

# Southern Regional College: Promoting Community Cohesion



The Community Cohesion Programme has been formally running since May 2002. Armagh College secured Reconciliation Funding from Europe and from the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) to develop and implement this work in collaboration with a wide range of community and voluntary organisations within the District of Armagh and beyond. The Lifelong Learning Team worked in partnership with the local Community Sector, with Trademark (a voluntary organisation which tackles oppressive and discriminatory practices and provides support for redistributive forms of equality) and with the support of ANIC (Association of Northern Ireland Colleges) to implement this programme.

The City and District of Armagh has a population of 54,000. The city is split into two distinct areas: the south and west areas are predominantly Catholic and the north and east are mainly Protestant. Other than Belfast, Armagh and its surrounding district suffered the highest levels of sectarian murders during the conflict.

The Lifelong Learning Team proactively promotes social inclusion and reconciliation. The College's Lifelong Learning Department aims to widen access and increase participation to marginalised groups and individuals and enable them to develop their capacity to engage in community relations. The Lifelong Learning Team aims to challenge issues of social exclusion including sectarianism and racism.

The Team has taken an interagency approach which has led to more targeted provision for those most in need. This approach has also reduced duplication of provision. The Lifelong Learning Team has been successful in developing a range of multi-agency Peace 2 projects that have resulted in over £800,000 in EU funding for the most disadvantaged within our community.

Following the Good Friday Agreement, it is a statutory obligation for public bodies to promote community/good relations. The College has taken a proactive role in promoting community relations which builds equality, reconciliation and an appreciation of diversity within the College and the local community.

The Lifelong Learning Team's work with marginalised groups including victims of the conflict, political ex-prisoners and migrant workers is innovative, and in January 2005 the Lifelong Learning Manager received a 'Local Heroes' award from the Home Secretary for the ground-breaking work being carried out by Armagh College.

The Public Value, innovation and transferability of the approach taken by Armagh College have been formally evaluated and recognised with the following awards and accolades:

**Association of Colleges UK President's Award (Top UK Beacon College, 2007)**

**Association of Colleges UK Beacon of Excellence Award for Partnerships to Develop Students as Whole People (November 2006)**

**Business in the Community Good Relations Runner Up (June 2005)**

**Home Office Local Heroes Award for Community Capacity Building (January 2005)**

**BBC Award for the Innovative Promotion of Lifelong Learning (November 2004)**

## Impact on students

The College formally evaluates all cohorts going through the programmes, and the following is a summary taken from the most recent evaluation in January 2007:

94% said they now have a clearer understanding of issues surrounding sectarianism, racism and homophobia

95% said the course tutor created a learning environment in which they felt comfortable discussing sensitive issues

91% felt that the programme content was appropriate

87% would recommend the programme to others

As Northern Ireland's first Total Quality College, Armagh College regularly monitors and evaluates the attitudes and behaviours of its learners and the impact it has on its many local communities through focus groups, course reviews, questionnaires, and also through formal external evaluation.

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## Programme Rationale

1. To contribute to a greater understanding of the issues and challenges facing divided communities and ethnic groups in building trust and sustainable relationships.
2. To assist the College and local community in identifying and strategically implementing practical ways of contributing to a fair, diverse and stable society.

## Aims and Objectives

Section 75 Schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 sub section 2 states: 'A public authority shall, in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland, have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group'.

The aim of this programme was to be pro-active in promoting community cohesion and good relations within the College and wider community to build trust and sustainable relationships.

A number of specific objectives were drawn up, including elements related to research; training for community activists, teachers and staff; integrating cultural diversity components in Essential Skills programmes; developing the curriculum, and piloting an OCN accredited Good Relations/Citizenship Course - Challenging Prejudice and Discrimination.

## Putting Planning into Practice

Previously the Lifelong Learning Team had been working on the ground over a two year period building trust and relationships between divided communities. These relationships were built based on trust, respect, equality and true empowerment. The Lifelong Learning Team believes that challenging discrimination and promoting empowerment of those who experience social exclusion is central to good community development practice. This project sought to improve the quality of life within the community and the College by promoting the principles of equality, inclusion and participation.

The programme therefore began after a process of consultation with local groups and from a number of related projects that the Lifelong Learning Team had developed with funding secured under Peace 2 (EU). The Community Cohesion Programme was developed and managed by the Lifelong Learning Team with additional input and support from other College staff.

