

**DE Consultation: Policy on Supporting Ethnic-Minority Children and Young People who have English as an Additional Language****UCET(NI) Response**

UCET(NI) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of policy in an extremely important area and commends the initiative taken by DE to systematise support for children and young people whose first language is not English.

There appears to be some uncertainty about the scale of the challenge facing us. The consultation document maintains at paragraph 3 that the number of children and young people with English as an additional language is increasing dramatically and in October 2006 was 3,852. That figure appears to be at variance with the data provided by the DE and based on the NI School Census, which indicate that the figure is 6,054. If the figure in the consultation document represents a significant underestimate it nevertheless has the effect of emphasising that the community faces an even more daunting challenge: indeed, the arguments advanced by the consultation document apply a fortiori.

The problem is an urgent one. In the first place, recent legislation on equality and human rights obliges the DE to ensure that the rights of those for whom English is not a first language are properly protected. In the second place, as the consultation paper also acknowledges, children and young people who do not speak English, or whose grasp of English is extremely tenuous, simply cannot access the school curriculum, with the predictable result that their educational progress will be thwarted and they will be unable to take advantage of the educational opportunities made available to them. NI is committed to nurturing the skills and abilities of all its young people to the highest level possible: it cannot realise that aspiration if a significant minority of young people are not equipped with the most fundamental learning tool of all – the capacity to communicate through English.

There is a third consideration that is implied in the consultation document but in our view needs to be made explicit. Young people who are not supported in acquiring a facility in English simply cannot participate in the life of the community. Most modern communities are multi-ethnic and multi-cultural in the sense that they recognise and celebrate cultural diversity. However, if they are to constitute recognisable communities there must be certain basic features that are shared by all. Perhaps one of the most fundamental of these characteristics is a shared language and in the Northern Ireland context that language is English. Moreover, we see no incompatibility between the development of a shared language throughout the community and the nurturing of the various community languages that sustain the life of minority groups.

There are many features of the consultation paper we support: the creation of a central agency to play a leadership role in EAL and to develop consistency of provision across Northern Ireland; the provision of staff development; making schools accountable for their

EAL provision; the quality assurance of EMAS; and the commitment to provide dedicated funding to underpin the work of the new agency.

At the same time we have a number of concerns. Firstly, we are surprised that, before the consultation period has elapsed, posts in EMAS are apparently already being advertised. Secondly, while we agree that the daunting list of duties specified for EMAS are appropriate, we earnestly hope that it will be staffed to a level commensurate with the very extensive range of responsibilities it will carry. Thirdly, while agreeing that EMAS should be quality assured we hope that measures can be adopted to ensure that in conducting inspections ETI retains the independence upon which its credibility depends

Finally, and most importantly, we are deeply concerned at the way in which the teacher education institutions are being regarded in this important initiative. These institutions constitute a significant resource of experience and expertise in EAL and we are surprised and disappointed that they have been marginalised in this exercise. They were not involved in the earlier consultation exercises that helped to inform the consultation document; that document makes no reference whatever to the NI Languages Strategy, which is currently being developed by the two universities, supported by funding from DE; and no reference is made to the potential role of higher education institutions in the research activities to be undertaken by EMAS.

We urge that further consideration is given to ways in which the EAL, staff development and research expertise of the teacher education institutions can be harnessed to support this major initiative. The consultation document refers to the need for collaboration. We would like to see that collaboration extended to include the universities. If EMAS is really to flourish and to meet the high expectations that are held for it, it will need to come to see itself as the hub of a range of networking institutions and other agencies. It will require to be open in its professional relationships, drawing on appropriate expertise wherever it can be found, stimulating the sharing of best practice, welcoming constructive critique, mobilising expertise, and avoiding at all costs becoming a central bureaucracy content merely to send its presumed wisdom down the line. The problem is too urgent to allow a new agency to waste time re-inventing the wheel, or congratulating itself that it has cornered the truth market in EAL.

Gordon Kirk, Academic Secretary  
12 April 2007