behind the continuing growth, identified in Chapter One, in the number of traditional school-leaver entrants to higher education.

Compared with the large subsidy for the largely middle class school-leaving cohort in full-time university study, there is much less for the largely working class learning poor. Costs per student in further education are much lower than in universities and students pay fees in most cases, though there are some alternative routes, such as the education and training option in New Deal for long-term unemployed people, during which they continue to receive Job Seekers Allowance. The budget for discretionary grants for further education has been cut severely in recent years and now amounts to only £3.3m (NI Assembly 2000, p.12). Virtually nothing is spent on adults who dropped out of education early and have few or no qualifications.

In response to this the Northern Ireland Assembly's Higher and Further Education Committee proposed as 'a core principle' the abolition of up-front tuition fees and their replacement by a graduate endowment to which only graduates earning more than £25,000 per year would contribute. This would represent an even greater subsidy to the middle class than at present and leave less money available to tackle the problem of the poor and learning poor. This recommendation has not been accepted by the Higher and Further Education Minister, who instead announced a package of measures designed to promote the policy of Targeting Social Need (Farren 2000). Although this more equitable package has been approved by the Executive, it has not yet been voted on by the Assembly, whose formal position is to favour the abolition of tuition fees, even for well-off parents.

In the South, the subsidy to the middle class in full-time higher education is even higher following the abolition of tuition fees in 1996. By contrast, people at the bottom of the learning ladder get little or nothing and the White Paper proposes only modest measures to help them. In the Back to Education initiative, for example, only narrowly defined categories will be eligible for free tuition. Many groups of unwaged people with less than upper secondary education will still have to pay partial fees and receive no allowances. Other groups who have not completed secondary education, including pensioners with non-means-tested pensions and people outside the labour force, will be required to pay the full fee (DES 2000, p96).

The Irish government has responded in part to pressure to abolish fees for part-time higher education courses (which it estimates would cost £30m), but only for defined disadvantaged groups: recipients of means-tested social welfare or unemployment benefits, medical card holders and recipients of family income supplement and their dependants.

In supporting this limited concession, the government uses an argument that could be applied with equal force to full-time higher education:

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“In ring-fencing the scheme in this way, the Government believes that it can positively discriminate in favour of the most deserving groups economically; reach the most educationally disadvantaged sectors within the mature student population and respond in a very tangible way to the educational needs of those with the lowest incomes” (DES 2000, p146).

It should be noted, though, that this mean-tested fee concession applies only to people doing a third level course such as a first degree or certificate course. The only concession to the learning poor is that it applies also to access courses, but only if they provide guaranteed entry to a third level institution.

A key factor in the decision to embark on education is the possibility of accumulating a large debt or suffering several years of poverty. This is a particular problem for low-income families or for adults with dependents, who do not have relatively affluent parents to support them. In the case of higher education courses, tuition fees are not a consideration for such groups, since they are not required to pay them either South or North.

What does matter to such higher education students and to anyone considering courses at lower level, is the existence of maintenance grants. But many adult learning poor have dropped out of education long before they are ready to enter higher education. Financial incentives at school-leaving age can be a determining factor for them.

For this reason, several pilot projects are being held in Britain to assess the effects of providing educational maintenance allowances. Research in Northern Ireland suggests they would pay for themselves. Harmon and Walker found very large returns on GCSE (normally taken by 16 year olds) relative to no qualification (p.27). One implication for younger people is that government should encourage higher participation in education. For older people in the workforce with no or lower levels of qualification, the policy implication is that they should be given greater encouragement to return to education.

A related finding is that the return to each additional year of schooling is roughly constant for school leavers after 16. “This suggests that educational maintenance allowances may be effective in encouraging individuals who would have otherwise left school at the earliest opportunity. Such individuals are more likely to come from lower income households than other children and hence there is a good case for making such allowances means-tested against parental incomes” (*ibid* p25). Moreover, this “may not turn out to be an expensive option for government since they can recoup some of the expenditure on these allowances in the form of high revenues or reduced expenditure” (*ibid* p.926).

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6.3 Discussion

We saw earlier in this chapter that there is a clear limit to how successful colleges can be in opening their doors to disadvantaged students, especially adults. In both jurisdictions some colleges are subsidising out of their own funds any initiatives they take, such as attracting unemployed people onto courses, whereas they can automatically draw down funding for young, mainstream, full-time students. It is wrong that colleges should be penalised for doing what both governments are saying they want them to do. If they attract too many disadvantaged students, they could soon go broke. In effect there is a strong brake, imposed by financial shortage, on helping the learning poor.

