Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Today I am launching the new further education strategy for Northern Ireland – Further Education Means Success.

The policy commitments I am outlining today, and the steps we will take to implement the new strategy, will enable colleges to build on the ground breaking achievements of the sector over the past decade.

In particular, the strategy will ensure that colleges continue to fulfil the important dual role of helping to develop a strong and vibrant economy, and supporting social inclusion. The strategy will also enable further education to be recognised as an equal and valued pillar of the education system, alongside higher education and the statutory school system.

My Department’s Skills Strategy has, as one of its key aims, the aspiration to enable people to access and progress up the skills ladder, in order to raise the skills level of the whole workforce, raise productivity and secure Northern Ireland’s future in a global marketplace.

Consequently, my top priority as minister for Employment and Learning has been to transform our professional and technical education and training system, in order to provide the most effective support for the growth of our economy, and to provide learning pathways that enable local people to reach their full potential.

Further education sits at the centre of the professional and technical education and training system, delivering provision from entry level to level six, to a very wide range of learners with different needs and aspirations. This provision is delivered through mainstream further education programmes, and through apprenticeships and training programmes.

Context

In 2014, I launched a review of further education in Northern Ireland, and on 2 July 2015 my department published a consultation document on the development of a further education strategy for Northern Ireland.

The review was wide ranging in its approach and considered regional, national and international policies and best practice, to inform a number of policy commitments.
It also included an underlying evidence base setting out the economic and social context that is specific to the further education sector, desk research of key literature and research papers, an analysis of the best practice that is present in our own further education colleges, and in colleges in other parts of the world, a detailed statistical analysis of further education activity, and consultation with key stakeholders.

Consultation

There were 45 responses to the consultation, which closed on 2 October. These were received from a variety of sources, including employer representative bodies, voluntary and community groups, training organisations, district councils and colleges themselves.

Overall, the responses received were very positive and supportive of the policy commitments in the consultation document. Of those who completed the consultation questionnaire template, almost 80% either strongly agreed or agreed with the questions posed, with just under 6% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. In particular, there was consensus that colleges should have a strong focus on provision that contributes most to re-balancing and re-building our economy.

However, there was also extremely strong support for the dual role for colleges that I have mentioned and, consequently, the need for colleges to support social inclusion, for example, by continuing to offer provision at all levels of study and in all sectors of the economy.

Achievements

Before I talk about the way forward for the sector, I would like to highlight some of its most notable achievements.

In recent years colleges have undergone a remarkable transformation in terms of the support they provide to employers, and the quality and economic relevance of the provision they deliver to individual learners.

The most visible change has been the creation of six large regional colleges, which has been accompanied by capital investment of almost £250 million over the past ten years to ensure a modern and state of the art learning environment is available to students.

As well as delivering a curriculum that is more focused on the needs of the economy, colleges have supported over 10,000 employers to up-skill their workforce and to be more innovative through the Skills Focus and Innovate Us programmes that are funded by my Department.

Colleges have also played an increasingly important role, along with Invest NI, in attracting inward investment to Northern Ireland, particularly through the Assured Skills programme, and the highly innovative Academies that have been developed to enable colleges to respond very quickly to the needs of specific employers and sectors.
Colleges have also improved quality in all aspects of their provision, and this is demonstrated by the fact that learner achievement rates have increased dramatically from 80% in 2010/11 to almost 90% in 2014/15.

**Strategy**

Our economy has changed considerably in recent years, with current and future jobs requiring increasingly high levels of skills and a breadth of knowledge.

Over the next ten years the pace of change will accelerate, driven by globalisation, advances in technology, new business models and rapidly changing consumer needs. In particular, the planned introduction of a reduced rate of corporation tax has the potential to invigorate our economy. These developments will lead to substantial changes to the world of work.

The further education sector has a clear and unrivalled role to respond to the changes in work through the development of innovative, flexible and economically beneficial programmes that will meet the requirements for new ways of learning. Colleges will also lead the development of a learning to learn and lifelong learning culture in Northern Ireland.

Further education college staff will have a critical role to play in working with employers and other key stakeholders to develop qualifications and programmes of learning. They will be represented on the Strategic Advisory Forum, and will have a particularly prominent role in working with employers and other stakeholders in the Sectoral Partnerships – structures which I announced as part of the outcome of the reviews of apprenticeships and youth training.

One of the key features and strengths of the further education sector is that it is accessible to a wide variety of learners, for example, in terms of different age groups, and in terms of the level and type of learning required, ranging from those with no, or very few qualifications to those who are following higher education provision. Further education students come from a variety of backgrounds and have a range of learning, work, and life experiences. This diversity strengthens and enhances the learning experience, enables colleges to contribute strongly to integrated education, and demonstrates that colleges can stimulate active participation in learning among the hardest to reach communities.

Colleges will continue to deliver provision of a broad nature to meet the needs of this wide variety of learners, and will be open and available to all.

**Vision for further education**

My vision for the further education sector is that colleges will be recognised locally, regionally, nationally and internationally for high quality and economically relevant education and training provision. They will be focussed on achieving excellence in delivering the skills needed for current and future jobs, and will be ambitious for their learners, for their region, and for the contribution they make to improving the
competitiveness of the Northern Ireland economy. Finally, colleges will also have an important responsibility to help fight poverty and support social inclusion by providing those with low or no qualifications, or who have barriers to learning, with the skills and qualifications they need to find employment.

