



Department for
**Employment
and Learning**
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SKILLS
TO SUCCEED

NORTHERN IRELAND

Higher Education Strategy

ISSUE 3



WELCOME

Welcome to the latest issue of the Higher Education Strategy e-zine which is designed to keep you up-to date in relation to the implementation of the two Higher Education strategies for Northern Ireland, 'Graduating to Success' and 'Access to Success'. As well as highlighting the progress which has been made over recent months through the continuing implementation of the strategies, this issue of the e-Zine also reflects on recent developments, achievements and case studies from across the wider sector.

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Foreword

by Dr Stephen Farry MLA, Minister for Employment and Learning

As I come to the end of my tenure as Minister I am able to reflect on some of the achievements that the Department, working in conjunction with the institutions and key stakeholders, has been able to make across the Higher Education sector in Northern Ireland. This progress has been achieved in spite of the issues around the sustainable funding of Higher Education which have provided the backdrop over recent years.

I was delighted to launch 'Graduating to Success', the first ever Higher Education strategy for Northern Ireland, in 2012. Since then we have been able to make good progress in implementing the projects flowing from the strategy, resulting in a number of significant achievements which are directly attributable to the work undertaken through the projects and which have resulted in a range of quantifiable benefits for the Northern Ireland Higher Education sector.

Later in 2012 I was able to launch 'Access to Success', the Regional Strategy for Widening Participation in Higher Education.

Through 'Access to Success' and the broader widening participation agenda we have been able to put in place a range of measures to address the multiple disadvantages being experienced by some of our people. Northern Ireland still leads the way in terms of ensuring that Higher Education is accessible to all who can benefit from it regardless of their personal or social circumstances and it is encouraging that the latest available figures show an increase in enrolments in some of the most underrepresented groups.

Great strides have also been taken in diversifying Higher Education delivery beyond the traditional



full-time routes. I have recently announced the introduction of a new student support system for both part-time undergraduate and taught postgraduate students.

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The introduction of new student loans will help to improve access for both of these groups, thus making these forms of study more viable and accessible to potential students who would not have been in a position to consider them as possibilities previously.

I have also put in place a range of higher level apprenticeship pilots, allowing students to combine their degrees with relevant full-time employment. The higher level apprenticeship approach is best attuned to meet employers' skills requirements through flexible models of delivery and I therefore expect to see degree-level pilots emerge as an important way forward for universities over the coming years.

In view of future skills needs forecasts which have identified the need for more graduates undertaking STEM and economically relevant subjects, I am pleased that, since taking office in 2011, my Department has also funded over 1,400

additional undergraduate places in STEM subject areas and an additional 234 postgraduate awards in areas of economic relevance. This allocation of funding recognises the need to rebalance the profile of course provision by increasing enrolments in those disciplines which will meet key higher level skills needs and in doing so contribute to the growth of the economy.

In the International Research field, I am very proud to have implemented a number of new initiatives. Together with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, my Department has facilitated the creation of a network of experts, known as NI Contact Points, to work directly with research organisations and companies to help them participate fully in Horizon 2020. The research capacity of the universities will be strengthened as a direct result of the significant increase in the drawdown of European funds which the Contact Points have helped to

facilitate since their introduction, ultimately benefitting the whole Northern Ireland economy.

Working with our counterparts, Science Foundation Ireland, we have piloted the 'Investigators Programme Partnership' initiative. These pilots will provide a real opportunity to develop new cross-border research collaborations, which will help Northern Ireland universities to take full advantage of funding opportunities under Horizon 2020.

I am also highly supportive of the well established US-Ireland R&D Partnership Programme, and welcomed the expansion of the programme in September 2015 to include collaborations between Research Centres. The Centre to Centre collaborations will bring an added dimension to the already flourishing US-Ireland R&D Partnership, facilitating large scale collaborations which will address key challenges and deliver further economic benefits

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for Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and the United States.

The first Research Excellence Framework results, which were released in December 2014, demonstrated the quality and strength of the research being carried out in our universities. In all of the areas that Queen's and Ulster University submitted to the Research Excellence Framework, at least half of the research was assessed as being of a 'world leading' or 'internationally excellent' standard in terms of originality, significance and rigour. In addition, in more than half of the areas to which they submitted, the research from Queen's University and Ulster was assessed as having outstanding or very considerable impacts in terms of reach and significance. Stranmillis University College also achieved impressive results, with 20% of its submitted research being assessed as 'world leading'. St. Marys University college, which submitted to a research excellence assessment for the first time, has had a fifth of

its submitted research ranked as 'recognised internationally'. The impact of this high quality research being delivered by our institutions has a very significant impact on our economy, as well as our health and the social wellbeing of our society.

