

The Business of Education

Summary of key findings from consultation with business
leaders on education in Northern Ireland 2013

January 2014

Report compiled by the
Integrated Education Fund

The Integrated Education Fund would like to acknowledge the contribution of all those members of the business community in Northern Ireland who made this summary report possible.

Contents

Introduction	2
Executive summary	4
Northern Ireland Business Leaders' Survey	6
Key findings	7
Foundations for change	12

This report is based on information from different polls and events which took place during 2013. For more detail, please go to: www.ief.org.uk

Introduction

The Integrated Education Fund began a major consultation process with representatives from a wide spectrum of the business community during 2013. One of the key objectives was to create new platforms and opportunities for debate on issues relating to our education system in Northern Ireland.

The consultation that took place involved meetings with a wide variety of business organisations; a business event for business leaders to discuss education; a round-table meeting and the commissioning of a Northern Ireland Business Leaders' Survey carried out by independent market research and polling company LucidTalk. This work highlighted opinion and support, particularly in relation to integrated education, and also a willingness to become involved in helping to create the best education system for all our children.

This body of work was carried out against the background of findings from a number of NI-wide attitudinal surveys commissioned by the IEF. The polls carried out by LucidTalk during 2013 have indicated strong public support for integrated education and an appetite for change to our current system.

The Business of Education event

The CBI, the Belfast Telegraph and the Integrated Education Fund invited leading business organisations and individuals to join them at a business breakfast on 15 February 2013. The theme was 'The Business of Education'. The aim was to encourage conversations around the business of education and a shared future in Northern Ireland. The event was set against the backdrop of an education system reliant on costly duplication of resources and an estimated 85,000 empty desks.

At the event, the business leaders highlighted that an export-focused economy means coming to terms with cultural diversity and that young people need the skills to deal with diversity. There was also consensus that an education system which embraced cultural diversity would benefit all young people, enabling them to fulfil their potential, and that integrated education can develop greater levels of understanding and respect. Many of the participants also felt that they could contribute to helping to develop the education system in Northern Ireland.

Platforms for debate

A series of individual meetings with business leaders also revealed a keen interest in exploring the issue and a willingness to be more involved in education in Northern Ireland. The conversations highlighted a range of perspectives but there was a common wish to see children learning with others from all backgrounds and cultures.

These initial, exploratory conversations led to a more in-depth discussion. Ten key spokespeople and commentators from the business community and civil society attended a round-table discussion at which the connections between education, social cohesion and prosperity were considered. It was agreed that there was a strong economic case for increasing diversity within the classroom and reducing duplication in the schools estate.

There was also a broad understanding that social cohesion is essential for prosperity and, given a backdrop of community tensions, that business representatives should be raising the need to tackle division with decision-makers at every opportunity.

Northern Ireland-wide polling

A number of NI-wide attitudinal surveys, commissioned by the IEF, have been carried out in order to determine the support for change to our current education system and for integrated education. The polls carried out by LucidTalk during 2013 have indicated strong public support for integrated education and an appetite for change to our current system.

Some key results from these surveys indicated:

- 69% strongly agree or agree that the business community should have a role in helping schools identify skills which could best prepare our young people for the future.
- More than two-thirds (68.7%) said an integrated school best prepares children for living and working in a diverse society.
- The vast majority of parents in Northern Ireland (79%) would support their school becoming integrated.
- 66% of all people questioned believe integrated schools should be the main model of our education system.

Northern Ireland Business Leaders' Survey

The Northern Ireland Business Leaders' Survey was another key element in the consultation process during 2013. It provides an important platform for the opinions of business leaders in relation to our current education system. The following pages contain the methodology and a summary of analysis and findings from the four questions asked in the survey.

Executive summary

Independent market research and polling company LucidTalk was commissioned by the Integrated Education Fund to carry out a number of Northern Ireland-wide public polls and sector panel surveys during 2013. These poll-projects and surveys were designed to provide information relating to the respondents' attitudes towards education issues in Northern Ireland.

This executive summary contains the key results from one of these surveys, the Northern Ireland (NI) Business Leaders' Survey – a survey poll of the opinions of a representative sample of the business community in Northern Ireland.

This survey, carried out during 3-18 October 2013, targeted 220 business leaders across small, medium, and large businesses in Northern Ireland. The results were analysed by business size, and by responsibility within the organisation: ie Managing Director; Financial Director and General Management.

