

**Transcript of Online Discussion with  
Sir Reg Empey, Minister for Employment and Learning  
30<sup>th</sup> April 2009**

Apr 30 2009, 3:31 PM

**JoanneStuart (guest)**: Good afternoon everybody and welcome to the second in our series of online discussions

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**JoanneStuart (guest)**: I will be chairing the discussion this afternoon

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**JoanneStuart (guest)**: I would like to welcome Sir Reg Empey, Minister for Employment and Learning

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**JoanneStuart (guest)**: Thank you for taking time to talk to us this afternoon Minister

Apr 30 2009, 3:32 PM

**Reg (guest)**: Hello, it's Sir Reg Empey here, Minister for Employment and Learning. I'm very pleased to be taking part in this on-line discussion and I look forward to hearing your questions about the work of my Department. The global recession is hitting us very hard and I want to hear your thoughts and concerns and see how best we can help you.

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**JohnMcMullan (guest)**: Minister should we use smarter public procurement practice to get better value from the £2.2bn spend and use social clauses to require successful tenderors to recruit apprentices and additional staff from the unemployed register.

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**Moderator (guest)**: Those who are signed in as guests could you please sign out and enter a name please. Makes it easier for the Minister to identify your question. Thank you

Apr 30 2009, 3:35 PM

**Reg (guest)**: Minister for Finance and Personnel chairs a group reviewing all purchasing for the public sector. Already contracts for building require a number of apprentices relevant to the cost of the contract so a strong push in the direction of which you are suggesting is already beginning and will grow, in my opinion.

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**JoanneStuart (guest)**: Thank you Minister

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**JonathanG (guest):** Good afternoon Minister; given the current economic climate, Job Centres are being visited by more people than ever before. Are you confident that Job Centres are resourced to cope with the increased demand they are currently facing; and what additional resources has the Department made available to ensure that they are?

Apr 30 2009, 3:39 PM

**Reg (guest):** Job Centres are being inundated at present and we have recruited an additional 48 people out of 130 planned to ease the backload. Many Job Centres have seen their throughput grow by over 100% in the last year. We will cope but it will require time and effort.

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**Paul Wickens:** Sir Reg - There has been great success in NICS paying its suppliers with 10 days. However, subcontractors to those suppliers do not enjoy the "flow down" of these payment terms. What can you do to change this?

**Colly (guest):** Are we still on line

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**JohnMcMullan (guest):** Minister, unemployment numbers are growing, we are doing better than both the UK and RoI but do you see NI overtaking either or both?

Apr 30 2009, 3:41 PM

**JoanneStuart (guest):** Yes, Minister is typing

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**Reg (guest):** My Department is well up the league in meeting the 10 day target with over 80% of bills being paid within this timescale. I regret to hear of the failure of the flow down and I will bring this to the attention of the Minister for Enterprise and the Minister for Finance because the reason for doing this was to help small businesses in particular to cope during the recession. If people are not 'playing the game' we may have to look at conditionality for early payment to make sure that suppliers pass this on

Apr 30 2009, 3:43 PM

**Reg (guest):** Yes, we are doing better currently but no one knows the path this recession is going to take. Our significant public sector has cushioned us a little in the short term but no part of our economy will be exempt if the recession continues for some time.

Apr 30 2009, 3:43 PM

**JoanneStuart (guest):** Would anybody like to comment on the last two answers

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**Michelequinn (guest):** Minister, what programmes or initiatives are being put in place to support the re-skilling of people who have recently being made redundant from the likes of FG Wilson and Bombardier?

Apr 30 2009, 3:45 PM

**Paul Wickens:** I am delighted with the Minister's response regarding payment

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terms. It is unfair that large suppliers are effectively holding on to money when they could easily be forced into a conditionality clause in all contracts.

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**GraemeDownie (guest):** Minister, what do you think needs to be done to ensure that universities are contributing to help develop local, innovative businesses?

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**Colly:** We are dependant for employment in the Public Sector and I see today 10% is employed in NHS, with manufacturing moving elsewhere we need to develop our services industries what is the executive view on addressing this?

Apr 30 2009, 3:46 PM

**JohnMcMullan (guest):** I think the minister is right re public sector cushion but we do need to get more innovation into both the social enterprise and private sectors.

Apr 30 2009, 3:46 PM

**Reg (guest):** First part of answer - I am working with the Enterprise Minister and Invest NI and we hope to bring forward proposals in the next few weeks to try and keep as many people as possible in the workplace and upskill them.