During my term in office it has also been encouraging to note significant increases in inward and outward student mobility. Our 'home' students have been able to avail of more study and work placements around the globe, enhancing their degree experience and career prospects on graduation. In addition, Northern Ireland's market share of the international student market has increased substantially, resulting in additional income streams for our universities and a more diverse Higher Education sector.

Finally, through the recent 'Higher Education Big Conversation' I have highlighted the importance of Higher Education to our economy and society and the need for it to be funded in a sustainable manner.

My Department's response to the 'Big Conversation', published in March, has clearly laid out the challenges facing our higher education system and displayed the full range of options available to us to meet them, which I am confident will be considered as a major priority in the next mandate. It is essential that sustainable funding is in place to ensure that the sector is able to continue to play its part in the future development of the region's economy, particularly in light of the expanded Higher Education provision and the associated skills demands that the introduction of a lower rate of Corporation Tax will require.

In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to thank those of you who have contributed to the implementation of the strategies, and who continue to work towards achieving our shared vision of ensuring that Northern Ireland has a modern, dynamic, high quality and world-renowned Higher Education sector.

section
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Interim review of the implementation of the strategies

The review aims to reflect on progress to date with a view to informing planning, ensuring best use of resources and improving effectiveness and efficiency of implementation during the remainder of the programme.

In undertaking the review, the team engaged with members of the Implementation Committee for the strategies, which is comprised of senior representatives of the key stakeholders in Higher Education in Northern Ireland. Consideration of the wider strategic context was central to the review exercise; indeed the guiding principles and vision underpinning the strategies can be considered to be as relevant now as when the strategies were published in 2012, particularly in the context of the evolving financial climate including reduced government funding, increased higher skills needs and the potential reduction in Corporation Tax.

The key findings and recommendations of the review, which will be subject to the agreement of Implementation Committee members, will be detailed in the next issue of the e-zine. The recommendations flowing from the review will aim to ensure that the remainder of the implementation programme is as flexible as possible as we move forward in order to take account of the developing financial environment. It will also help to ensure that the Departmental and stakeholder resources which are employed to implement the strategies are utilised in a targeted and efficient manner, as well as ensuring that the programme remains aligned to wider developments within the sector and the wider economy.

The wider political environment also has the potential to impact on Higher Education in Northern Ireland generally, including future implementation of the strategies. Under the restructuring of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, Higher Education will fall within the remit of the newly established Department for the Economy and this development, along with the upcoming publication of a refreshed Economic Strategy for Northern Ireland, will help to place Higher Education firmly within a wider economic context.

In Focus

Project 5 - Create a more supportive learning environment

Project 5 is focused on creating a more supportive learning environment for students. The project team responsible for implementing the project is investigating the partnership approach as a logical progression for achieving sustainable and effective student engagement.

The partnership approach positions students as equally responsible to academics and institutional managers for their own learning, for the quality of their learning environment and, through their student representative systems, for the development of policies and initiatives to enhance their learning community.

The partnership approach can be defined in contrast to more traditional approaches of canvassing students' views on issues that affect them or soliciting retrospective feedback on teaching quality. The partnership approach aims to enable students to shape their own education, or to develop their understanding of their environment in order to

influence it, rather than being a passive recipient.

In recognition of a move towards a partnership approach, the Department and the NUS-USI organised a 'Partnership in Higher Education workshop' which

was held on 12 November 2015 to examine the way forward. Employment and Learning Minister Dr Stephen Farry opened the workshop, which aimed to provide the Higher Education sector here with the opportunity to hear first-hand about the work



DEL Minister, Dr Stephen Farry, provided the opening address at the 'Partnership in Higher Education workshop' which was held on 12 November 2015

In Focus

Project 5 - Create a more supportive learning environment

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across the UK on effective student/academia partnership and to develop a shared vision of students working in partnership with their institutions.

The workshop also aimed to understand the practices associated with effective staff-student partnerships and suggest

interventions that might be taken to overcome barriers and drive partnership across Higher Education here. Attendees at the workshop included staff and student representatives from Northern Ireland's Higher Education Institutions and Further Education Colleges, as well as the NUS-USI

and other Higher Education organisations throughout the UK.