This chapter also gave examples of our elitist system of financing young full-time students while refusing it to disadvantaged groups. This does not seem wrong because the notion of an elitist higher and further education system, in which the academic high achievers get more and the learning poor get little or nothing, is strongly embedded in our thought processes. But this must change if we are truly to have a system of lifelong learning in which everyone participates. In particular, we must reorganise our priorities and financial programmes to target far more resources at those who most need help.

Educational maintenance allowances and other initiatives, if properly marketed and targeted, may reduce the number of learning poor emerging from the school system today, but measures are also needed for the 1.1 million adults in Ireland who have few or no qualifications. Means-tested grants are an important incentive. Such grants already exist in the South but they go mainly to younger people. The December 2000 packages of proposals in the North includes the reintroduction of a number of means-tested bursaries in both higher and further education, which is welcome but insufficient. Previous experience both North and South suggests that the existence of means-tested grants does not radically change the social class or age composition of higher education. If they did, three decades of grants in Britain and Northern Ireland between the 1960s and the 1990s should have led to a revolution in working class participation. Specific incentives are needed to attract the learning poor, possibly means-tested bursaries for people over the age of 25, assuming these would be lawful under the new equality legislation North and South.

There are some more radical approaches that should comply with the law, one of which goes back to the argument in the Southern White Paper for mean-tested fee concessions for part-time students. The reasoning for this is sound: essentially that scarce resources should be devoted to those who need them most, though there may be disagreement as to where exactly the line is drawn and how disadvantage is defined e.g. we would argue that people on low incomes should benefit as well as unemployed and other disadvantaged groups.

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The same logic should be applied to full-time study as well, so that decisions on charging fees would be taken on the basis of income rather than mode of study. In other words, instead of a vertical distinction between full-time and part-time courses, we should have a horizontal distinction based on income. Under this scenario, people with high incomes would make a contribution to their education (as part-time students in both jurisdictions and full-time students in the North already do). This would generate more money to give real financial incentives to the poor and learning poor to enter education.

In addition, this distinction would remove some of the current anomalies arising from the fact that there is no clear-cut distinction between full-time and part-time study. For some purposes, full-time study means more than 21 hours, for others it is 19.5 hours; in the North a further education course can be more than either 15 or 21 hours per week, depending on the number of sessions attended, but there are no requirements about hours or sessions for short courses; moreover, some part-time teacher education courses are treated as full-time for student finance purposes (DHFETE 2000, p.44).

Another argument in favour of removing the hard and fast distinction between full-time and part-time courses is that the underlying rationale no longer exists, if it ever did. The original notion was that full-time students concentrated solely on their studies whereas part-time students also had jobs. But many full-time students also work. A student working a night shift in a factory could be a full-time student, while another on the day shift would have to enrol part-time.

Of course, if students have income from jobs, that should be taken into account in deciding whether they should pay fees or receive bursaries. But a distinction based on income rather than mode of study would be fair and transparent, as well as helping the many people in low-paid, low-skilled jobs at a time when the economy demands higher levels of qualifications.

An alternative and potentially complementary approach is to concentrate resources specifically on the learning poor rather than the materially poor. This would build on an idea, put forward in Britain by the National Institution for Adult and Community Education and by the Kennedy Report, that the government should establish a lifetime entitlement to education up to NVQ level three (approximately two A levels or Leaving Certificate). This education would be free for young people and for adults who lack basic skills or are socially and economically deprived (Kennedy 1997, pp 13 and 44). This would give adults who were disadvantaged by the education system an opportunity to catch up on their peers. This idea is simple but radical since it explicitly encourages study by those who have no or few qualifications.



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We have described this as potentially complementary with a system based on incomes rather than mode of study because the two can be combined. It would be possible, for example, to have no fees for any courses below NVQ level three or equivalent but also to offer bursaries to low income students studying below this level. In the case of courses at a higher level, low income students could still be offered fee concessions or bursaries to enable them to build on their previous study achievements.

6.4 Structures

Interviews carried out for this report suggest that there is an enormous amount of goodwill for the idea of working across the border. In September 2000, for example, the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges (ANIC) and the Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology (Republic of Ireland) signed a new North/South Protocol to promote co-operation between them. There are also initiatives in cross-border tourism training and in safety training in the construction industry, known as Safe-T-Cert. However, the examples of collaboration are small and sporadic. Considering the potential for collaboration, the amount of cross-border work is very small. The main difficulty is that the two education systems have evolved separately for so long that there are few areas common to both. Funding mechanisms, decision-making structures, patterns of provision and systems of accreditation are so different that it is very difficult to turn the desire to work together into practical reality. Work should begin on turning round all these factors so that co-operation can be encouraged and developed.