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**Reg (guest):** Second part of answer - one area we are currently engaged with is apprenticeships where we have put measures in place to protect apprentices enabling them to complete their training.

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**Reg (guest):** Third part - other measures will follow and I hope to be able to announce them in the next few weeks.

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**JoanneStuart (guest):** Minister, Graeme's question is on innovation and the role of universities

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**Reg (guest):** Our universities are more open and aware of economic potential of 'spin outs' than was the case some years ago.

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**Reg (guest):** We hold regular discussions with them and we have invested heavily since November last year in collaborative research with universities in the Irish Republic (£17m).

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**Reg (guest):** This, and other initiatives, will, in our view prepare the ground for greater local economic benefit to arise.

Apr 30 2009, 3:50 PM

**JoanneStuart (guest):** Thankyou Minister. Can we now go to Colly's question

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**Reg (guest):** The emphasis in recent years has widened to support tradable services as manufacturing has become more difficult. However, the recent

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downturn has taught us that there is no panacea to be found in services alone. We need a balanced economy. Tourism offers huge potential.

Apr 30 2009, 3:52 PM

**JoanneStuart (guest)**: The Minister has answered a number of questions, would anybody like to comment on any of the answers?

Apr 30 2009, 3:53 PM

**Ken\_Sharp (guest)**: On the subject of tourism, we seem to be no nearer any of the 'signature' projects being created - and along with them jobs. Though not his area specifically - can he tell us anything.

Apr 30 2009, 3:53 PM

**GraemeDownie (guest)**: I agree with the Minister that universities have become more aware of spin-outs but wonder if there is more that could be done to create a more long-term, and ongoing, relationship between universities and local business.

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**Colly**: I would agree that there is no panacea to be found in the services industry are we perhaps being over optimistic in regards to tourism - we need perhaps more innovations in this sector

Apr 30 2009, 3:54 PM

**Reg (guest)**: Yes, I have been assured that the Titanic Signature project will be signed off in the next couple of weeks and this will, I hope, kick start the remaining signature projects.

Apr 30 2009, 3:55 PM

**JohnMcMullan (guest)**: Universities have a key role to play but it was disappointing to see the cost for participating in knowledge transfer partnerships increase recently

Apr 30 2009, 3:55 PM

**GraemeDownie (guest)**: Couldn't agree more with Colly, more has to be done to spread the innovations in the service sector.

Apr 30 2009, 3:56 PM

**Reg (guest)**: Hi Graeme. A new model is being developed by QUB, whereby a private company is working with a research team at the university from the start of the project. This is happening in NI today and could be a role model for future collaboration.

Apr 30 2009, 3:56 PM

**Ken\_Sharp (guest)**: In terms of innovation, the work being done by Brian Treacy and his team at Lough Erne Golf Resort with its Rory McIlroy v. Padraig Harrington match, has been an amazing success in terms of publicity for Fermanagh. Probably deserves a well done to Invest NI for the support given to the project.

Apr 30 2009, 3:56 PM

**ToryKerley (guest)**: Sir Reg, , we are confident in Skillsmart Retail that the Retail Sector will, with our colleagues in tourism, continue to be of enormous importance to the NI economy going forward. We remain the largest private sector employer and in some areas (particularly border regions) retailers continue

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to prosper and recruit: we would commend our Retail Works programme to the Department as an excellent conversion course for anyone seeking employment in the sector as a result of redundancy.

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**Reg (guest):** This will enable the business expertise of a private company to intermingle with the research expertise of a university.

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**AlanBraithwaite (guest):** There exists some (political/economic) momentum to flourish the local green economy and create green jobs. Is Stormont in support of this and does the Minister anticipate any acute skill shortages?

Apr 30 2009, 3:56 PM

**GraemeDownie (guest):** Thank you Minister, that sounds like a good development and hopefully one that is replicated in other areas.

Apr 30 2009, 3:57 PM

**Reg (guest):** Hi John. Thanks for that. We'll have a look at that.

Apr 30 2009, 3:59 PM

**Reg (guest):** Colly, with the current currency differential, tourism clearly has potential and we are training up chefs and other staff to raise the quality of the product. We have a Hospitality and Tourism Action Plan (will be on our website shortly).