Following the workshop, the project team are now working together to agree the best way forward to develop and implement the partnership approach.



The Higher Education Big Conversation

In September 2015 the Employment and Learning Minister, Dr Stephen Farry, initiated the 'Higher Education Big Conversation' to consider the sustainability of Higher Education in Northern Ireland.

Launching the 'Big Conversation', Minister Farry said: "Higher education makes a vital impact on our economy and society here. It drives our knowledge economy by equipping our people with the higher level skills which companies, both local and newly investing, need to grow. It generates billions of pounds of spending in our economy and supports over 18,000 jobs for people in Northern Ireland across a range of occupations.

"It is one of the surest ways for people, regardless of their backgrounds or personal circumstances, to improve their life chances and employment prospects. It is a crucial enabler of social mobility, social cohesion, and social change.



"However, the model we currently use to support Higher Education here is no longer sustainable. We need an innovative solution. To find this we need an innovative process."

The 'Big Conversation' represented an experimental and innovative approach to engaging with people about the important choices facing our society in relation to Higher Education.

The 'Big Conversation' comprised two main stages. The first

stage focused on promoting awareness about the purpose and importance of Higher Education to individuals, the economy and wider society. It outlined how the existing Higher Education system works and the challenges it faces as well as highlighting the different ways in which Higher Education is delivered and funded across the globe.

Stage two of the 'Big Conversation' provided key stakeholders and the wider public with the opportunity to have their

The Higher Education Big Conversation

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say about the future of higher education in Northern Ireland through a public consultation type exercise. This stage focused on some of the most critical issues facing Northern Ireland's Higher Education system, including its financial sustainability. Some 120 people participated in the stage one survey and the second stage consultation questionnaire generated 90 responses.

Following the conclusion of the 'Big Conversation' the Minister wrote to his Executive colleagues to identify the nature and scale of our Higher Education funding deficits and to outline the range of options available to address them. This has helped to inform the budget preparation process for 2016-17 and to date a further £5 million additional funding has been secured and another £20 million

promised in June monitoring to help target skills needs. The Minister also highlighted the additional funding required to expand Higher Education provision to meet our skills demands as informed by the new Northern Ireland Skills Barometer tool, with a particular focus on ensuring we can adequately prepare for a lower rate of Corporation Tax from 2018 onwards.

On 9th March the Department published an outcome paper outlining the various options available in order to help secure a sustainable funding model for Higher Education and support the scale of growth which our economy requires (www.delni.gov.uk/consultations/higher-education-big-conversation). Those options will need to be considered in the context of the next Comprehensive Spending Review period.



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Study USA

The Study USA programme provides opportunities for pre final-year Higher Education students, from universities and colleges in Northern Ireland, to gain an external perspective through a year-long business studies placement in a church-affiliated college or university in the US.



Currently in its twenty-first year, Study USA (formerly the Business Education Initiative) is managed by the British Council and has links with over 140 US institutions from Washington to Wisconsin and Nebraska to New Jersey. Through study outside their home country, it is intended that these students gain additional confidence, an international outlook, and enhanced business and management skills that will directly benefit the local economy.

The programme also aims to facilitate the building of closer links between Northern Ireland and the USA and to promote long term economic, academic and cultural partnerships.

Feedback from past participants, as well as evidence from a recent independent evaluation of the programme, shows the currency that participation in Study USA provides to students when seeking employment after graduation. In general students return from their year in the US significantly more focused, driven and goal orientated, as well as more mature and politically aware. Speaking at the graduation ceremony for the 2014/15 cohort, DEL's Deputy Secretary, Heather Cousins, stated "Increased international student and staff mobility is recognised in our Higher Education strategy as a key element in enhancing the reputation of our universities

and colleges and improving careers prospects for students".

Students benefit from departmental funding covering the cost of programme recruitment, delivery and administration, flights to the USA, text book allowance and food and accommodation costs during term time. In addition to the generous funding provided by DEL, the US colleges waive tuition fees for participants, equating to a scholarship worth in the region of £25,000 per student.

Following a competitive selection process, there are currently 54 students in the US under the auspices of the Study USA programme, now midway through their second semester. Recruitment is underway for a 2016/17 cohort, and it is hoped that another 54 students will travel to the USA in August 2016 to take advantage of all the opportunities the programme has to offer.



