

**A Comparative Study into FE Teacher Education North and South of  
Ireland: Toward a Framework for FE Teaching Qualifications.**

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## **Introduction**

This study was designed to investigate models of teacher education which would be appropriate for the training of further education teachers and was carried out at a time when Northern Ireland Teacher Education in FE Colleges had undergone considerable change in relation to professional standards, recognition and regulation. The Project was designed to encourage partnership between experts within the field of Further Education in the North and South of Ireland and to support collaborative working between the University of Ulster, the National University of Ireland (Maynooth), FE consortia in N Ireland and South of Ireland, the General Teaching Council Northern Ireland and the Teaching Council of Ireland in the area of teacher education for the FE sector. The work of the Project was timely with regard to preparation for the introduction of new requirements for the professionalization of the FE sector and the introduction of Teacher Education FE qualifications by 2013 in the South of Ireland.

Vocational colleges, North and South, are tasked by Government with the development of enterprise and business as priority skills areas (DEL NI 2008, DES 2008). IVEC points out that in the South of Ireland “ the number of adult learners that Vocational Education Committees (VECs) cater to annually exceeds the total number of graduate and undergraduate students currently in third level education” The nature of vocational education means that vocational teachers will, usually, have entered teaching from an industrial or business background and have brought to teaching, comprehensive and applied vocational knowledge (Robson 2006); however, they may face significant challenges in adjusting to a new identity as an educator (Robson and Viskovic, 2001) The latter is especially true in Further Education, as vocational teachers, usually enter teaching service prior to undertaking teacher education as opposed to school teachers who are trained before they commence teaching ( Robson and Bailey 2002, 2009).

Colleges are often faced with challenges in that their student intake will consist of a range of students who have very diverse learning needs. This latter situation poses great challenges for the inexperienced teacher. Consequently, weaknesses in teaching will lead to poor retention and poor rates of achievement. This can also mean that students, who did not achieve in schools, may experience further disadvantage, may lose the opportunity to develop their potential and will be at risk of becoming marginalized within a society where accredited knowledge and skills are an essential requirement for employment and, ultimately, social inclusion (McAleavy et al, 2003, McAleavy et al 2001).

The partnership approach, utilised in this Project, addresses these latter issues through the establishment of a North/South partnership designed to assist stakeholders to explore a possible qualification framework fit for purpose across North and South; the partnership approach will also assist in the establishment of a framework of skills which will meet the needs of the sector in both jurisdictions. Sector needs are firmly focussed on the “curriculum for skills” agenda (DES 2008, DEL 2008). Skills shortages and the value of the contribution by FE colleges to the STEM agenda for enhanced skills (DEL 2008) and the review of workforce needs connects the North and South of Ireland. In Northern Ireland, Colleges of Further and Higher Education and Universities work in partnership to promote regulatory recommendations in respect of employability and meeting the needs of economic and enterprise policy requirements (Empey 2007). There exists, in the South of Ireland, comprehensive expertise and experience in respect of tutor education and policies in relation to provision of training for tutors working in colleges and other areas of education and training (O’Mahony 2011); in addition, the Colleges of FE are active in developing the use of new vocational curricula and technologies to meet the needs of business, community and learners.

The Project has, therefore, concentrated on the development of a strong working partnership involving relevant stakeholders from North and South of Ireland, in order to establish and maintain an expert panel of key advisers on Teacher Education in both jurisdictions. With this in mind, the panel consisted of representatives from the following organisations/departments:

## **Northern Ireland**

University of Ulster

General Teaching Council N Ireland

Lifelong Learning UK N Ireland

Department of Employment and Learning (DEL)

## **South of Ireland**

NUI Maynooth

The Teaching Council ROI

DES

IVEA

North Eastern Further and Higher Education Alliance ( NEFHEA)

Communication between all stakeholders was planned and actively supported via regular face to face meetings and via electronic methods. All panel members were afforded the opportunity to investigate and share current models of teacher education which would be appropriate for the training of FE teachers, so as to explore a framework for teacher education for the FE sector in North and South of Ireland; the focus was on the need to enhance employability and enterprise skills. Opportunity was also given for consultation with relevant staff of FE colleges in North and South of Ireland and with staff in GTC N Ireland and TC South of Ireland.

## **Rationale**

This Project was carried out at a time when Northern Ireland Teacher Education in FE Colleges had witnessed much change in terms of professional standards, recognition and regulation. It was designed to support a partnership with relevant South of Ireland stakeholders in order to prepare for the introduction of new requirements for FE teacher education in the South of Ireland and to move towards

addressing government targets for the professionalization of the sector and the introduction of FE teacher education qualification(s) by 2012 (now changed to 2013).

## **Aim**

The aim of this project was to further develop, test and evaluate models of teacher education that would be appropriate for the training of further education and work based learning teachers in Northern and Southern Ireland.

The project aimed to support partnership and collaborative working between University of Ulster, the National University of Ireland (Maynooth), FE consortia in N Ireland and South of Ireland, GTC N Ireland and Teaching Council of Ireland in the area of teacher education for the FE sector.

