



Border, Midland & Western
Regional Assembly
Shaping the Region

**Submission from the Border, Midland and Western Regional
Assembly to the OECD Review of Higher Education in Ireland**

February 2004

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Introduction

The Border, Midland and Western Regional Assembly welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the OECD Review of Higher Education in Ireland. The Regional Assembly, whilst not directly involved in education *per se*, is concerned about the regional spread of higher educational facilities and the consequent low levels of related spin-offs in the Region. Whilst it may not be feasible nor practical to establish a completely new university within the Region, there are a number of ways in which the role of existing educational institutions can be strengthened, the linkages with industry be enhanced and the benefits of both education and research spread more widely across the Region.

This brief paper sets out a number of issues in relation to improving the regional spread of educational and research outputs in the BMW Region and makes a number of recommendations on how to improve the spread and impact of educational and research institutions across the Region. The first section sets out a brief background to the Region and some of the pertinent issues facing it, including the poor spread of educational facilities. This is followed by a section on the existing efforts and potential to increase outreach and distance education and the role of L onra, the Higher Education network in the Region. The fourth section reviews the role of R&D and examines ways in which it can be strengthened. The fifth section looks briefly at the subject of entrepreneurship and possible actions to help develop a culture of entrepreneurship within the educational system.

1. Background to the Border, Midland and Western Region

The Border, Midland and Western Region is one, which consists of 47% of the land area, 27% of the population and 19% of the GDP of the country. With the exception of Galway City, it is predominantly rural and has a lower percentage of the high value-added economic activities than the Southern and Eastern Region (S&E). Since the division of Ireland into two Regions, a growing economic divergence between the two Regions can be discerned. This is evidenced in areas such as the slower growth of Gross Value Added (GVA) per person and the decrease in disposable income per capita in the BMW Region.¹ Employment however has grown at a faster rate in the BMW Region but most of this has been concentrated in low value-added industries, where the output per person is lower and the rate of unemployment in the BMW Region still continues to be 0.6 % higher than in the S&E Region. Unemployment is particularly high in the Border Region, where it is currently at 6.3%. The principal regional socio-economic indicators are shown below.

¹ See e.g. CSO (2004) County Incomes and Regional GDP, which shows how the disposable income per person in the BMW Region as a percentage of the national average, decreased between 1998 and 1999.

Table 1. Regional Socio-Economic Indicators

	Year	State	BMW	S&E
Population (000s)	2002	3197.3	1038.0	2879.3
Labour Force (000s)	2003	1786.6	494.9	1424.7
Unemployment Rate	2003	5.2%	5.6%	5.0%
Disposable Income per capita (state = 100)	2001	100	91.3	103.1
GVA per person (state =100)	2001	100	75	109
GVA per capita (EU = 100)	2001	118	88.5	128.6
No. of Cities	2004	6	1	5
No. of Universities	2004	7	1	6
No. of Institutes of Technology	2004	10	5	9

2. Education & Research and Regional Balance

As can be seen from the table above, the BMW Region is disadvantaged due to the presence of only one university in the Region, namely NUI Galway. This is further complicated by the fact that the Region has a retention rate of graduates of only 13%, with the remainder seeking employment or further education either in the S&E Region or outside the country. Thus, whilst the level of third level participation of school leavers is relatively high in the BMW Region, the vast majority of these then leave the region, thus lowering the overall level of educational attainment in the Region.

Within the Region, the educational institutions are not evenly dispersed, with the Midland and Border counties of Laois, Offaly, Leitrim, Roscommon, Longford and Cavan not having any third level institutions. This anomaly is partly being addressed through a Lónra (the BMW Region's Higher Education Network) outreach education programme. This is also complemented by a BMW Innovative Action funded Education Outreach initiative, which has led to the development of three education outreach centres in disadvantaged sub-regions, Cavan, the Midlands (Laois, Longford and Offaly) and Roscommon. Whilst these initiatives have contributed somewhat to improving educational access in areas, which are removed from education centres, their remit still remains small and their funding is uncertain. Such initiatives should not simply be one-off pilot initiatives, but should be mainstreamed into the general higher education sector, to provide a more equitable and accessible education service.

The BMW Regional Assembly strongly supports the activities of Lónra, and believes that with the correct supports it can become a model for the collaborative development of education provision.

A further impact of the poor regional distribution of education in the Region is the low levels of linkages with industry and the consequent low levels of R&D. Due to a number of factors, including poor absorption capacity, the BMW Region received only 12.6% (€80.4m) of funding for the 3rd level sector between 2000 and 2002 (CIRCA Audit of Innovation in the BMW Region 2004). Third level institutions in the BMW Region only secured 8.5% of State national funding for industry-related research during this period (Ibid.). Unlike other European regions, there are no private research associations in the BMW Region and there is only one State research institute, the Marine Institute, which is now based in Galway. Further consequences of the low levels of research are discussed in section four.

3. Improving Access, Outreach & Distance learning

As mentioned above, outreach and distance learning can play an important role in bringing educational facilities to areas, traditionally disadvantaged by their poor access to such facilities. The concept of outreach and distance learning are strongly advocated in the White Paper on Adult Education *Learning for Life*, which makes provision for off-campus provision, part and full time options, modularisation of programmes, the development of outreach strategies and distance delivery and the recognition of a range of access routes and qualifications. Whilst there has been some progress in these areas, access to education still remains an important priority, particularly for adults in the BMW Region.