The business leaders were asked four questions relating to the current education system in Northern Ireland and how they could help transform the current system in order to create an education system which would contribute to a more cohesive society and strong economy.

The overall findings from the results indicated strong support for a de-segregated education system as a way of helping to strengthen cross-community relationships and to enable funds to be invested in developing skills to meet future employment needs and help economic growth.

“Business voice is influential – it must have more of a role in education, and hasn't been that involved up until now.”

Of the 220 business leaders surveyed, the findings overall indicated:

Question one - Would you agree that a de-segregated education system could contribute to strengthening cross-community relationships in the workplace and impact positively on economic growth?

92% of business leaders expressing an opinion either 'Strongly Agreed', or 'Agreed' with the above statement (ie excluding those not responding, or 'Don't Know').

Question two - Would you agree that the additional cost of maintaining a segregated education system would be better invested in developing skills in schools to meet future employment needs and help economic growth?

95% of business leaders expressing an opinion either 'Strongly Agreed', or 'Agreed', with the above statement (ie excluding those not responding, or 'Don't Know').

Question three - What are your concerns about the current education system in relation to how it would impact on your business?

Question 3 was a qualitative question and the comments provided by the sample of business leaders highlighted three key concerns: employability skills, training and work placements; and the importance of a more integrated educational experience, for all school students. In relation to the educational experience, business leaders believe this would lead to better teamwork in the workplace, and thus better economic performance overall.

Question four - How can you, as a business leader, help transform our education system which would contribute to a more cohesive society and a strong economy?

The one key conclusion from the responses to this qualitative question was that business leaders highlighted that there should be much better liaison and connection between schools and businesses.

More results and analysis from the NI Business Leaders' Survey can be found on the following pages.

Northern Ireland Business Leaders' Survey

Methodology

The survey carried out by independent polling company LucidTalk targeted 220 business leaders across the small, medium, and large business size sectors in Northern Ireland. Results were analysed by business size, and responsibility within the organisation, ie Managing Director, Financial Director and General Management.

The target for the survey was equally balanced between small, medium, and large businesses, defined in terms of number of employees as: Small: 0-10 employees; Medium: 11-49 employees; Large: over 50 employees.

However, the final recorded 220 completed survey-interviews reflected the Northern Ireland business sector structure with 140 respondents from businesses with 0-10 employees, 32 from businesses with 11-49 employees, and 48 from businesses with over 50 employees. Businesses were asked for their own employee statistics – as such, there may be an error in the above business size breakdown, as some companies may define, eg part-time, casual workers as employees, and other companies may not.

In terms of qualitative questions such as questions 3 and 4, ie questions which ask for 'comment' answers, all similar type comments that were made by more than 10% of the respondents (nb each on an individual basis) were noted as significant. This complies with standard market research practice.

“ Segregation is like a bad tax! It's the use of public money in a way which is detrimental to society. It could be invested in construction and so on. ”

Key findings

Question one

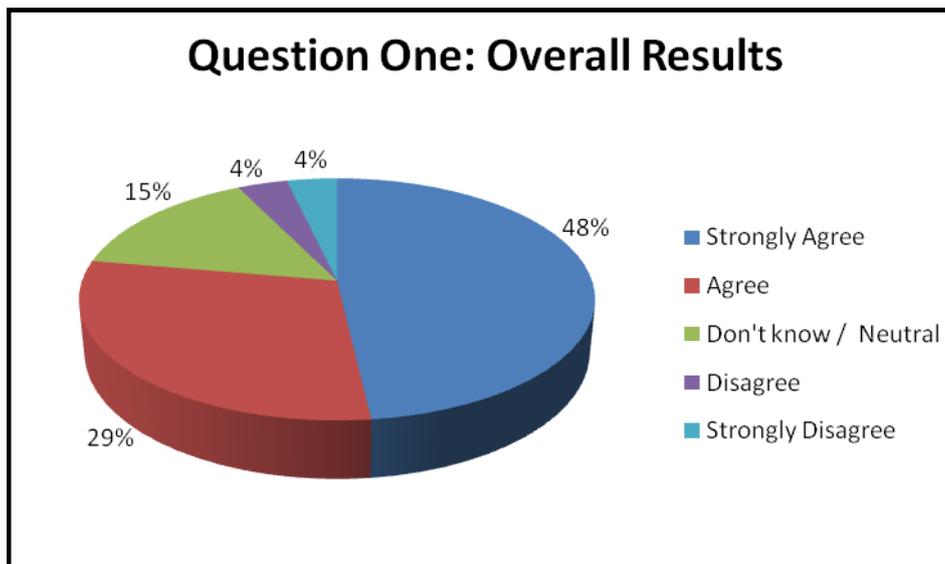
1. Would you agree that a de-segregated education system could contribute to strengthening cross-community relationships in the workplace and impact positively on economic growth?