The project was to develop a possible qualification framework fit for purpose across North and South and present findings in preparation for the 2013 FE Teacher Education requirements in South of Ireland.

## **Objectives**

To identify a sample of comparative programmes in Teacher Education for the FE sector in North and South of Ireland

To design a joint framework for Teacher Education for the FE sector in North and South of Ireland which is fit for purpose and values both the building of character and the development of competitiveness.

To support an on line community forum for key discussion and project information for participating providers.

To continue to develop North South forums for future exchange and cooperation.

To disseminate key findings and establish a framework for future collaboration.

## **Methodology**

The collection of data is vital to the success of a sound research project. If data is not conducted in the most effective manner, crucial learning experiences may be lost. Therefore, it is imperative that an appropriate method of data collection is employed. The project team decided that the use of syndicate meetings (focus groups) document audits and reviews and face to face individual meetings/interviews would be best employed for the collation of data for this particular research project.

The qualitative research was collated through six syndicate meetings (focus groups) and several interviews/meetings with relevant stakeholders involved in the project. Interviews 'have become part of common culture' (Steinar and Svend, 2009, pp. 1-20) and are useful methods of collecting data. Focus groups are a sound and reliable source of data collection when the group members have various interests in common and the key issues of concern are common to the groups (Williams and Katz, 2001). The method of using focus groups as a means for data collection has become attractive to researchers in the field of education and is increasingly used in this area of research (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1998). The literature on focus groups offers many definitions to best describe what they are and the role they play in research, (Parker and Tritter, 2006) and what is apparent from the literature is that "a focus group is a gathering of individuals brought together to discuss an issue which they have an opinion on". The information gained from the syndicate meetings (focus group) related to real life professional experiences, conversations between different members and/or opinions formed by the members within the syndicate group. The data is rich in realness i.e. the information is taken from actual situations and occurrences (Ashar and Lane, 1993; Glitz, 1998). "The hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group" (Morgan, 1997)

Generally, as is the case for most qualitative methods, it is the focus group's ability to access the "knowledge, ideas, story-telling, self-presentation, and linguistic exchanges within a given cultural context" (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998, p. 5) that makes it a refreshing challenge to traditional quantitative approaches. Quantitative work (such as the collection of survey data) through a process of "measurement, experimentation, variables, and operationalization, transfers the original 'voices' of its research subjects into statistical data, mathematical relations, or other abstract

parameters," leaving little understanding of the context in which particular social practices occur (Schratz, 1993, p. 1). In contrast, qualitative methods such as focus groups and individual interviews pay more attention to the voices of participants in their everyday life, allowing researchers the possibility of observing and presenting a broader view of social reality within their research practices (Schratz, 1993; Hoepfl, 1997). Stated simply, focus groups help to capture those experiences that cannot be "meaningfully expressed by numbers<sup>3</sup>" (Berg, 1995, p. 3).

The key elements that contribute to focus groups being an effective tool for social scientists are the levels of "synergy, snowballing, stimulation, and spontaneity" that a group dynamic can generate (Catterall & Maclaran, 1997). For instance, within a focus group discussion, a comment may encourage a train of thought in another, people may develop new ideas and ways of connecting their personal stories to specific situations, and it is research participants who primarily guide the flow and direction of questioning (Panyan, Hillman, & Liggett, 1997; Glitz, 1998). Additionally, researchers describe the data they attain from focus groups as "extremely rich" and "high quality" (Ashar & Lane, 1993).

The venue, setting and the preparation all lend themselves to the success of the session, so it was felt by the project team that they should conduct all syndicate meetings (focus groups) in a neutral venue away from the colleges and universities. The procedure followed ensured that members felt secure and confident that whatever they disclosed would remain confidential. Sessions involved open discussion and, on occasion debate, regarding the topics raised and all members were encouraged to participate as part of the research for this project. (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

In addition to regular syndicate meetings, quantitative data was gathered from relevant documentation North and South of Ireland. Document audits and reviews were carried out among key Project stakeholders; the latter informed discussions in relation to the Project aims. Experts from North and South of Ireland were invited to review and liaise in relation to the project. All Government Departments responsible for FE teacher education were involved: Teaching Council personnel (North and South of Ireland), IVEA (South of Ireland), representation from the North East Alliance for FE Colleges and Higher Education (employer forum in South of Ireland),

Lifelong Learning UK N Ireland Sector Skills Council. The two universities, who were partners in this Project, represented providers and, through the Project, made links with other key forums, particularly in the South, from the wider HEI community responsible for FE Teacher Education.

## **Findings**

The Project investigated current provision, across provider areas on the Island of Ireland, paying particular attention to the models of practice that exist and, that might be shared, to design a coherent and transferable qualification with a common set of standards. The approach facilitated the forming of a network of providers who can work cooperatively to agree and design a common core of competences suitable for the FE sector and follow subsequent standards of practice and education models in the future.

