Vision 2020: Global Partnerships

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Introduction

I am very honoured and delighted to address you today and hopefully interact in the discussions of such an august group of people. I was extremely impressed by the TAFE system when I visited Australia last year and took many lessons home with me. I intend today to talk to the themes of this session by concentrating on how we in Belfast and in our region have been dealing with global partnerships.

About Belfast

Some quick background – Belfast is the capital of Northern Ireland a region within the UK. The city in terms of political boundaries has a population of 300k but its suburban surround increases that to 750k. The population of Northern Ireland is 1.8m and Belfast is the key economic driver and has over 50% of the jobs in the region. Belfast is therefore extremely important to the economic health and success of the region – though that is often disputed by those who live outside the city.

From 1969 for over 30 years Belfast and Northern Ireland gained an international reputation for conflict. Where once we had been an important industrial base for the British Empire and built among other things great ships such as the Titanic, we spent a number of decades building walls to divide us, killing and maiming each other – in all nearly 4000 people died and countless 1000s were injured both physically and psychologically. The peace process in 1998 brought an end to this but left us with a battered economy, over dependent on the public sector with a weak private sector and high levels of unemployment and deprivation. In the last 16 years we have been striving to redress the balance and deal with these problems and we have to a certain extent made real progress and achieved gains.
Belfast Metropolitan College operates in this context and is the largest vocational education and training college in Northern Ireland and the 6th largest in the UK. Against the background context of the city, we have been at the forefront of economic resurgence and growth, working to address the skills deficit that 30 years of difficulties threw up, and to meet the needs of new and emerging business sectors as they have developed in the last 10 years in areas such as tourism, financial services and renewable technologies.

**Why we want to be a Global Partner**

NI’s economic strategy seeks to rebalance and rebuild the economy, internally by strengthening economic growth and infrastructure, increasing the skills level of the population and creating jobs; externally by attracting foreign investment and significantly increasing exports. To that end government here has recognised the value of education as an export both in attracting students into Northern Ireland and also through procuring contracts for delivery in other countries. While initially this was seen as a ‘university’ led process, the value of vocational training and education as an export, has now been recognised and is supported significantly by the Northern Ireland regional development agency – Invest NI.

Given our history, a strategy to become outward focussed had many barriers to overcome – we are not like Australia with a long history of outward focus. Two primary obstacles face any plan to expand externally here. The first is a cultural one because if you spend 30 years inwardly focussed, oblivious to anything beyond your boundaries, then attempting to break that cycle inevitably leads to fear and will quickly flush out the lack of skills we had in going out and selling to others – this had to be addressed. Secondly our global image, as a place of conflict preceded us and this had to also be addressed and Northern Ireland reimaged and rebranded as a place to live, visit and work in. Ultimately a strategy that pushes people to look outwards for economic benefit, has also through seeing other horizons been a major plank in cementing the peace here and has had major impact on cultural change.

In the context of this economic strategy for the region, the College’s view was that remaining dependent only on our internal market and largely on public funding, given the size of the region, was a strategy for stability and no growth at best and at worse, given the realities as the global recession bit ever more
deeply in the UK and in Europe, a strategy more likely to lead to stagnancy. We however wanted to be able to grow and innovate, we have deep ambitions to carry out our transformative work in enhancing people’s lives, by giving them skills and pathways to work and to do that we needed additional resources. These additional resources were not just additional income, we also needed access to knowledge, expertise and innovation which we could utilise to our advantage and so to the advantage of those we worked with. For us then it was crucial that we became part of the internationalisation story and so we set about actively pursuing this agenda. This strategy was multi-focussed aimed at increasing the number of students coming from outside Northern Ireland to the College – a big challenge; developing strong and successful partnerships across a number of key areas in the world and working there; and in raising the global profile and reputation of the College.

**Do we have targets and if so are they useful?**

The Northern Ireland regional strategy does have targets for export driven activity, which has been very useful in pushing developments across the globe. Some will argue that the targets are not very stretching, but what they have served to do is increase significantly the consciousness about looking outward and building alliances and partnerships across the globe. As I have indicated this is a big cultural shift in a region that spent so many years looking in on itself. To that end targets have been a very positive part of the process of building global partnerships and alliances.

**What forms do partnerships take?**

Partnerships and their forms can be simple or complex depending on their purpose and basically reflect differential needs over time. In our own experience we have formed and participated in international partnerships that are simply sharing and learning networks which may or may not lead to increased students or paid activity. I am for example a member of RC20/20 a network of the leading urban community colleges in the USA. It was for example through RC20/20 that I visited Australia and subsequently have been developing links between our college and the TAFE system.
As members of the European Union we have access to schemes that promote and subsidise both staff and student exchanges, work placements and research networks. While these come with the requisite levels of public bureaucracy, they have been a powerful tool for innovation in practice for many of our staff and enhanced considerably the experience of students, many of whom come from backgrounds, where out of country travel could simply not be afforded.

We have also a number of partnerships which are very focussed on generating income. In China, a joint venture in developing qualifications with a Chinese – Canadian company, where we have had the advantage of working with a partner who has been established in China since 1985, when the Canadian government took a very robust approach to developing education as an export. It is interesting to note that Canada is one of the most successful deliverers of all educational products on the international market. In India we are in partnership with a group of UK colleges working in skills development in the automotive sector. I could go on.

We believe we have been very successful so far and we have many more ambitions. There are a number of key elements in our experience, which assist in success in creating and developing global links.

The first is very obvious but often forgotten – you have to start with a quality product, you have to be offering something worth having whether it’s to the prospective student, or the joint venture partner, or to the learning network. Hype will take you part of the way but if the basics aren’t good then it will be a tough sell.

Secondly communication and its constancy cannot be underestimated. While technology will take you part of the way, real relationship building and face to face interaction will always trump technology and is more likely to conclude the deal. This is something we have had to take on board and it has investment implications – building international links costs initially and can’t be done on a shoestring.

Lastly we have put incredible work into connectivity – building contacts, ambassadors, and friends. We are relentless in this. We are a very political college on a cross party basis; we connect strongly to other public agencies and to the private sector in developing on a global basis – we use the Irish diaspora ruthlessly. This opens doors. It was not a happy accident that when the G8 met in Northern Ireland last summer President Obama in his only public speech
which was internationally relayed, paid tribute to the transformative work of Belfast Metropolitan College in changing lives in Belfast. It was the result of continuous product building, communication and connectivity. The result is that our website now bears his endorsement and that of a number of international politicians.

**Whose requirements do partnerships meet?**

So we believe we are in the foothills of this global process and that it has brought great energy to the College, given us rich and sustainable partners and access to an incredible knowledge base across the world. We do not see this simply as something we do to get more money, but rather an interactive process where we give and take equally and where mutual respect for each other is ingrained.

**Visas – a mountain to climb or a little fence?**

And here is the sting in the tail. The current political climate in the UK fed by nearly 7 years of austerity and economic hardship is becoming increasingly hardline on what are regarded as porous borders. In the five years I have been in the College, we have seen the thresholds that visa applicants have to climb get higher and higher and this is having a detrimental impact on attracting students to study here. Its further impact is that some countries, whose citizens are being made climb high barriers to get here, are becoming less accommodating in relation to us seeking to work there. In the UK this is causing serious tension between the Departments of Business and Enterprise and the Home Office and at this minute the ‘suspicious islanders’ are in the lead. In Northern Ireland these national policies are impacting on our ability to push further with our work. Despite our increasing success, this is an issue that will potentially have serious consequences for our work.