In looking at structures, we are keen to avoid any hint of setting up cumbersome bureaucracies, especially ones that take on a life of their own at the expense of institutions and groups working on the ground. On the other hand, we are convinced that there are many areas where fruitful co-operation could help everyone involved by better identifying and meeting educational needs. By filling gaps in provision, eliminating duplication and ensuring that lead responsibility is given to the most suitable organisation, we believe this could be cost-effective. Moreover, it has the advantage of ensuring that statutory and community organisations work together.

At institutional level, we believe the two governments, through the North/South Ministerial Council, should create a fund to encourage Institutes of Technology (ITs) and Further Education Colleges (FECs) to work more closely together. This could include sharing expertise and staff, encouraging joint research, serving the needs of industry, especially small and medium enterprises, seeking out the learning poor and working with communities to meet their needs. (Specific elements concerned with community education are dealt with in Chapter Four.)

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We believe it is possible to go beyond modest initiatives to encourage bilateral links between colleges North and South and to take a radical approach to co-operation at national and local levels.

For example, instead of the Republic's Department of Education and Science creating the National Adult Learning Council as an executive agency (DES 2000), it might be possible to set up a body for the whole of Ireland, operating under the North South Ministerial Council, like the all-Ireland tourism body. This would bring together communities, providers, employers, unions, statutory bodies such as FÁS and the Training and Employment Agency (T&EA) and learners from North and South, and would control its own budget. The argument for this is that both parts of Ireland share similar problems and, in many cases, the solutions may be very similar. Some of the innovations developed in Britain over the last few years should be drawn on through the East/West structures created by the Good Friday Agreement.

It might be possible to have joint bodies along the border as well. The nucleus for these in the South would be the Local Adult Learning Boards (LALBs) proposed by the White Paper. There is no similar mechanism for the North, but there are several bodies with partial responsibility, including the T and EA, FECs, Education and Library Boards, private providers and community groups. If local bodies with effective powers and budgets are created, it will be important to replace, rather than add to, the plethora of bodies involved.

The Northern Ireland Assembly will review existing local government structures, including the five Education and Library Boards, as part of a reform of public administration (OFMDFM 2000, p.64). It could look at the option of cross-border bodies for lifelong learning as part of this review, taking account of what has been learned from the creation of 47 Local Learning and Skills Councils in England and Wales. It should also heed the warning that the absence of a strategic dimension at local level in Britain is a major weakness in the system which significantly reduces the potential for widening participation (Kennedy 1997, p.39).

These new agencies could greatly increase the effectiveness of services for adults in communities, the workplace and education and training institutions. Potential learners on either side of the border could have access to the most suitable provider. The co-ordination of services in this way would provide better for the local population, while also avoiding wasteful duplication of expensive facilities and expertise that exists in places like ITs, FECs and specialist centres such as training units for Travellers.



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Creating such public bodies can itself do much to promote informal learning among adults, with desirable spin-offs in reconciliation and mutual understanding. By ensuring that all political and social groups are represented, as they are in the Northern Ireland District Partnership Boards, we can build on the process of inclusive and consensual decision-making pioneered by the European Peace and Reconciliation Programme and incorporated into the structures created by the Good Friday Agreement.* It would be a form of citizenship education in action.

More specifically, these local bodies might:

- serve as a forum that brings together all providers, relevant statutory bodies, the private sector, the voluntary and community sector, learners and the learning poor, especially those from disadvantaged groups;
- carry out education and training needs analyses in their areas, covering everything from basic skills through to postgraduate level needs;
- draw up strategic plans for their areas to meet the educational needs identified, with particular emphasis on the learning poor and on basic skills;
- set targets for meeting local educational needs and reducing differentials between advantaged and disadvantaged groups;
- draw up a comprehensive database of education and training opportunities;
- market what is available, using innovative means to attract people from disadvantaged groups;
- ensure that learners get the support they need from the time they first consider taking up a learning opportunity through to when they complete it and move on to employment or other activities;
- identify lead organisations (public or private colleges or training centres, employers, trade unions or voluntary and community groups) which would be given the resources to build up special expertise or facilities to offer education and training services in collaboration with others on either side of the border;
- allocate resources to learners and providers in line with the strategic plan;

* Dr Mo Mowlam, former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, was one of many who praised the District Partnerships for promoting local participation and grass-roots involvement, working together towards a common goal. She said the partnerships had provided a positive backdrop for the success of the Good Friday Agreement (EC 1998).

