

Education and Training

Alliance Party Policy Document

**Approved by Party Council:
November 2000**

The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland
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1. Introduction

1.1 Achieving appropriate education and training provision in Northern Ireland is of utmost importance. Schools and colleges should be instrumental in developing an enterprise culture and a positive 'can do' mentality. Both education and training are vital in remotivating the population. There are external pressures making it imperative to get education and training provision right if Northern Ireland business is to be competitive, such as:

- Expansion of the EU single market competition infiltrating more aggressively from the Republic of Ireland
- Technical advance and high skill levels in industrial areas elsewhere
- Low cost competition from Eastern Europe

2. Teachers

2.1 Changing of attitudes begins in our schools and involves teachers as well as pupils.

2.2 Teacher training needs to contain an appropriate degree of enterprise and industry awareness.

2.3 Ideally teachers should also undertake a short placement in the private sector as part of their training or work in another sector before embarking on a postgraduate certificate in education.

3. Work Experience

3.1 Young people should acquire practical work experience while at school. There are several examples of work shadowing, work experience and practical business learning programmes currently operating in many schools at both primary and secondary level. Within a reasonable period such programmes should be introduced at a particular year level in all primary and secondary schools in Northern Ireland to give every pupil at each level access to a real enterprise experience. This will:

- Enhance enterprising behaviour
- Increase business knowledge and experience
- Increase the perceived career value of work and business, particularly in grammar schools

4. Vocational Courses

4.1 More courses relevant to business should be taught and the importance of vocational courses should not be overlooked. An equal

emphasis should be placed on vocational training and academic qualifications in order to instil a sense of pride in those who choose not to pursue an academic route. Vocational qualifications are vital to equip those without GCSEs, A-Levels and degrees to pursue suitable skilled employment .

4.2 The Jobskills Programme is to be generally welcomed for seeking to improve the quality of employment-related training and for seeking to make training – through the acquisition of National Vocational Qualifications more relevant to industry needs.

4.3 For those pursuing third level education the requirement to take a placement year in industry should be extended so that as many graduates as possible can benefit from this. We recommend that students at all levels should gain relevant work experience.

5. Information Technology

5.1 With the current rapid expansion in the IT sector there is a requirement to increase training in IT. The Software Industry Federation recommends the provision of 1500 more permanent graduate places and 1500 conversion, MSc and apprenticeship places in Northern Ireland. This is an area of potential high employment growth that should be embraced and developed so that Northern Ireland maximises its IT potential. It is important that all areas of potential growth should have adequate training methods in place in advance so that future opportunities can be grasped. Apart from IT, the areas of construction, economics, manufacturing engineering, software engineering and hospitality and tourism have been identified as ones where investment in training is required.

6. Careers Guidance

6.1 To ensure that young people choose to follow the best educational route for them and to ensure they are properly equipped for a career, there is a need for better careers guidance to be available within schools and colleges. This is essential in order to reduce the number of graduates who have qualifications which do not adequately equip them for a career and to ensure that young people do not embark on a course of education which they later regret. Young people must be motivated and directed appropriately or alienation will continue to be a feature of their attitude to employment and employment support.

7. Lifelong Learning

7.1 The learning process should not end when employment begins and the government's proposed Lifelong Learning programme is to be welcomed. This scheme should enhance an individual's employability and improve job satisfaction and motivation. The University for Industry and Individual Learning Accounts are ways that individuals can improve their skills and potential for career progression. It is important that those in employment should have access to training in a similar manner to those who are unemployed.

8. Access

8.1 Equal access to training should be available for all with provision of childcare facilities, relief for carers, access for those with disabilities etc. It is important that all those seeking work should have equal opportunity to gain training.

9. Unemployment and the Social Economy

9.1 Our aim is to work towards full employment for all those who are able to work. In order to achieve this, new and imaginative ways of tackling unemployment need to be further incorporated into policy and practice. A principal element of this is the social economy.

9.2 The unemployment problem will not be solved simply by the creation of jobs.

9.3 The unemployment problem is affected by:

- High rates of long-term unemployment
- Lack of appropriate skills among unemployed people
- Low wage jobs
- Spread of part-time employment
- Lack of flexibility in social security provision

9.4 There are severe repercussions for the wider community due to the continued unemployment problem. Repercussions do not just affect the economic well being and self-worth of unemployed individuals and their families but they also affect budgets in other Departments, as benefits, housing subsidy and health problems are increased:

- Cause a loss to government of revenue in tax and national insurance contributions
- Create a social underclass
- Cause people to live in inadequate or bad housing
- Have a detrimental affect on physical and mental health
- Increase stress and anxiety particularly in relation to debt
- Make family dislocation more likely
- Increase theft, drug abuse and other anti-social behaviour
- Stifle a sense of community and local pride
- Attract some people to paramilitarism and general anti-community behaviour

9.5 These are undesirable consequences of high and long-term unemployment that will undoubtedly detrimentally affect the development of the political process.

