

16 April 2026

Dear Sir/Madam,

Department of Economy's Review of approach to Widening Participation in Higher Education

Feedback from the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC)

Background

- As the support body for almost half of the schools in Northern Ireland, the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Review of Widening Participation in Northern Ireland.
- The controlled sector is the largest education sector in Northern Ireland, representing 49% of all schools. CSSC supports controlled schools in Northern Ireland which include Nursery Schools, Primary Schools, Secondary Schools, Grammar Schools, Integrated Schools, Special Schools and Irish-Medium Schools. Additionally, 28% of children and young people who attend controlled schools are entitled to Free School Meals.

Controlled Schools and Widening Participation

- CSSC agrees with the Department of Economy's definition of widening participation that it refers to efforts that ensure individuals from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds can access, succeed in, and benefit from higher education. These efforts recognise that social, economic, geographic, and personal circumstances can unfairly limit opportunity. Widening participation seeks to remove these barriers through targeted support, inclusive policies, and collaborative action.
- The Independent Review of Education (IRE) stated that 'Education is the greatest investment any society makes in its own future. Responsible citizenship, prosperity and fulfilled lives depend on it. In a world changing at an unprecedented pace, peace and prosperity depend on education more than ever before.' Therefore, it is important to maximise the opportunities for children and young to access higher education.
- Whilst outlining what works well in the Northern Ireland education system, the IRE concluded that many young people, disadvantaged by poverty, emerge under-skilled

and under-qualified after compulsory education. Free school meal entitlement is recognised as a strong indicator of social disadvantage and is closely linked to low levels of academic achievement. As highlighted above, 28% of children and young people who attend controlled schools are entitled to free school meals. It is important to embed widening participation activities in schools that have a higher rate of social disadvantage.

- Investment in tackling educational disadvantage will have to be carefully targeted, and outputs carefully measured. Targeted investment in education represents investment in knowledge, social cohesion, creativity, physical and mental wellbeing and caring for and helping others.
- Widening Participation in Northern Ireland should ensure that it targets the right children and young people who need it. There is a large disparity in schools leavers going to higher education by sector. This is shown below from figures from the Department of Education¹ from the academic year 2024/25:

	Controlled and Controlled Integrated	Catholic Maintained (Non-grammar)
HE: Grammar and non-Grammar	28.3%	25.9%
HE: Non-Grammar only	12.1%	25.9%
HE: Non-Grammar only with 1 or more A-Levels	45.2%	59.3%

- This shows that children and young people are less likely to attend higher education after attending a controlled school in Northern Ireland. The review of widening participation should prioritise controlled schools in its strategy going forward and ensure that they are prioritised for widening participation activity. This will ensure all children and young people are given the best possible opportunity to attend higher education when they leave school.
- The Northern Ireland Audit Office report ‘Assessing the Quality of Education in Northern Ireland’² noted that the Department of Education “should identify the data it needs and how it will obtain and analyse this to demonstrate that the education system is providing a quality education for all pupils”. It would be important to include strengthened widening participation data for this purpose and for the Department of Economy to proactively work cross-departmentally to achieve this.

¹ [Statistics and research | Department of Education](#)

² [NI Audit Office Report - Assessing the Quality of Education in NI.pdf](#)

Conclusion

- A young person is less likely to attend higher education if they attend a controlled school. Any change in widening participation must not be to the detriment of controlled schools or the children and young people that attend them and make the attainment gap worse. Any further programmes that are created to support widening participation in Northern Ireland should support controlled schools and the children and young people that attend them.

Overall, CSSC welcome the Review of widening participation in Northern Ireland. It is important that the Review team engage with a diverse range of stakeholders, and as an organisation we hope to engage further on behalf of controlled schools.

Yours faithfully,



Mark Baker
Chief Executive