## Monitoring Procedures

The Community Cohesion and Good Relations Programme is monitored in a number of ways - both short-term (such as learner feedback - verbal and as recorded in weekly Learning Journals and an evaluation questionnaire at the end of the course - plus teacher feedback after staff development sessions on 'Community Relations') and longer-term (such as monitoring the diversity of student enrolments in terms of ethnic mix; positive Inspection Reports from DEL; securing additional funding for Good Relations work, and greater awareness, understanding and respect for diversity amongst both staff and the student body).

DEL inspected the 'Cultural Diversity Initiative' (including the 'Good Relations' curriculum) in 2005 and their subsequent report was extremely positive - commending both the training resources and materials that had been developed and the quality of teaching observed in Good Relations training sessions. The report also found that the projects were useful exemplars for practice across the FE sector and praised project planning and management and the commitment of the senior management team to developing an ethnically-sensitive and inclusive environment.

As part of the programme the College set up a Good Relations Working Group that was charged with monitoring the embedding of Community Relations within the College. Each year the College has to submit a detailed progress report to the Equality Commission which outlines our Community Relations work. The initial programme was monitored by the Department of Employment and Learning. In December 2005 the College secured £165,000 from the Community Relations Council under Peace 2 to further embed Community Relations within the College. This programme will be closely monitored by the Community Relations Council. The Good Relations programme is also monitored by the Senior Management Team and the Operational Management team to ensure continuous improvement. Equality and Diversity are two of the College's Core Values as outlined in the College's Corporate Development Plan. The College's Good Relations Strategy is also outlined in its Corporate Development Plan.

*"Both assessors felt that this project should be put forward for the President's Award because of its relevance in a wider political, social and economic context. The college's work is not only worthy of wider acknowledgement, but offers a real solution in bringing together communities traditionally separated through religious beliefs which is not only relevant in Northern Ireland but throughout the UK as a whole...An excellent and pioneering example, modelling how community partnerships work at their best."*

**AOC Assessment Panel, 2007**

# The Public Value of Adult Education

## Southern Regional College

### Wider benefits

#### Civic Engagement and Social Cohesion

Many of the individuals who have participated in this programme are displaced (i.e. they have involuntarily moved from areas of violence or from interface areas for their own personal safety). This group is often the most isolated and excluded group within the community. Within the District of Armagh, sectarian divisions run deep. Housing is broadly divided across sectarian lines and smaller towns in the district suffer a similar legacy. The divisions run so deep that towns within the district are sometimes defined simply as Republican areas or Loyalist areas.

This programme has engaged those who have previously been prevented from fulfilling their potential in society and/or in the labour market due to the situation they found themselves as a result of the conflict. The vast majority of these people and their families have few formal qualifications and suffer from low self esteem as a consequence; they are often caught in the poverty trap without hope of gaining employment in the near future.

Those who were targeted for this project experienced disadvantage in education, employment, housing and family support. A crucial element of the programme was to encourage participants to examine the breadth of diversity existing in their own community, in this way they were invited to engage in debate focusing on the challenges and opportunities presented by diversity, social exclusion and inclusion. These encounters were managed with skill and sensitivity to ensure that those involved could express their views on sensitive and controversial material in a safe environment where they were helped to analyse, understand and challenge their own and other's perceptions. This strand of peace and reconciliation work was directly aimed at empowering individuals and communities to develop the skills and confidence required to participate as full and active citizens in society. This programme empowered the most disadvantaged within the community.

In May 2006 the College organised a major Good Relations Conference, 'Partners in Pluralism', which was the first conference of its kind within the Further Education sector. The purpose of the conference was to showcase 'best practice' in good relations delivery and research and over 150 delegates from across the island of Ireland and Scotland were represented at the conference. The conference was held during Community Relations Week, and offered an opportunity for both civic society and public bodies to illustrate some of the progress that is being made in building better relationships as the foundation for a shared future.

The College is currently finalizing the delivery of Good Relations/Challenging Prejudice programmes for both the Business and Community sectors. From 2007/2008, an accredited Workplace programme (Level 2) will be rolled out to fifteen large employers and to a multitude of small to medium sized enterprises in association with the Federation of Small Businesses and NI Chamber of Commerce. These tailored programmes will offer business owners and employers a user-friendly and structured learning opportunity to explore such topics as Sectarianism in the Workplace, Sex Discrimination in the Workplace, Racial Discrimination in Northern Ireland, the role of Migrant Workers in Ireland and Sexual Orientation in relation to the Workplace.