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- co-ordinate the allocation of outside funding , especially from the EU;
- plan and co-ordinate provision of facilities such as ICT centres provided by Ufi *learndirect* in Northern Ireland and the Community Application of Information Technology (CAIT) Initiative in the Republic;
- encourage the creation of, and offer a support and mentoring service to community groups, drawing on the expertise and research findings of the National Adult Learning Council in the South and bodies such as the Educational Guidance Service for Adults and the Basic Skills Unit in the North;
- monitor developments in their area and ensure that good practice models are made available in their area and throughout Ireland;
- review what they are doing and how well they are meeting the targets of the strategic plan through a process of evaluation and constant public consultation.

6.5 Recommendations

1. **Funding formulae for higher and further education institutions should include a substantial social inclusion element, similar to Targeting Social Need in the North, to encourage the recruitment of disadvantaged students and to ensure that colleges are not penalised for social outreach work, as they are at present.**
2. **Governments should review the equity of their post-school funding systems generally, with a view to targeting resources at the learning poor as distinct from the traditional school-leaving cohort.**
3. **In deciding on funding systems and formulae, account should be taken of the greater cost of providing education and taking up learning opportunities in rural areas.**
4. **Student funding should be rationalised so that decisions are based on incomes rather than mode or level of study. Resources should be directed to people on low or no incomes, whether in low paid jobs, unemployment or economic inactivity.**
5. **Core funding should be given to community groups for educational activities, along with specific resources to buy in courses that suit them from any part of Ireland.**



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6. Funding bodies should be prohibited from refusing grants solely on the basis that some people may benefit on the other side of the border.
7. Governments should actively consider tackling the problem of the learning poor by abolishing all fees for courses below a certain level (A level/Leaving Certificate) and by concentrating student support at these low levels.
8. Governments North and South should consider the possibility of setting up island-wide and cross-border bodies responsible for co-operation in lifelong learning, with a particular remit to tackle the problem of the learning poor. In so doing they should take account of the duties listed earlier.
9. Short of this fully integrated solution, there are many steps that could be taken, island-wide and in border areas, to the mutual benefit of both jurisdictions in sharing experience and achieving greater economies of scale in new developments. Public bodies North and South should be required to promote cross-border information exchange and co-operation in carrying out their duties. The Republic's White Paper lists one of the roles of the National Adult Learning Council's research unit as promoting and developing strategic linkages with all adult education providers, and particularly North/South, East/West and EU relations (para 10.2.4, p191). But the duty to promote such linkages extends beyond the research function to the Council's general activities.

Conclusions and Outstanding Issues

7

THE evidence reviewed above shows that there is a major problem of educational disadvantage among adults in both jurisdictions in Ireland. The view advocated here is that there are degrees of educational disadvantage and that the response that is required will need to be in accordance with the scale of disadvantage.

In the Republic of Ireland just over 80% of young people currently leave school having completed the senior cycle. In the North, 65.4% of 17 year olds are in full-time education, but with a large gender difference: 73.3% of female and only 57.8% of male students. As might be expected, there is a strong relationship between employment status and qualifications on leaving school and, while the overall situation regarding unemployment has improved dramatically, the situation of early school-leavers is unchanged relative to those with qualifications.

A major focus of policy initiatives in recent years has been on increasing the number of students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds who progress to universities and colleges of technology. Considerable attention has been given to this issue, particularly in the context of the abolition of fees for higher education and the relatively higher cost per student of such education compared to primary, secondary or indeed adult education.

Evaluations of initiatives to improve access suggest that bolder measures may be required. The indications are that the current initiatives sponsored by the Higher Education Authority in the Republic may be having some success in changing the negative attitudes towards education in disadvantaged communities, and thus bolstering the belief that entry to third level is an achievable goal for young people in these communities. However it is also true that, at least on the basis of the numbers of students involved, the initiatives have not met the expectations of either the funding agency or the institutions themselves.