Overall results for question one

Strongly Agree	Agree	Don't know / Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
106	65	33	8	8

Responses to this question were overall positive, with 77% (171) of the total number of respondents opting for 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree'. A further 15% chose 'Don't Know/Neutral' whilst just 7% responded with 'Disagree' or 'Strongly Disagree'. Comparing those who responded with 'Strongly Agree' and 'Agree' to those who chose "Disagree' and 'Strongly Disagree', a large majority (92%) opted for positive responses.

Percentage breakdown of overall results for question one



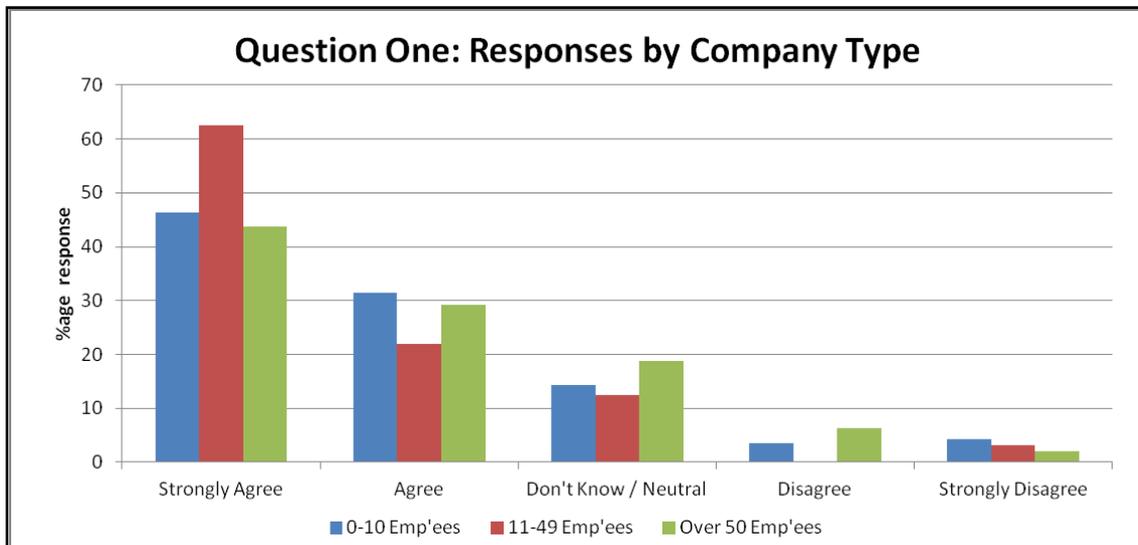
“ It's also accepted that after school at 16, 18 you go to college, university, work and it's integrated; what's the difference at 16? ”

Answers to question one by company type

	Company with 0 - 10 Employees	Company with 11 - 49 Employees	Company with Over 50 Employees
Strongly Agree	65	20	21
Agree	44	7	14
Don't know / Neutral	20	4	9
Disagree	5	0	3
Strongly Disagree	6	1	1

Overall, the largest proportion of positive ‘Strongly Agree’ and ‘Agree’ answers came from those in businesses with 0-10 employees, which represented 64% of positive responses overall. Analysing each company type individually, 78% of respondents from businesses with 0-10 employees opted for ‘Strongly Agree’ or ‘Agree’ with 85% of those from businesses with 11-49 employees choosing these options and 73% from businesses with over 50 employees.