Life-long learning and improved access to education are also two important principles of Lónra, the Region's higher education network. Lónra is funded by the seven member institutions (5 Institutes of Technology, NUI Galway and St. Angulas Sligo) and jointly by the HEA and EQUAL Ireland and they are also assisted by the BMW Regional Assembly. They have been responsible for setting up a number of educational initiatives in the Region including Expansion of Courses at Foundation Level to increase Educational Opportunities, Development of Open Distance Learning Courses at Outreach Centres, Supporting Enterprise and Entrepreneurship and Excellence in Teaching and Learning through Project Based Learning. Lónra argued in a recent report² that people in areas of high employment in low skill industries tend to see little value in further education and that these areas often experience a "brain drain" of young people who leave for further education and do not return for employment.

Further education opportunities therefore also need to be embedded into local community and industry structures and greater links need to be forged with employers and more emphasis needs to be placed on upskilling and retraining, particularly in areas of traditional industries in decline. Improving access to education and promoting life-long learning are two important priorities for the BMW Region whilst also ensuring that education is embedded in the local and regional structure, thus creating greater industry-higher education linkages and promoting a culture of life-long learning for school-leavers and adults living in the area.

² Lónra 2002, Report on BMW Demographics, Current Availability of Distance Learning Courses, ICT Connectivity and Learning Centres in the BMW Region.

4. Research and Development

The BMW Region is characterised by poor university/industry linkages and low levels of expenditure on RTDI. This is confirmed in the recently commissioned *Audit of Innovation in the BMW Region* (2004). The BMW Region also has a higher proportion of workers employed in the agriculture, forestry and fishing sectors than the S&E Region, which have a greater concentration of higher value-added and service oriented companies. This is exacerbated by (or perhaps as a result of) the presence of only one university in the Region. Whilst there are a number of Institutes of Technology (I.T.s) in the Region, their emphasis has traditionally been more vocational and teaching rather than research oriented. In recent years however, there have been a number of individual initiatives to increase the research capacity of the I.T.s, including an Enterprise Ireland *Research Enhancement Scheme*, due to be launched shortly, which will provide funding for research and enhanced industry linkages for the I.T.s in the BMW Region.

All of the third level institutions in the Region employ Industrial Liaison Officers, who are responsible for fostering co-operation with the private sector. Many of their activities however concentrate on student placement schemes and the level of technology transfer tends to be very low. A number of institutions are also involved in delivering more generic services to industry such as information provision, teaching, consultancy and testing and analysis. Another important development is the recent growth of business incubation centres, which now exist in Dundalk, Letterkenny, Sligo and Athlone I.T.s and NUI Galway.

Despite the above initiatives, the levels of RTDI and industry/third level collaboration remain very low in the BMW Region. We suggest that some of the barriers can be addressed through the following measures:

- Increase the regional spread of university/industry linkages through forging linkages between NUIG (and other universities in the S&E Region) and companies in a wider geographical area
- Mainstream initiatives such as the EI supported Research Enhancement Scheme and other initiatives which would enhance the research capacity of the I.T.s
- Improve and co-ordinate the provision of information or “business intelligence” to companies from both higher education institutes and support companies
- Integrate more practical applications of knowledge into third level teaching and research programmes, in collaboration with industries and communities
- Pilot actions to increase the absorptive capacity of SMEs (e.g. R&D vouchers, graduate placements, Teaching Company Schemes)³

³ These pilot actions are elaborated on in more detail in the Appendix – extract from the Pilot Actions of the BMW Audit of Innovation

5. Entrepreneurship

Another region-specific issue highlighted in the Audit of Innovation report is the low level of entrepreneurship, as evidenced by comparative business start-up and expansion rates. It is clear that a pro-enterprise culture needs to be developed within the region and that the Higher Education sector, among other public institutions can play a significant role in this. There is a clear requirement for entrepreneurship training at primary, secondary and third levels. This would also help to counteract the “brain drain” from the BMW Region. There is also a role for Higher Education Institutions through the provision of graduate enterprise and enterprise platform programmes. These initiatives should be mainstreamed in all institutions and sufficient resources should be put in place to enable this to occur.

Conclusions

Whilst there have been a number of initiatives to support collaborative educational development in the Region, most notably through the work of Lónra in conjunction with the higher education institutions, more national support is required for the development of greater linkages between the research institutions, industry and communities, which will foster the development of a regional knowledge-based economy and promote a culture of entrepreneurship and life-long learning in the Region. Despite the efforts of regional bodies, the collaboration between research and educational institutes, enterprise development agencies, government departments and industry is still relatively weak and there lack a coherent regional strategy, which will encompass the development of education and training, research and innovation. The BMW Region is lagging behind on a number of factors, many of which are directly related to the poor levels of R&D, the lack of university/industry linkages and the failure of the region to retain its graduates, thus causing the loss of a valuable human resource. Whilst a higher education review cannot tackle all of these complex issues, the regional dimension of all education and research policies needs to be reviewed and a greater emphasis should be placed on ensuring that education strategies contribute towards bringing about more balanced regional development.