SFI-DEL Investigators Programme Partnership

Launched in January 2014 by Minister Farry and the Irish Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Minister Richard Bruton TD, the SFI-DEL Investigators Programme Partnership enables Queen's University and Ulster University to participate as full academic partners in Science Foundation Ireland's well-established and highly prestigious, 'Investigators Programme' on a two year pilot basis for the 2014 and 2015 calls. Projects will typically run for 4-5 years.

On 14 May 2015 Minister Farry announced £3.5 million of research funding for seven research projects involving Queen's University Belfast. The funding will support successful Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) Investigators Programme projects from the 2014 Call through the SFI-DEL Investigators Programme Partnership.

The Minister said: *"The SFI-DEL Investigators Programme Partnership is of significant benefit to Northern Ireland both economically and socially. I welcome that seven projects involving Queen's University collaborating as partners with*

research institutions in the Republic of Ireland have been successful in SFI's prestigious Investigators Programme.

"My Department will be providing £3.5 million to support these ground breaking research projects in areas such as Energy, Sustainable Food Production and Processing, Parallel Computing, Processing Technologies and Advanced Materials and Personalised Medicine.

"These research collaborations will not only address fundamental research issues but will also strengthen cross border research alliances and help Northern Ireland to bring further success under Horizon 2020,

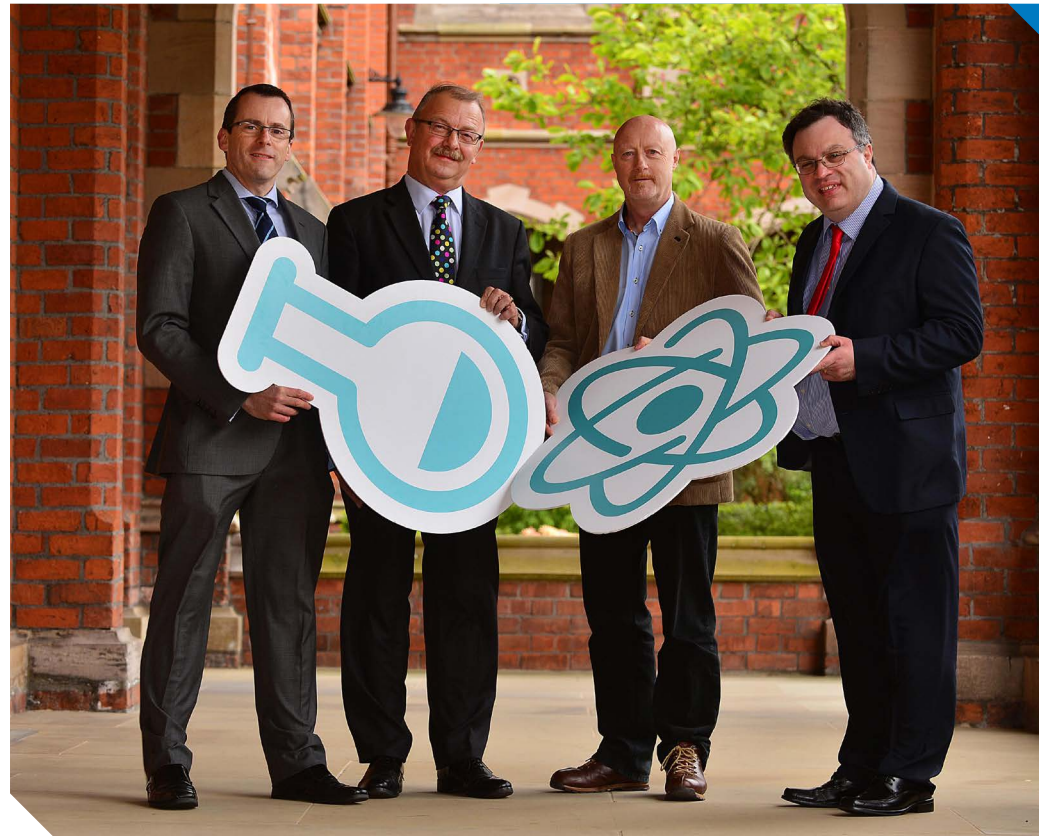
the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation."

The SFI-DEL Investigators Programme Partnership supports collaborative projects involving universities from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in undertaking excellent scientific research that has the potential to impact society and the economy. The seven successful projects were selected following international competitive peer review involving 400 international scientists.

The 2015 SFI Investigators Programme Call closed in June 2015. The results are likely to be announced in spring 2016.