Percentage responses to question one by company type



Comparing the percentage of positive ‘Strongly Agree’ and ‘Agree’ answers with negative ‘Strongly Disagree’ and ‘Disagree’ responses, a large majority of participants from every company type opted for ‘Strongly Agree’ or ‘Agree’. A total of 91% of those from businesses with 0-10 employees, 96% from 11-49 employee enterprises and 90% of respondents from companies with over 50 employees, opted for these two favourable responses.

Question two

2. Would you agree that the additional cost of maintaining a segregated education system would be better invested in developing skills in schools to meet future employment needs and help economic growth?

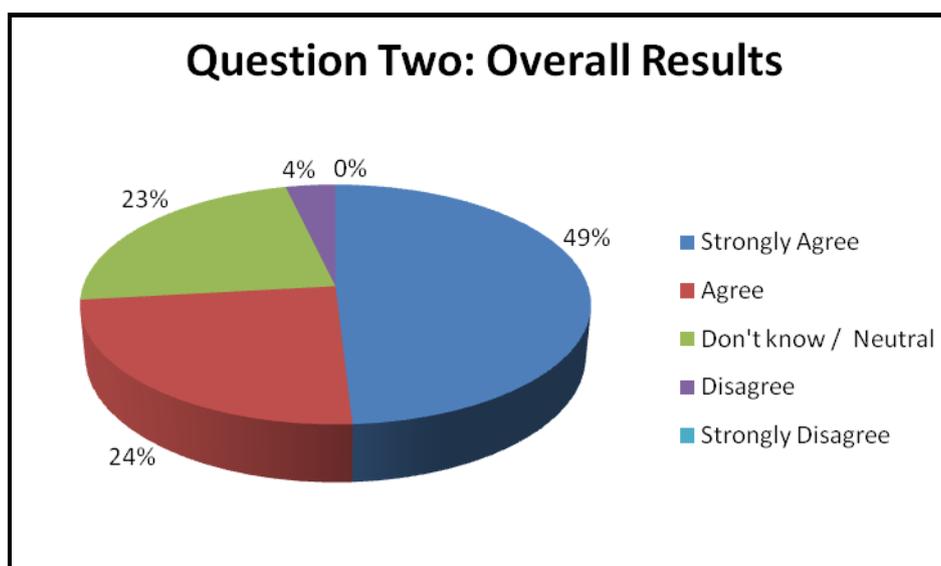
Overall results for question two

Strongly Agree	Agree	Don't know / Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
108	53	51	8	0

A large majority of respondents 161 of 220, (i.e. 73%) selected 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' in answering this question, whilst a further 51 (23%) opted for 'Don't Know/Neutral'. A very small proportion - 8 respondents (4%) did not agree with the statement, and no respondents selected 'Strongly Disagree'.

Looking at responses of 'Strongly Agree', 'Agree', 'Strongly Disagree' and 'Disagree', a total of 95% chose 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree'. A total of just 5% chose 'Disagree' and no respondents opted for 'Strongly Disagree'.

Percentage breakdown of overall results for question two



“ Surely we can keep asking a very simple question (and encouraging others to keep asking this): why are children NOT to be together from the earliest age? ”