Apr 30 2009, 4:02 PM

**Reg (guest):** Tory, I recently met with SkillSmart and am well aware of the increasing demand from workers in retailing for more hours. Also particularly in border regions retailing, because of the currency, is providing a significant boost for local economies.

Apr 30 2009, 4:03 PM

**Reg (guest):** Alan, the Executive is very supportive and you will have noticed recent announcement in the Chancellor's budget. We can see how, for example, Harland and Wolff have moved from building ships to assembling turbines.

Apr 30 2009, 4:03 PM

**Paul Wickens:** Sir Reg – I have been successful in setting up my own business after being made redundant. However, with regards to ongoing development/training, there appears to be a loophole in accessing funding as a sole trader – e.g. DEL is currently offering a 100% bursary for certain events – but only if you are an employer with (I believe) more than 5 employees. What are your thoughts on this and how can you potentially help to close the loophole?

Apr 30 2009, 4:04 PM

**Reg (guest):** This is one example of what can be done. There are many others and Belfast City Council has set aside land at the north foreshore for the specific development of green industries.

Apr 30 2009, 4:05 PM

**Reg (guest):** We are confident that we can provide the skilled personnel for this sector.

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Apr 30 2009, 4:06 PM

**Reg (guest):** Hi Paul. We have finite resources but I will ask the Department to look into this new threshold.

Apr 30 2009, 4:07 PM

**JoanneStuart (guest):** Minister, thanks for your answers so far

Apr 30 2009, 4:07 PM

**JonathanG (guest):** Sir Reg, Given that DEL has committed to a strategic aim for the FE sector of 'FE means Business', what curriculum adjustments have FE colleges made to accommodate the needs of business in the current economic climate? What support has DEL provided to the colleges to encourage such changes?

Apr 30 2009, 4:09 PM

**Reg (guest):** Jonathan, we regard the FE colleges as an integral part of our economic development policy and our contracts with them reflect this. We have adjusted the proportion of funding they receive to steer them in the direction of economically relevant subject. More to follow...

Apr 30 2009, 4:09 PM

**AlanBraithwaite (guest):** regarding Paul query, we submitted applications for the bursary and have just been advised by the training providers that funding support has now been put on hold by DEL. Appreciating that resources are under pressure, is this likely to change in the near future?

Apr 30 2009, 4:10 PM

**Reg (guest):** We now have six workforce development fora designed to ensure that local employers clearly advise local colleges of their specific local needs to ensure that local courses are relevant to local employers. This is the demand led system to which we are aspiring.

Apr 30 2009, 4:10 PM

**JonathanG (guest):** This is good news, as i sit on the WDF for SERC and can see first hand the benefits that close relationships between colleges and business can generate

Apr 30 2009, 4:11 PM

**Michelequinn (guest):** How do these 6 workforce development fora work with the existing sector skills councils who represent each industry sector in NI/

Apr 30 2009, 4:11 PM

**Reg (guest):** Alan, we have been overwhelmed by demand. This is good in one sense, and I am taking steps to ensure that internal staff resources are adequate and I hope we can restore business as usual as soon as possible.

Apr 30 2009, 4:12 PM

**Reg (guest):** I will have advice posted on our website for employers interested in this, as soon as possible.

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**Reg (guest):** Michele, the WDFs are geographically based, not sectorally based, but we do have full buy-in from the SSCs.

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Apr 30 2009, 4:14 PM

**Reg (guest):** Our website is [www.delni.gov.uk](http://www.delni.gov.uk)

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Apr 30 2009, 4:14 PM

**JoanneStuart (guest):** Minister, what is the latest on the Stem Review which is due for publication?

Apr 30 2009, 4:15 PM

**Reg (guest):** Joanne, the Education Minister and I have received the STEM report this month and it is under active consideration from both Departments. There was a debate in the Assembly on Monday on STEM and it was a very constructive discussion.

Apr 30 2009, 4:15 PM

**JoanneStuart (guest):** Thanks Minister, this is an important area of skills for NI

Apr 30 2009, 4:17 PM

**JoanneStuart (guest):** Minister, this is a challenging time for employers, what are you looking from us?

Apr 30 2009, 4:18 PM

**Reg (guest):** I fully recognise that this is a very difficult time for employers. At the same time, it is in their own long-term interests to invest in the up-skilling of their workforce. We may be able to offer help but it must be a collaborative approach.