10. Financial aid

10.1 Several indicators exist to define an area as disadvantaged. One of the measures is the ratio of unemployment in the areas compared to the Northern Ireland average. The additional aid currently coming to the Province needs to be genuinely additional in its funding of initiatives and should be specifically targeted at disadvantaged areas for regeneration and reconciliation projects.

11. Benefits

11.1 There are large numbers of non-economically active people who, while they may be registered as unemployed are not actually looking for work. Part of the reason for their reluctance to look for work is reflected in other problems. The benefits trap is a major concern in the community and a major barrier to employment take-up. Options to encourage more people to apply for jobs need to be developed. The impact of the Jobseekers Allowance reflects the need to tighten up benefit procedures. All people, whether economically active or not should be facilitated into employment as far as is possible. It is disappointing that, partly due to lack of inter Departmental co-operation there has been so little flexibility in adjusting benefits in relation to various employment related schemes.

12. New Deal

12.1 New Deal makes some attempt to encourage individuals back to work and we cautiously welcome this as a positive step towards tackling long-term unemployment. The initial Gateway interview has the potential of being a very useful exercise and with the subsequent options of training, education, employment, voluntary work or environmental work there is potential for individuals to have a more directed employment path. It is important that New Deal and Worktrack provide work experience and real job opportunities for long-term unemployed people so that they move from these schemes into work and not back to social security.

12.2 There should be positive co-operation between the departments of the Assembly to allow initiatives that:

- Create benefit/salary ratios for low paid jobs to encourage long-term unemployed people to take those jobs
- Protect benefits for categories of people seeking employment including long-term unemployed people and people with disabilities
- Allow full benefit resumption for people who have not succeeded in employment, especially those with disabilities

13. Long-term unemployment

13.1 The effective tackling of long-term unemployment, however, is tied to the development of a real social economy in Northern Ireland. A real social economy will:

- Develop community leadership and individual skills
- Establish community businesses meeting local needs
- Create jobs for local and long-term unemployed people
- Create employment training opportunities for local and long-term unemployed people
- Develop community confidence and pride
- Create a community enterprise culture

13.2 Due to the length of time without work, long-term unemployed people are less likely to be able to effectively compete for newly created jobs than other people looking for work. As such, unemployment can be self-perpetuating for long-term unemployed people. Training or retraining, through the social economy agenda and various training initiatives, will help considerably. However, employers should also, at least for a limited

period be provided with monetary incentives to employ people previously unemployed for at least two years. We advance two suggestions for pilot schemes:

- A one year national insurance holiday per employee (affecting both employer and employee will help to reduce any negative impact of the national minimum wage, to employers.)
- A national rebate per employee

13.3 We wish to see subsidised work rather than subsidised inactivity and also a move from government programmes into real employment. The government should be seen as an employer of last resort.

14. National Minimum Wage

14.1 The national minimum wage is a welcome first step towards better conditions for low-wage earners, but is only one method of tackling the difficulties faced by those in the low income bracket. It should be considered in conjunction with the two measures outlined above. The minimum wage will encourage businesses to be more competitive. To date, productivity has been low and unit labour costs are high, staff absenteeism and turnover are high in comparison to the rest of Europe and training is poor. It is hoped that employers will increase their competitiveness and their investment in employees as a result of the implementation of a minimum wage. The government should provide support to small firms to assist them in implementing the minimum wage.

15. Tackling Low Pay

15.1 NHS wage levels should be addressed as support staff are currently being underpaid and are offered low pay rises in comparison to senior management. Lab staff such as trainee graduate MLSOs with a starting salary of around £8k are in particularly in need of a pay review. Other professions suffer from disparity in wages such as teaching. This is an issue of fairness that should be addressed.

16. Working-Time Directive

16.1 The Working Time Directive is a welcome measure to cut down the working hours of employees and pressure should be put on employers to ensure they comply with the directive. It is possible that this may have the negative affect of reducing employee's take home pay, however the affect of this on low wage earners may be offset by the implementation of the National Minimum Wage. There are areas of work which are not covered by this directive and a review of the situation should be made in the near future to include a reduction in working hours of junior doctors and those in the transport sector. The current EU position of delaying implementation of the Working Time Directive for an extra 9 years, in the case of junior doctors, is totally unacceptable and should be challenged. (The implementation period is 4 years for other employees thus the total implementation period is 13 years in the case of junior doctors).

17. Equal Opportunities

17.1 Equal opportunities are essential to ensure that part-time workers are treated in a similar way to full-time employees, to ensure that women have a fair deal, and to tackle discrimination against workers because of factors such as religion, race or disability. We would encourage employers

to consider equality of access for potential employees who live in areas with inadequate public transport, as this may deter skilled individuals from applying, with a view to providing some form of transport or lobbying public transport providers to improve their services.

18. Childcare

18.1 The government's 'family friendly' policies are to be welcomed and should be implemented in order to provide for more flexible working hours, childcare, parental leave and long term-breaks for family reasons. The availability of reasonably priced and good quality childcare is absolutely critical to opening work opportunities to many women and men. Such childcare is often not currently available. There needs to be urgent action taken involving the private, public and community sectors in providing comprehensive childcare throughout Northern Ireland.