

**Women's Resource & Development Agency:
Response to the Further Education Means Business Strategy Review**

The WRDA welcomes many of the proposals outlined in the Further Education Means Business Strategy Review. The increasing emphasis on supporting vocational training could help to ensure that further education is more accessible and relevant to those who are socially excluded.

Since 1983, the WRDA has been working with and through women in disadvantaged communities. Central to the work of the organisation over the past 10 years, has been the WRDA Community Facilitators programme. This programme is offered to women who are already active in their local communities, giving them the opportunity to gain an NVQ Level 3 in Direct Training and Support. As part of the course, participants commit to providing 10 hours of volunteer facilitation hours in the local community.

We support the Strategy Review's focus on vocational training for young people aged 14-19. The review identifies that disadvantaged young people are often further disadvantaged by traditional academic-focused education, due to the combination of disillusionment, poor literacy and numerical skills leading to disruptive behaviour and leaving school at age 16 with no formal qualifications and lacking in essential skills.

The role of the Voluntary and Community sectors is critical in reaching adults who have had this experience, or a similarly negative experience, of secondary education and who are therefore unlikely to personally access formal learning and education again. Over many years, voluntary and community organisations across Northern Ireland have been providing alternative training and learning programmes, accredited and non-accredited. Such courses have proved highly valuable either in equipping participants for employment, or providing a route to re-entering college-based learning.

“The Department will promote a new relationship between colleges and relevant providers to enable the colleges to fund specific provision from voluntary and community organisations, at particular levels and in particular areas.” (Page 46)

This statement is vague, leaves too much unsaid and needs clarification. While it acknowledges the role of voluntary and community organisations, and promotes partnerships between colleges and organisations, we are concerned about the phrase, '...at particular levels and in particular areas'.

Particular levels?

- The training provided by voluntary and community organisations must continue to meet the diversity of needs identified by and in the community. This will need to include non-accredited courses, essential skills, and low level and high level courses.
- Voluntary and community organisations should not be limited to the provision of 'particular levels' if this is Essential Skills training, and low level courses and qualifications.
- Level 3, 4 and 5 courses should not be outside of the provision of voluntary and community organisations.

Particular areas?

- Voluntary and community organisations exist to tackle areas of identified social need and exclusion. 'Particular areas' needs to reflect this and requires clarification. Does it refer to locations (e.g. areas of TSN), or groups of people, (e.g. men, women, young people)?

WRDA

Over the past 10 years, over 170 women across Northern Ireland have completed the NVQ Level 3 in Direct Training and Support with WRDA. Of these participants, many have entered employment or further training, and 122 are active facilitators. Over 1,467 hours of facilitation were provided during 2003, covering an astonishing range of issues from parenting to policy, confidence building to cross community meditation.

As a training provider of an NVQ Level 3 qualification, we are concerned that our role and funding could be jeopardised.