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Dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning Request for comment from Office of the First and Deputy First Minister 48.12

Firstly the University and College Union UCU would wish to express its appreciation to the many dedicated civil servants who have contributed to the work of the Department of Employment and Learning over the past number of years. They have delivered a wide range of public services to assist our citizens, with dedication and professionalism. It is our view that, whatever reshaping occurs within government, the skills and commitment of those workers must continue to be harnessed to meet the challenges our society faces in respect of people who may be in work, or in post school education and/or training, those who may be unemployed or far removed from the labour market, those seeking careers advice to help them chart their future or those who must access to the employment related judicial system. Those features of our social interaction will remain ahead of us and the skills and dedication of such staff must continue to be utilised to best effect to support that work.

The University and College Union represents teaching staff in colleges of further education, teacher education and academic and academic related staff in universities, we also represent a number of tutors in training organizations. UCU aims to protect and promote the professional interests of members and to promote adult, further and higher education and training. Our members are mainly teachers and lecturers – educators - whose role is to impart knowledge and encourage learning by students so that they can obtain qualifications, and develop the skills and experience, to equip them to progress in their chosen careers and as citizens.

The Department of Education has a similar mission in respect of the expectations it has for teachers. UCU believes that Department is the appropriate governmental department to have responsibility for the delivery of education across all sectors. Until the late 1990s, that department had overall responsibility for all sectors of education. It continues to have responsibility for regulating the teaching force in schools and for quality assurance through the Education and Training Inspectorate for post-school education and training. The proposal for FE lecturers to register with the General Teaching Council is also a welcome step towards parity of esteem across the teaching profession. The re-integration of the post-schools sectors within that Department would in our view, not only enhance the status of teachers in those sectors but provide much greater scope of integration of the 14 – 19 curriculum across the schools and FE sectors in particular, and promote greater planning and co-operation between schools and universities particularly in the delivery of STEM subjects. It would also enhance the strategic approach to the training of teachers which is fragmented under current arrangements.

The future strategic direction of the schools sector will be determined by the Education and Skills Authority with a focus on preparing young people for life and for future employment. That focus strengthens the argument for greater planning, co-operation and integration between the schools and the post-school sectors to mutual benefit. The re-distribution of post-school education into a single department will facilitate cross-sectoral planning and regulation and the deployment of teachers to best effect. It would also end the anomaly which currently exists whereby the need for the training of teachers is determined by one department and funded and delivered by another.

Research activity makes an important contribution to economic development but the mechanisms through which it does so are complex and indirect. The highest quality research requires long time horizons and academic freedom to question received wisdom. Research is of crucial importance to all aspects of society and is about much more than business innovation and development. There are dangers that the inclusion of the Universities within DETI would lead to an excessive focus on short term applied research for the benefit of private gain to the detriment of wider social need. There is no evidence that the current funding of research in HE would be put at a disadvantage should DE have responsibility for universities. That did not happen in pre-DEL administrative arrangements. There is no reason to believe that the extensive and developing co-operation and interactions between FE Colleges and Universities and the business/industry sectors, would be disadvantaged by the return of the post-school sectors to the Department of Education. The Scottish and Welsh Assemblies each have returned the further education and university sectors to a single education department without detriment to the promotion of economic objectives.

Integration and co-operation across sectors of education would not be improved by the re-location of post-school institutions to the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment. Indeed such a re-distribution would in our view completely distort the role and functions of DETI. Currently DETI has an annual recurrent budget of just over £200million. Its functions are clear ie to promote the development of the economy - primarily the private sector - and to stimulate inward investment from the international business community. Should the post school sectors be re-distributed to that department its budget would be increased by over £700million and it would assume responsibility for all associated administrative and accountability arrangements for the funding and regulation of those sectors. That alone would necessitate the scaling up of administrative machinery to proportions which would overwhelm the purpose and focus of DETI. In our view, this distortion of mission could damage the promotion of inward investment.

Furthermore we are concerned that in DETI's drive to attract clients, post-school education establishments may be locked into financial arrangements and contracts which do not reflect the true cost of delivery or which may adversely impact upon the quality of the educational experience to students. UCU supports and welcomes measures to enlarge the role of FE colleges and Universities in the promotion of economic development. We see that as an essential role for those sectors. However that is only one aspect of their purpose and role – it is not and must not become the primary or dominant feature of provision. Should that become the case, we believe it would fundamentally change the role and mission of those institutions and undermine their crucial role in supporting all aspects of our society and economy. A post-school education service which is primarily business facing will turn further and higher education institutions into training organizations harnessed to the short term needs of multinational corporations whose objectives are for short term profit rather than meeting our needs for a well qualified workforce of educated citizens committed to social cohesion and a shared future.

We note the Higher Education strategy of the Westminster government is to open up that sector to more private sector involvement and greater opportunities for private profit through an expanded higher education market. The location of universities within the Business and Skills Department at Westminster was primarily to promote that development. However even the Westminster Coalition Government is rethinking this position following major problems uncovered by the Obama government in the United States of America as a result of private providers failing to meet the needs of students by failing to deliver in the delivery of quality courses. UCU is concerned that if higher education is to be located within DETI private sector providers such as INTO and KAPLAN will seek to extend their spheres of operation to Northern Ireland and dilute the standards of provision our education departments have sought to preserve. The £40million found by DEL to support higher education arising from the position taken by the Northern Ireland Executive in respect of student fees is retained for that purpose.

UCU notes that a number of influential individuals who preside over FE colleges are pressing for colleges to be relocated to DETI. We believe that is motivated by a strategy to further remove their teaching staff, from links with the teaching profession and to assist them continue their attack on the pay and conditions of FE teachers. UCU is concerned that college leaders in seeking to place the sector with DETI, would seek to further reduce regulation, departmental control and external scrutiny.

The harnessing of our FE colleges to the economy has been tried in DEL's "FE Means Business" policy. The "incorporation" model was designed to make colleges corporate organisations run on a business model. It has not worked. The educational purpose of those institutions has been diverted from being a public education service. This has reduced learning opportunities for our citizens. The "break even at all costs" philosophy of college leaders, pushed by senior officers of DEL has undoubtedly resulted in huge efficiency savings but at the costs of teachers jobs, cuts to courses and increased class sizes. This has damaged the quality of provision to students. It has also resulted in unprecedented levels of financial mismanagement by colleges and huge sums spent from the public purse in investigations and consultancy fees as colleges stumble from one crisis to another.

The failure of college leaders to honour promises and collective agreements made with representatives of staff has led to a disillusioned workforce and a dominant management culture of direction and bullying. UCU believes that the "hands off" approach of senior officers of DEL, shackled by the flawed 1997 Further Education Order, has contributed to that situation. In any future arrangements transparency and accountability to political control in the governance of our post school institutions must be paramount.

We would wish to see the other functions carried out by DEL transferred to an appropriate department and in a constructive and efficient manner with minimum disruption to the mission and delivery of its public services. For example we believe the Tribunal functions properly should be located within the justice system and the careers service and post school education and training should be under DE.