Maynooth (NUI) and University of Ulster are experienced tutor education providers with research expertise in the development of the various programmes, and, have current experience of working with the vocational and non graduate learning communities within the FE sector. The University of Ulster has informed the policy framework for teacher education in the FE and vocational skills community in Northern Ireland. The research team there has also contributed to the development of the Northern Ireland lifelong Learning UK standards. NUI Maynooth has an established history in the sector itself and a full understanding of the needs of the adult and community education sector in South of Ireland. Central to the work of both providers is their awareness of skills-focused education and training and the models of teacher education and scholarship that inform the programmes of learning necessary for a tutor education policy in the Republic of Ireland.

All focus group members were willing to work together, with University of Ulster and NUI Maynooth as leaders, to develop a forum that will consult and establish agreed standards and approaches (to be piloted and reviewed) suitable for FE tutor education provision in the future in the North and South of Ireland. The establishment of this consultative network offers an opportunity to ensure standards and a consistency of approach, meeting the needs of a credit framework where transferability of qualifications and credits can be realised in the FE sector.

Opportunities for collaboration and sharing of good practice increased throughout this project and through the networks that will permeate this work in the future.

Comprehensive experience exists in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in respect of further education and training (FE) tutor education and the formation of policies needed to support the provision of training, for non graduate and graduate tutors working in VEC and other areas of education and training (O'Mahony, 2011). Inevitably, the government-drive to qualify the tutoring workforce in the South of Ireland by 2013 will result in demands on teacher educators in this developing sector. National University of Ireland, Maynooth, and University of Ulster as lead providers, have worked together in the past to review such needs and have designed many successful trials between students in the North and the South (SCoTENS, 2008; 2009).

Vocational and inclusive education courses are now the focus of all 'curriculum for skills' initiatives (DES, 2008; DEL, 2008). The major challenge for South of Ireland is in the area of low and medium skills and qualifications, in further education and training. Failure to address skill enhancement on the middle to lower rungs of the qualifications ladder could result in large sections of the population failing to benefit from the economic growth that those with high level skills might generate in the future. The 2007 National Skills Strategy (NSS) forecast that some 500,000 people need to move at least one step up the NFQ ladder and it is estimated that up to 84% of all up-skilling envisaged in the NSS will need to be addressed by the VECs.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Despite recognising the need to qualify the FE tutor workforce in Ireland, there is a lack of a coherent national strategy for qualifying and up-skilling the thousands of FE tutors who work in colleges and centres in Ireland. Also, there seems to be an opinion that trained second level teachers are automatically qualified to deliver FE programmes. The 2010 OECD Review of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Ireland recommended the need to ensure that FE tutors and instructors have appropriate pedagogical competences, in recognition of the important impact that tutors in Ireland will have on the future skills strategy and workforce development. It was the view of this study that FE tutors required specialised training and that the

traditional competence model for teachers of second level students may not be appropriate. More recently, the Teaching Council of Ireland (2011) has established Programme Requirements for the Accreditation of Teacher Qualifications [Further Education].

The providers are now faced with a huge challenge. In Ireland we have many providers of tutor education with a wide range of courses being offered according to University or Institute requirements. The new strategy requirement calls for a very different approach to the traditional style of provision currently on offer.

Colleges and VEC centres are thriving as unemployment rises and students in our society endeavour to improve their quality of life. Accessing tutors with a very different skills-set (McAleavy and O'Hagan, 2008; O' Hagan et al, 2005; McAleavy et al, 2001; O'Mahony, 2011) to those from the qualifying sectors of our teacher education communities, will pose a challenge for our College and vocational education and training employers. It is of the utmost importance that the needs of the FE community of tutors is realised and understood. It is suggested any provision for FE tutors will require a skills focused course provision with a work-based learning model to support employed tutors (SCoTENS, 2008; 2009).

The outcomes of this Project offer opportunities for social networking and the sharing of good practice. Several key additional research outcomes have been identified, including the increased knowledge of all participants, the additional benefits of North-South cooperation for all stakeholders involved in FE teacher education and the impact of such initiatives on the individual teacher, and the strategic vision of the FE sector in Ireland.

In conclusion, the researchers suggest the following key recommendations:

1. Maintain an expert consultative forum of key stakeholders to advise on Teacher Education in North and South of Ireland
2. Consider the implication of post-compulsory teacher education and emerging national and professional standards in the Republic of Ireland

3. Develop a curriculum contextualised for the Republic of Ireland, with due attention to the sector needs and policy recommendations
4. Consult key stakeholders in response to legislation and policy regarding vocational and non graduate tutor education in the Republic of Ireland.
5. Devise a joint framework for Teacher Education for the FE sector in North and South of Ireland focusing on the need to enhance employability and enterprise.
6. Consult the Managers and relevant staff of FE colleges in North and South Ireland to ensure the needs of providers are built into the plans for teacher education for FE.
7. Evaluate existing knowledge and experience in relation to good practice in tutor education in South of Ireland and develop a series of pilots for non graduate training with lead institutions.
8. Establish an FE network to support the design of Irish FE Tutor Education Standards and share Good Practice Models for Tutor Education provision.
9. Consider partnership/franchise opportunities and make recommendations for future cooperation based on provider agreements.
10. Liaise with providers to investigate teacher education models of work-based reflective practice in the North and South of Ireland

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