SFI-DEL Investigators Programme Partnership

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Employment and Learning Minister, Dr Stephen Farry announcing £3.5 million of research funding for seven research projects involving Queen's University Belfast. Also pictured (left to right) Darrin Morrissey, SFI Director of Programmes, Professor James McElroy, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Postgraduates QUB and Professor John Dalton from one of the funded projects - Application of New and Emerging Technologies to Develop Vaccines against Liver Fluke Infection.

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US-Ireland R&D Partnership Programme

The US-Ireland R&D Partnership is a tri-jurisdictional alliance which was officially launched in 2006. It represents an ongoing and strategically important opportunity for research collaboration between universities in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and the United States in the eligible areas of nanotechnology, sensor technology, energy/sustainability, telecommunications, health and agriculture.

The aim of the Partnership is to increase the level of collaborative R&D among researchers and industry across the US, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, that will generate valuable discoveries and innovations which are transferable to the marketplace, or will lead to enhancements in health promotions, disease prevention and healthcare.

In Northern Ireland the following Government Departments provide support for the programme:

- the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) / Invest NI support projects in the eligible areas of nanotechnology, sensors, telecommunications

and energy/sustainability which fall under the jurisdiction of the National Science Foundation (NSF) in the US.

- the Health and Social Care R&D Office of the Public Health Agency supports health-related projects which fall under the jurisdiction of the National Institute of Health (NIH) in the US.
- the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will be supporting projects in the agriculture area.

The Partnership was expanded in September 2014 to include 'Centre to Centre' research collaborations. At the thirteenth

meeting of the US-Ireland R&D Partnership Steering Group held on 17 November 2015 in Farmleigh House, Dublin, the extension of the Partnership to include agriculture research was announced and the successful launch of the first two projects connecting research centres in the US, the Republic of Ireland, and Northern Ireland was celebrated.

The first project, 'Partnership in Continuous Manufacturing for Nano-based Drug Products' includes collaborators at Synthesis & Solid State Pharmaceutical Centre at the University of Limerick, the Centre of Pharmaceutical Sciences at Queen's University Belfast, and the Centre for Structured Organic Particulate

US-Ireland R&D Partnership Programme

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Systems at Rutgers University and Purdue University. The second project, 'Agile Cloud Service Delivery using Integrated Photonics Networking' features the Irish Photonic Integration Centre and Centre for Future Networks and Communications at Dublin City University, the Computer Science Research Institute at Ulster University, and the Centre for Integrated Access Networks at the University of Arizona.

Northern Ireland Steering Group Co-Chair, Dr. Rosemary Hamilton CBE commented "The value of these centre-to-centre collaborations lies in the complementary and synergistic activities amongst each of the partners and represent a significant step-up in the scale of activity for the Partnership"

These projects bring the portfolio of US-Ireland R&D Partnership projects to 27 which have a combined investment value of £32 million.



Pictured at the launch of the founding Centre-to-Centre research projects are, I-r, Prof Liam Barry, Irish Photonic Integration Centre & Centre for Future Networks and Communications at Dublin City University; Prof Gavin Andrews, Centre of Pharmaceutical Sciences at Queen's University Belfast; Prof Philip Morrow, Computer Science Research Institute at Ulster University; and Prof Kieran Hodnett, Synthesis & Solid State Pharmaceutical Centre at the University of Limerick

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In Focus

Project 20 - Foundation Degrees Promotion Campaign

Project 20 had a primary aim of increasing and improving buy-in to Foundation degrees. The key mechanism to achieve this aim was a wide ranging Foundation degree promotional campaign which ran across a variety of media from January 2013 until March 2015.

The project has now been completed with all of its target outcomes successfully achieved. Independent third party research was completed following the completion of the advertising campaign to assess the impact of the promotional campaign. The research provided substantial evidence to demonstrate its impact in terms of increased awareness among employers, employees and potential students:

- **Increased awareness of Foundation degrees** among employers was evidenced by the fact that **75%** of the employers surveyed were aware of the qualification in April 2015, an increase from 60% in December 2012.
- The message that **'anyone can do a Foundation degree'** was acknowledged by 44% of people surveyed in September 2014 compared to just 12% in February 2013, as was the message that a **Foundation degree** can still be studied while in work (24% to 32%).
- The target of reaching 2,500 Foundation enrolments by 2015, from a baseline of 1,132 in 2010, was achieved in advance of the target date with **2,528 enrolments on Foundation degrees** as of academic year 2013/14.
- **Part-time enrolments** on Foundation degrees also increased from 903 to **1,132** during the same period.
- **Enrolments in Foundation degrees in STEM subjects** increased from 39.6% of the total Foundation degree enrolments in academic year 2009/10 to **45.5%** in academic year 2013/14.