There is also evidence from the international literature that improvement in access by disadvantaged groups requires different kinds of action at all levels in education and in the wider society. The need for an 'educational equity chain' has been put forward to include taking steps to ensure successful learning by all students at primary level, as well as providing an institutional ethos in higher education that is supportive and inclusive. There are also indications that the division of secondary education into vocational and academic streams creates obstacles which are difficult to overcome for those in the vocational stream and thus helps create the learning poor. Furthermore the improvement of pre-school facilities and the reduction in the age of starting school can help prevent children from disadvantaged backgrounds falling behind at primary level.



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In our view, access programmes are serving only one facet of the needs of educationally disadvantaged adults. In terms of the numbers involved, a greater need exists in both Irish jurisdictions for people who have completed secondary education only, and an even greater need again among people who have left school with junior secondary qualifications or with primary schooling only.

In order to deal with these problems we suggest that there is a need to focus on three major areas. The first is a sustained effort to improve standards of literacy and numeracy; the second is a greater investment in community education, while the third will involve the widening of participation of mature students through open and distance education and through appropriate use of ICT.

Following the publication of the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey, it became apparent that up to one-quarter of Irish adults (North and South) have problems with all but the simplest of literacy tasks. That study also showed the variety of ways in which literacy problems restrict people's social and personal lives as well as their labour market prospects. The recent policy statements that have focused on literacy have common themes in both jurisdictions. There is a great concern about the scale of the problem, a recognition that existing efforts are too limited and emphasis on the need for a more broadly based set of initiatives to address the problem.

Having considered the evidence on adult literacy and the various policy statements, it appears to the researchers that there is a scope for North-South co-operation on various features that have been separately proposed in each jurisdiction. Specifically, we have suggested ways of co-operating around matters of test-instrument development, family literacy programmes and workplace literacy. We have also suggested that the further education colleges in Northern Ireland should extend their involvement in the South.

With regard to community education, a number of conclusions emerged. Firstly, while it has often been said that a community education model is one that is most likely to reach the learning poor, the funding and infrastructure for community education has been so badly developed that sustained programmes involving substantial numbers are hard to find in either jurisdiction. Secondly, the recent White Paper in the Republic on Adult Education, *Learning for Life*, places community education at the centre of the new proposals since it promises to give a 'collective sense of purpose' to socially excluded people. A White Paper in Northern Ireland had already recognised the role of the voluntary and community sector in creating a culture of lifelong learning. Thirdly, it became clear that there is scope for co-operation in community education throughout Ireland. In addition, there are natural communities that extend across the border, many of which were split by the closing of border roads during the 'troubles'.

Our suggestions are for support not only for colleges, but also for a structure that ensures that the core costs of running groups are met on a guaranteed, long-

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term basis, rather than leaving them dependent on short-term project funding. We also recommend the creation of support services including databases of learning opportunities and advice and guidance to help with learning skills and careers advice. There is also a need to consider an appropriate system of accreditation and certification, preferably on a common (all-island) basis. We are also of the view that the proposed Forum for Adult Education should be organised on an all-island basis since the functions envisaged (exchange of ideas, good practice and new thinking, influencing policy development and contributing to solidarity and peer support) can be enriched by bringing together the different perspectives of adult educators North and South.

It has been well documented that the number of mature students attending further and higher education in the Republic is low by international standards. This fact, coupled with the large proportion of adults with relatively low qualifications, draws attention to the need to consider new approaches to the involvement of mature students in education. In Northern Ireland the situation, while somewhat better, is complicated by the finding that the traditional relationship between initial education and adult education does not hold to the same extent as in other countries: even people with good initial education seem reluctant to engage in learning as adults.

We have taken the view that ICT holds promise for providing real opportunities for such students, while recognising that the evidence suggests that mastery of new technology is related to level of education. Nevertheless new programmes and support services such as those suggested in the new University for Industry (Ufi) *learndirect* initiative can offset some of these difficulties. We have therefore recommended that that North-South discussions should focus on the conditions under which *learndirect* centres might be created and run, the procedures for the production or adaptation of Ufi course materials and collaboration on the creation of cross-border databases of learning opportunities, as well as co-operation in the creation of information and guidance services.

In addition we have recommended that there should be a joint programme of research in adult learning, with particular reference to the current plans for lifelong learning. Particular attention should be given to the professional training of adult educators, perhaps linked with the training of literacy tutors.

Finally, the present work has examined issues to do with funding and the structures through which the recommended initiatives might be delivered. At the most general level, we believe that there is a need for a review of funding in both systems, with a view to targeting resources at the learning poor as distinct from the traditional school-leaving cohort. In particular, funding formulae for higher and further education institutions should include a substantial social inclusion element to encourage the recruitment of disadvantaged students and to ensure that colleges are not penalised for social outreach work.