**Further Education’s Dual Role**

To achieve this vision, and to fulfil the important, but challenging, dual role that colleges have to adopt, the future direction for further education will be built around four key objectives. These are:

- ensuring the highest quality provision of learner education and training;
- developing the talents of those already in work and those seeking to enter employment, in order to provide a pipeline of suitably qualified individuals at all levels to meet employers’ needs, including indigenous companies and inward investment projects;
- supporting employers to become more innovative and competitive, and to source new markets; and
- encouraging and supporting the economic participation of those who are furthest from the labour market, to the benefit of individuals, the economy and wider society.

**Themes**

The strategy is built around nine themes, containing 21 separate policy commitments.

**Theme 1 - Economic development** is the first part of the dual role, namely the key part that colleges will play in identifying and meeting the skills and qualification needs of employers through a more economically focused curriculum, by up-skilling employees, and by supporting employers to become more competitive, to innovate and to source new markets. Colleges will continue to have a key role to play in identifying the skills and qualification needs of individual employers, with a particular focus on those sectors which are important to rebalancing and rebuilding the economy. Working alongside Invest NI, colleges also have a crucial role to play in ensuring a pipeline of highly skilled individuals to support both inward investment and our indigenous companies.

**Theme 2 - Social inclusion** focuses on the second part of the dual role, namely the distinctive contribution that colleges make to providing learners with the knowledge, skills and qualifications required to avail of the benefits of economic participation. Colleges will also support diversity and social inclusion by widening and encouraging participation from the most deprived areas and ensuring access for those with low or no skills or other barriers to learning. In these ways, colleges will provide individuals with the skills and qualifications they need to gain employment and to become economically active, with all the benefits that this brings to individuals, the economy and society.

**Theme 3 - Curriculum delivery** emphasises the importance of colleges delivering provision in imaginative, innovative and flexible ways to enthuse and inspire
learners. In particular, colleges will make increasing use of technology to engage learners and enhance the teaching and learning experience. This theme also addresses the importance of individuals developing the important employability skills that are valued by employers, for example, through work based learning and by developing enterprising students.

**Theme 4 - Excellence** describes how colleges will embed high quality teaching and will enhance how performance is monitored. Excellence will be at the heart of everything that colleges do, particularly in terms of improving the quality of provision that is delivered, and monitoring and evaluating the outcomes that have been achieved. College lecturers in Northern Ireland are already well qualified, and this will be enhanced to ensure that they have strong pedagogical skills and have up to date industrial knowledge in their areas of expertise. The Department and colleges have a vision to establish Northern Ireland as an internationally renowned centre for excellence in teacher education in professional and technical subjects. The Department and colleges will also take steps to ensure that meaningful feedback is obtained from learners and employers on the quality and relevance of the services provided to them, and that this is used to inform the on-going quality improvement processes in colleges.

**Theme 5 - College partnerships** details the two aspects of partnership through which colleges will deliver their services to learners, employers and communities more effectively and efficiently. These are partnerships between colleges themselves, and colleges working in partnership with others. Colleges will make use of shared services to enable them to operate with maximum efficiency, and will share the excellent practice that is present throughout the sector to enable them to deliver services to learners and employers to the highest standards of quality. Colleges will also work in partnership with other educational institutions, with government departments, with the new district councils and with the voluntary and community sectors to deliver effectively to the employers, individuals and communities that they serve.

**Theme 6 – Governance** demonstrates how good governance adds real value and supports effective decision making in individual colleges. This theme will have a focus on issues relating to colleges’ status as Non Departmental Public Bodies of my Department. In particular, my Department will work with the Department of Finance and Personnel to ensure that colleges can retain income that they are able to generate outside of funding provided by government.

**Theme 7 - Funding model and college sustainability** reinforces that how colleges are funded will be an important consideration. Under the funding theme, the current model will be reviewed to ensure that it supports the strategic direction set out in the new further education strategy. Given that the new apprenticeship and youth training systems will form a considerable proportion of colleges’ provision in future, it will also be important to take account of the funding models that are being developed for these new systems.

**Theme 8 - International dimension** relates to how colleges have become increasingly focused on the need to operate in an international arena and have already built excellent partnerships with employers and educational institutions across the world.
They will learn from best practice outside of Northern Ireland by maximising student and staff exchange opportunities and continuing to develop partnerships internationally.

**Theme 9 - Promoting the further education sector** considers how the excellent services provided by colleges can be promoted more effectively to learners, employers and other key stakeholders. This will be an important part of ensuring that further education is recognised as an equal and valued pillar of the education system in Northern Ireland, alongside higher education and the statutory school system. Therefore, colleges will work together and with the Department to identify ways in which to promote the further education sector.

**Way Forward**

The new further education strategy complements the pioneering work that my Department is conducting regarding a new system of apprenticeships at level three and above, and a new system of youth training at level two in Northern Ireland. Colleges, with key partners, will be primary deliverers of this innovative system of professional and technical education and training, which will provide opportunities for learners to progress to higher levels of learning. In addition, colleges will continue to be the sole deliverers of higher education at levels four and five, including apprenticeships at these levels.

The strategy, and the 21 policy commitments within it, will be used to build upon current strengths in a way that will further consolidate a world class system of further education in Northern Ireland. The policy commitments will be implemented jointly by the Department and the further education sector through a programme of individual projects, with formal programme and project management governance arrangements.

The Department and the further education sector will develop and publish an implementation plan within three months of the publication of this strategy. However, it has to be recognised that the pace at which some of the policy commitments can be implemented will be dependent on the level of resource that is made available to the further education sector.

I commend this statement to the Assembly.