

Chapter 2

STRATEGIC CONTEXT FOR THE REVIEW

2.1 This chapter sets out the strategic context for the Review of the Post-Primary Education system. It provides an overview of the economic, political, social, educational and wider policy changes facing the education service in the foreseeable future.

2.2 In common with other developed societies, Northern Ireland has been experiencing a period of profound and accelerating economic, social, political, technological, cultural and demographic change. The globalisation of the economy has had major implications for the movement of capital, labour and knowledge and this has created intense international competitiveness. The information and communication technology revolution presents new ways of providing, assessing and disseminating knowledge, and is altering many features of contemporary living. Research in a wide variety of human endeavours has given rise to the epithet “the knowledge society”, as the descriptor of contemporary society. The accumulated impact of such change is greatly altering the character of work and occupational patterns over a life cycle. The need to retrain and relearn, and to keep abreast of developments, has made in-career development a requirement for most occupations.

2.3 The family, as a social institution, has been undergoing profound change with new forms of alignment being forged. This impacts on many aspects of social and community activity and has implications for how we care for the younger generations. Linked to this, the developed world has been experiencing great demographic change with reductions in the proportion of young people while, at the other end of the life-cycle, greater longevity is in evidence, involving new patterns of relationships between the young and older generations. As the diversity of cultures, languages and religions has become increasingly acknowledged in societies, there have been new demands for pluralism and tolerance. Despite the general improvements in standards of living in developed countries over recent decades, there is increasing concern about the extent and durability of social exclusion. The gap between the rich

and poor has been widening. In the knowledge society, with its dependence on information and communications technology, the danger of increases in the gap between those who 'know and can do' and those who 'don't know and cannot do' is obvious.

2.4 The European Union and international organisations such as the OECD and UNESCO have been drawing attention to the significance of such changes. Most developed countries have been giving greater priority to education policy as they endeavour to restructure and reorient their education systems to meet the challenges which now exist. The demands of the emerging knowledge-based society place a premium on human intelligences, adaptability, flexibility, creativity, self-reliance, innovation and teamwork skills. A well-educated, self-confident and adaptive population is a key resource for the future well-being of society. Educational structures and procedures devised for an earlier and very different society need to be reformed and brought into alignment with the changing societal needs and values of the modern world. All of this represents a major challenge for our education service.

2.5 The Northern Ireland Executive committed itself in the Programme for Government to the provision of an education system which is based on excellence and equality of opportunity for all. In this Review we have sought to make a definitive contribution to the achievement of this objective, in accordance with the Programme for Government's⁽¹⁾ intentions -

"We need to improve significantly the educational successes of so many of the young people in our schools, colleges and universities. Our Vision is to extend accessibility, choice and excellence throughout our education system, raise standards and eliminate low achievement. We will create a highly educated society in which all school leavers have the qualifications and aptitudes to achieve self-fulfilment, to proceed to further or higher education, receive vocational or professional training for participation in a modern workforce and have lifelong opportunities to update their knowledge, skills and qualifications."

(1) Northern Ireland Executive (2001), *Programme for Government*, Section 1.6 *Education for All*, Belfast: HMSO

Policy Developments

2.6 The context within which the Review has been carried out is also one of considerable policy development within the education service and the wider public sector. Our findings and proposals have taken account of local legislative and policy considerations, national policies and international policy statements (Appendix B). In particular, we have had regard to policy developments which will influence the future role and effectiveness of the post-primary education system, including:

- **the review of the Local Management of Schools (LMS) funding formula⁽²⁾** being undertaken by the Department of Education, and which has very significant implications for the resourcing of schools. The present arrangements are uneven in their application across the different school sectors and between education and library boards, and are open to claims of inequity by one or other school sector. It is essential that the proposed common formula should be consistent and transparent in its application and should maximise the delivery of resources to the classroom;
- the current **review of the statutory curriculum** being undertaken by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), which represents a significant and timely opportunity to address the changing educational needs of young people, society and the economy - arising from the rapid development of communication technologies, different approaches to learning and teaching, the growth of the global economy and, not least, changing moral and civic values. It is critical that the review of the curriculum framework for Key Stages (KS) 3 and 4 in particular should produce a curriculum which challenges and motivates young people to develop as individuals. Young people should be provided with genuine access to a curriculum that is interesting and relevant, which develops their personal qualities and enhances their ability to operate as productive and engaged citizens;

⁽²⁾ *Department of Education (DE) (2001), A Common Funding Formula for Grant-aided Schools: A Consultation Document, Bangor: DE*

- the rapidly developing **16-19 curriculum**, and the associated National Qualifications Framework, with its academic, vocational and occupational pathways, which present significant opportunities and challenges to schools and further education colleges (FECs), and training organisations (TOs), working separately and in partnership, to prepare young people for rewarding careers and to meet the skills shortages identified by employers and Government;
- the strategy outlined in “Unlocking Creativity”⁽³⁾ for the nurturing and **development of creativity and adaptability** within our education system, which presents an exciting challenge for our society. Developing those abilities calls for new approaches in education and training, at all levels, and new approaches to economic and cultural development;
- the development of a strategic approach to the promotion of **a culture of tolerance**,⁽⁴⁾ as referred to in the Belfast Agreement,⁽⁵⁾ which presents a challenge to the community at large. It has been widely acknowledged that the development of understanding and respect for diversity is a seminal purpose for our education system. We have taken careful note of the various initiatives and policy developments in this area;
- the policy on **Open Enrolment**, which is designed to enable parents to express preferences for their children’s post-primary school. Under primary legislation schools must comply with parental preferences, subject to the constraints of their enrolment capacity. Arising from this policy there has been an increasing proportion of pupils entering

⁽³⁾ *Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), Department of Education (DE), Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (DHFETE) (2001). **Unlocking Creativity. A Strategy for Development.** Belfast: DCAL, DE, DETI, DHFETE,*

⁽⁴⁾ *Working Group on Integrated Education (1998), **Towards a Culture of Tolerance: Integrating Education.** Bangor: Department of Education Northern Ireland*

⁽⁵⁾ *The Governments of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland (1998), **The Belfast Agreement** Belfast: Northern Ireland Office*

grammar schools, with a consequential reduction in the overall proportion of enrolments in the secondary schools sector. This gap is expected to increase over the next ten years as a result of demography, and if not addressed is likely to exacerbate further the perceived inequities in resources and educational provision, and inequality of opportunity within the post-primary sector;

- the rapid development of **education technology**, which is already changing the nature of teaching and learning and, over the next twenty years, has the potential to transform the way in which schools function. Already there has been a huge investment by Government across the UK through the National Grid for Learning, the Northern Ireland Network for Education and the Education Technology Strategy in Northern Ireland: Classroom 2000 will provide a comprehensive, managed ICT service for all schools. The projected investment over the next ten years will enable teachers to develop their competence in using technology for teaching and learning and has the potential to transform both classroom practice and professional development;
- **Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998**, which places a statutory obligation on all public bodies to promote equality of opportunity and good community relations in carrying out their functions. The selective system of post-primary education has been identified for an Equality Impact Assessment in the Department of Education's Equality Scheme.⁽⁶⁾ The equality implications of school systems have been an important consideration within the present Review. In addition, we have had careful regard to the duty of the State, under the European Convention of Human Rights, to provide an effective education for all its citizens.

2.7 These are the key policy issues which are driving developments in our education system. The accumulated impact of these factors will involve major change, regardless of the outcome of this Review. What we have sought to do in the Review is to consider all of these issues in the round and to provide an appropriate strategy for the future development of post-primary education to meet the challenges which lie ahead.

⁽⁶⁾ *Department of Education (DE) (2001), **Equality Scheme for the Department of Education**, Bangor: DE*