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We also feel that student funding should be rationalised so that decisions are based on income rather than mode or level of study (full-time or part-time).

With regard to structures, we are of the view that there is a need to set up local bodies to plan and deliver the lifelong learning programmes that have been proposed in each jurisdiction. We think that this is especially appropriate in the absence of an effective infrastructure.

Obviously it has not been possible to deal with a range of issues, given the time available for our work. One issue we will mention as being of very considerable importance is accreditation and certification. The Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS) project (DENI 1999) has sought to develop a single credit transfer framework across further and higher education (including other providers of post 16+ education). To simplify the complex work it is doing, NICATS is attempting to put a value on separate building blocks of learning which can be taken at any institution and put together to form qualifications at different levels.

We were told of barriers to cross-border movement of students and workers because of the different systems of accreditation. In the case of graduates there is no problem because degrees from all Irish institutions are readily recognised. This is not always so further down the educational ladder (though in some areas like catering, there is a high level of mutual recognition between the two jurisdictions): however people taking NVQ qualifications in the North or NCEA awards in the South may have difficulty persuading educational bodies or employers on the other side of the border of their value.

Given that there is a tendency towards divergence on the issue of accreditation and certification, it is important that this issue is revisited promptly. To assist cross-border mobility, it would be extremely helpful if the two governments set up a group to examine mutual recognition, taking account of developments at European Union level.

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* DENI no longer exists. Its FE work is now the responsibility of the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, but the statistics on HE and FE enrolments remain on the DENI website at www.deni.gov.uk, where the relevant statistics can be found at /statistics/pr/stats.

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Inez Bailey, Director, National Adult Literacy Association, 23 Jun

Eileen Kelly, Director, Educational Guidance Service for Adults, 30 Jun

Raymond Mullan, Director, Newry and Kilkeel IFHE and Chair of the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges (ANIC), 7 Jul

Peter Gallagher, Director, North West IFHE, 11 Jul

Michael Mowen and Noel Maguire, Erne East Community Association, Lisnaskea, 19 Jul

Monika Donnelly and Roisin McKee, Slieve Beagh Community Association, Roslea, 19 Jul

Brian Rouse, Director, and Anita Maguire, Outreach Officer, Fermanagh IFHE, 26 Jul

Ina McCrumlish and Davy Kettles, Louth Enniskillen Opportunities (LEO) Project, 26 Jul

Seamus Murphy, Deputy Director, North West IFHE, 3 Aug

Raymond Rodgers, ADM/CPA, 4 Aug

Paul Hannigan, Director, Letterkenny IT, 17 Aug

Mags Connolly, Director, Basic Skills Unit, 22 Aug

Breandan MacConamhna, Director, and others, Sligo IT, 28 Aug

Laurence Bradley, Newry and Mourne Confederation of Community Groups, 6 Sep

Johnston Price, Head of Education and Training, Ulster People's College, 6 Sep

Andy Pollak, Director, Centre for Cross Border Studies, 20 Apr, 6 July, 19 Sep

Paul Nolan, Board Member, Centre for Cross Border Studies, 22 June

Andy Pollak and Paul Nolan, 2 Mar, 15 Nov, 18 Dec

IFHE = Institute of Further and Higher Education (Northern Ireland)
IT = Institute of Technology (Republic of Ireland)



Nine Characteristics of Good Practice in Widening Participation Appendix 2

- Marketing is planned and based on intelligence
- There are strategies for contacting non-participants
- Good quality information and guidance is readily available and impartial
- There is effective support for learning
- Financial and practical support is provided
- The curriculum is relevant and enables students to progress
- There is effective teaching and promotion of learning
- There are mechanisms for recording students' achievements which acknowledge all learning, are meaningful to students and are recognised by employers, education providers and others
- Management information is accurate and is used to evaluate students' progress and other aspects of provision

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The Centre for Cross Border Studies, based in Armagh, was set up in September 1999 to research and develop co-operation across the Irish border in education, health, business, public administration, communications and a range of other practical areas. It is a joint initiative by Queen's University Belfast, Dublin City University and the Workers Educational Association (Northern Ireland), and is financed by the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. Between February and May 2001 the Centre will publish research reports on cross-border telecommunications, cross-border health services, all-Ireland co-operation to tackle disadvantage in education, EU cross-border funding before and after the Good Friday Agreement and a number of other areas of practical North-South co-operation.

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