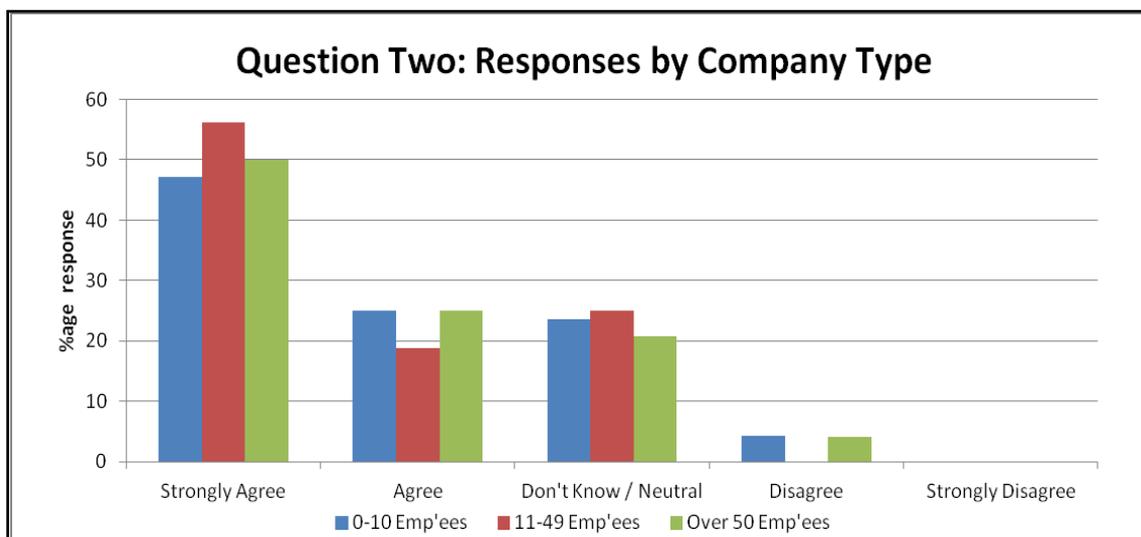
Answers to question two by company type

	Company with 0 - 10 Employees	Company with 11 - 49 Employees	Company with Over 50 Employees
Strongly Agree	66	18	24
Agree	35	6	12
Don't know / Neutral	33	8	10
Disagree	6	0	2
Strongly Disagree	0	0	0

There were 140 respondents from businesses with 0-10 employees, 32 from businesses with 11-49 employees, and 48 from businesses with over 50 employees. Those from businesses with 0-10 employees represented 61% of the 'Strongly Agree' responses. Considering each company type in turn, 47% of those in businesses with 0-10 employees selected 'Strongly Agree' with 25% selecting 'Agree', 24% selecting 'Don't Know/Neutral' and 4% opting for 'Disagree'.

In comparison, 56% of those from businesses with 11-49 employees opted for 'Strongly Agree' with a further 19% choosing 'Agree', and a final 25% opting for 'Don't Know/Neutral'. A total of 50% of respondents from businesses with over 50 employees strongly agreed, 25% chose 'Agree', 21% opted for 'Don't Know/Neutral' and 4% selected 'Disagree'.

Percentage breakdown of overall results for question two by company type



Analysing only those responses which were in favour or not in favour of the statement (excluding the Don't Know/Neutral responses), it is clear that a majority of participants from all company types opted for positive responses of 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' (94% from businesses with 0-10 employees, 95% over 50 employees, and 100% of respondents from businesses with 11-49 employees).

Question three

3. What are your concerns about the current education system in relation to how it would impact on your business?

Key Statements:

- 22% of respondents stated that students were not prepared for the real world of work when they leave school; they did not have basic employability skills such as how to behave, good timekeeping, understanding what to expect and the ability to work with others.
- 18% of respondents stated that there should be work placements for students and the majority of these stated that these should be compulsory in order that students had a better understanding of the world of work.
- 15% of respondents stated that they believed that students should be taught about diversity from a younger age and they should have more experience of working with others from different backgrounds, (religious and community), which would lead to better teamwork in the workplace.

Question four

4. How can you, as a business leader, help transform our education system which would contribute to a more cohesive society and a strong economy?

Key statements:

- 49% of respondents stated that they could outreach to schools more by being involved in career fairs, career workshops, provide advice on careers, and helping schools and students with information they would need to better understand the workplace.
- 43% stated that they would be willing to have closer relationships with schools to offer more work placements, apprenticeships and open days to show what is expected of employees.

Foundations for change...

A truly integrated, successful society is built on foundations of an inclusive education system. Our children will be entering an increasingly diverse and global workplace and they need to possess the right skills and experience to develop and succeed in their working life. Business also needs dynamic employees equipped with skills that will help companies grow and ensure economic growth for Northern Ireland.

This summary report highlights an appetite for change to our current education system. It also shows the business community is keen to play an increased role in helping to identify skills which could contribute to future economic prosperity. It sends a powerful message to our politicians that many of our business leaders are committed to working with them and the school community to enable our young people to enter the workplace with many sought-after skills.

The findings from the Northern Ireland Business Leaders' Survey also indicate a support for a de-segregated education system as a way of helping to strengthen cross-community relationships and to enable funds to be invested in developing skills to meet future employment needs and help economic growth.

This support was also reflected in the themes which emerged from the variety of outreach work carried out by the IEF with representatives from the business community during the past 12 months. A de-segregated model will help to provide the strong foundation on which to build a fully integrated community. One community living, working and building a Northern Ireland to ensure a strong civil and economic future.



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