Part-time and Postgraduate Student Finance

In June 2015, Minister Farry launched a public consultation to consider a range of options to improve the finance offerings for both part-time undergraduate and taught postgraduate students.

Currently part-time undergraduate students can access non-repayable grants to assist with their tuition fees, but they are income assessed. Only a minority of part-time students are eligible to receive these grants and they are normally not sufficient to cover the full costs of fees charged. Meanwhile, most postgraduate students have no access to any standard student finance package, and the vast majority must finance their own studies.

Following the consultation, Minister Farry has announced plans to introduce new student loans for both part-time and postgraduate taught students.

Under the new arrangements, part-time undergraduate students will still be able to access the existing tuition fee grants, but they will also be able to 'top them up' with a loan should they need to, up to a level proportionate to the full-time tuition fee loans. Students ineligible to receive the existing fee grants will also be able to access these new loans.

Taught postgraduate students will also be able to access new non means tested tuition fee loans for the first time. These measures will vastly improve access for both part-time and postgraduate students and have been widely welcomed across the Higher Education sector.

Further information on the new loans can be found on the Department for [Employment and Learning website.](#)

Case Study from the Reach Higher advertising campaign: Nuala Esler

As a key action within 'Access to Success', the Department developed and introduced the 'Reach Higher' advertising campaign in 2014/15. The campaign is a centralised awareness raising programme promoting the benefits of participation in Higher Education.

Over the last 12 months many good news stories have been shared across numerous publications and online. One such example is that of Nuala Esler from Ballymena.

Nuala, who is 32, was studying at Northern Regional College and had struggled to achieve a Grade C in her GCSE Maths. Despite many attempts and a lot of effort, Nuala could not understand why and was becoming more and more frustrated each time. With the help of the College's Educational Psychologist, Nuala was diagnosed with dyslexia and dyscalculia. Not letting this hold her back, Nuala was determined to achieve her GCSE Maths and, with the help and support from her tutors, she did just that.

Keen to continue her studies Nuala then embarked on an Access

Course which has enabled her to gain entry into Stranmillis University College to become a teacher. Nuala feared her diagnosis would impact on her career and her aspirations to become a teacher but she is well on her way and a real example of what can be achieved. Stranmillis University College has a range of facilities to help students with learning disorders and as such were able to provide equipment to help Nuala with her condition.

Nuala would encourage others like her to really consider Higher Education. The Access Course enabled her to start a degree in teaching and, whilst she admits that she was fearful of doing a degree, she has grown in confidence and gained a lot of satisfaction from her achievements to date. Her hard work and determination has enabled her to follow her lifelong



dream to become a primary school teacher.

The Department is about to commence a new wave of advertising in March 2016 to encourage people like Nuala to consider Higher Education. www.nidirect.gov.uk/the-benefits-of-higher-education

section
10**In Focus****Project 10 - University Bases
at Further Education Colleges**

The purpose of Project 10 is to pilot a number of initiatives and approaches aimed at increasing access to and participation in Higher Education provision, with a particular emphasis on up-skilling those in employment and those in rural locations who may not be in a position to travel to University to commence or further their Higher Education studies. The project therefore has a strong focus on testing the part-time delivery of bachelor degrees, for those progressing from part-time Foundation degrees, and the delivery of Foundation degrees and higher level apprenticeships.

The use of technology through distance learning and the provision of access to university materials and resources are central to the project, with a view to making participation in Higher Education provision more accessible, attractive and achievable to those in rural areas who may not have previously considered up-skilling to this level.

Three pilots are being rolled out across two Further Education colleges – South West College is partnering with Ulster University and, separately, with Queen's. Southern Regional College is partnering with Ulster University.

As a direct result of the pilots the following provision has already commenced:

- BSc (Hons) Energy Environment and Sustainability, accredited by QUB and delivered by South West College; and
- BEng (Hons) Mechanical and Manufacturing Engineering, accredited by and delivered by South West College in collaboration with Ulster University.



Further Information

We would be delighted to have any feedback, suggestions or queries.
Please contact us via one of the following methods:

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You can also view copies of the strategies via the links below:

[Graduating to Success](#)

[Access to Success](#)

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