Apr 30 2009, 4:18 PM

**JoanneStuart (guest):** We are moving into our last 10 minutes, are there any other questions?

Apr 30 2009, 4:19 PM

**Paul Wickens:** May I thank the Minister for his constructive answers to my questions.

Apr 30 2009, 4:19 PM

**JoanneStuart (guest):** If there are no other questions, can I ask what the progress is with UKCES - Commission for Employment and Skills

Apr 30 2009, 4:20 PM

**ToryKerley (guest):** Sir Reg, how do you see the Department's policy developing with regard to sectoral skills academies/centres of excellence - employers in the retail sector in NI are eager to benefit from the NSA for retail initiative - successfully launched this week in London.

Apr 30 2009, 4:20 PM

**Reg (guest):** Our local representative on this national body is my Employment and Skills Adviser, Bill McGinnis, who is very well qualified to put forward a Northern Ireland perspective to this body.

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**JohnMcMullan (guest):** Minister do we need a full review of the N Ireland budget forecast as suggested by some political parties?

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**Reg (guest):** Already the CES has decided to try to simplify the vast array of programmes that are available throughout the UK to help employers and they have recently taken responsibility for Investors in People.

Apr 30 2009, 4:23 PM

**Reg (guest):** Tory, skills academies are being considered, including those on construction. I recently attended a junior chef's academy which is going extremely well so there may be room to grow these successfully.

Apr 30 2009, 4:24 PM

**Reg (guest):** John, I think that the current public spending outlook flowing from the budget will, inevitably, bring us closer to such a review. In particular, the Chancellor is predicting a big drop in capital spending after 2013/14. This could have significant implications for NI.

Apr 30 2009, 4:26 PM

**AlanBraithwaite (guest):** How are the Job Centres coping with demands of additional unemployed particularly those coming from middle management roles?

Apr 30 2009, 4:26 PM

**JohnMcMullan (guest):** Minister if we need to raise more money for investment in skills development where do you see it coming from?

Apr 30 2009, 4:26 PM

**ToryKerley (guest):** thank you for taking the time for this session Sir Reg - let's hope that whatever any budget review may hold upskilling will remain priority - as lord Young said at the launch of our NSA last night "if you want to keep trading - keep training" - important for the whole country!

Apr 30 2009, 4:28 PM

**Reg (guest):** Alan, this is new territory for the Job Centres. We have issued guidance because of the different profile of our current client base. Many coming in are people who have never before used the service. Indeed, they are people who, in some cases, were used to giving advice, not receiving it.

Apr 30 2009, 4:29 PM

**Reg (guest):** Many of these people are quite distressed, understandably so, and our staff dealing as sensitively as possible with all groups.

Apr 30 2009, 4:29 PM

**JohnMcMullan (guest):** Minister, Many thanks for your time and valuable advice.

Apr 30 2009, 4:30 PM

**Colly:** Thank you for your input

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**AlanBraithwaite (guest):** By the way, I applaud the decent efforts at the C'Mon Over campaign and facebook pages. Great job.

Apr 30 2009, 4:31 PM

**Reg (guest):** Thanks Alan.

Apr 30 2009, 4:32 PM

**JoanneStuart (guest):** Thank you Minister for taking part today.

Apr 30 2009, 4:32 PM

**Paul Wickens:** Joanne - the sun is now shining in Donaghadee!

Apr 30 2009, 4:33 PM

**ToryKerley (guest):** And in London, but i'd rather be in Donaghadee - regards to all

Apr 30 2009, 4:33 PM

**Reg (guest):** Thanks to all who contributed. Please watch our site [www.delni.gov.uk](http://www.delni.gov.uk) as we will be posting links on the threat posed by the swine flu. Could I also ask you all to check out the Skills Newsletter available also on the site. It gives regular updates on issues which are applicable to you all. Best wishes, Reg.



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Apr 30 2009, 4:33 PM

**JoanneStuart (guest):** Thanks to everybody for logging on and contributing to the discussion. We will be posting the transcript on the site in the next couple of days.

Apr 30 2009, 4:33 PM

**JoanneStuart (guest):** Enjoy the sun!!!

Apr 30 2009, 4:33 PM

**Colly:** and in sunny Ballymena!

Apr 30 2009, 4:34 PM

**JonathanG (guest):** Its raining in Scotland!!

Apr 30 2009, 4:37 PM

**Lucy (guest):** Thank you to all who have taken part. A transcript of today's Ministerial web chat will be posted on NI Crunch Talk soon.

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