#### Economic regeneration

This programme was targeted at those who live in sectarian interface areas within the City of Armagh and where inter-community relations are correspondingly poor. All of the areas worked with through this programme were disadvantaged ones, whose image and attractiveness as an investment location had been adversely affected by local violence or community tension. These areas suffered physical dereliction (including damaged infrastructure) as a consequence of the conflict. For example in terms of the Noble indices some of the estates are within the electoral wards with the highest levels of deprivation in terms of housing stress. These communities have been adversely affected by local violence and community tension. The areas have suffered physical dereliction and lack of investment as a consequence. With regards to this programme the majority of these individuals and their families continue to have low levels of income, skills and qualifications and consequently suffer high levels of multiple deprivation. It is now the College's intention to make a significant contribution to the social, cultural and economic regeneration of the mid and South Ulster Border Region. Armagh Campus recently merged with its two sister Colleges to become the Southern Regional College and we now plan that this approach to and programme of Good Relations and Community Cohesion will be mainstreamed across all full-time courses by 2008/2009 and part-time courses by 2009/2010. One cannot underestimate the impact this will have in promoting reconciliation and directly tackling a legacy of polarization amongst the 50,000 strong student body and the 300,000 citizens within the catchment area of the SRC. Inevitably this will have wider benefits for economic regeneration within the merged College area.

# The Public Value of Adult Education

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*"I have been assessing for the Association of Colleges' Beacon Award, sponsored by the Christian churches, for College Partnerships to support students' development as whole people, for all seven years of its existence. This award is open to all FE colleges across the United Kingdom, and is very highly prized. Almost my whole professional career has been in FE, half of it in college senior management, and subsequently as the Churches' National Advisor in Further Education. Consequently, I have very considerable experience of high quality provision across the sector.*

*"AoC was delighted to make this award this year to your programme at Armagh College. You are doing pioneering work of very high quality in bringing together statutory, voluntary, community, educational, church-based, and business sectors to build greater understanding of the issues and challenges facing divided communities and ethnic groups. Your programme focuses on working together to build trust and sustainable relationships, and this challenging aim is effectively modelled by the whole ethos of the programme and its management. It is an excellent model of how partnerships work at their best.*

*"The willing and enthusiastic presence of so many partners, not only at the local presentation, but also and significantly during the very full assessment visit, spoke volumes of the genuine relationships that have been built on during this programme"*

**Association of Colleges Assessor**

### Application beyond Northern Ireland

This approach to community capacity building, the promotion of good relations (accredited programme), challenging prejudice, reconciliation and social cohesion can be readily applied in a variety of national and international contexts. It has already been disseminated where different issues divide the community elsewhere within Northern Ireland, Scotland, England, Europe (Slovenia, Lithuania), South Africa, and the U.S.A. (North Carolina and Minnesota).

The College has developed a formal strategic partnership with Cumbernauld College (Glasgow) to share good practice in urban regeneration and overcoming community marginalization and sectarianism. This unique partnership, the first of its kind between Northern Irish and Scottish Colleges, has been endorsed as a model of best practice by the Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning in Scotland and by the Scottish First Minister.

The Director had meetings in 2005 with professors at Harvard University who have identified a resonance for this programme especially along the Turkish/Iraq border. Discussion has also taken place with North Carolina and North East Minnesota Community

Colleges to assess applicability of this approach in racially segregated populations in the mid and south-east USA.

Two senior managers from Armagh College have already visited South Africa (Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape town in 2006 and 2007), as part of a specialist British Council delegation to meet presidential advisors and senior government officials to advise on the modernisation of the Vocational Education and Training System and set up exchange partnerships. Similar exchange partnerships and high level visits have been made to assist the Lithuanian Government in their transitional approach to revitalizing their non-formal adult education sector.

The approach which Armagh College has adopted to Diversity and Good Relations has also been presented in a research paper at the seventh Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network in Ljubljana, Slovenia, 2005.

The Minister of Education and Science, Republic of Ireland, met with the College's Director in Armagh to discuss the growing problem of racism and prejudice towards migrant workers, who now make up some 16% of the Irish workforce.

### WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

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