



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE  
FOR EMPLOYMENT  
AND LEARNING**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**Departmental Briefing on Responses to  
the Consultation on Widening  
Participation in Higher Education**

29 June 2011

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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**Departmental Briefing on Responses to the Consultation on  
Widening Participation in Higher Education**

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)  
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Sammy Douglas  
Mr Barry McElduff  
Mrs Sandra Overend

**Witnesses:**

Mr Fergus Devitt            )  
Mr Andrew Hamilton        )        Department for Employment and Learning  
Mr Kieran Mannion         )

**The Chairperson:**

I welcome Andrew Hamilton, deputy secretary; Fergus Devitt, director of higher education; and Kieran Mannion, head of higher education widening participation branch. The general gist is that I am keen on short, sharp and concise discussions. So, we can do it like that, and members will ask short, sharp and concise questions as well.

**Mr Andrew Hamilton (Department for Employment and Learning):**

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to brief you on the development of the regional strategy for widening participation. Our vision is that any qualified individual in Northern Ireland should be able to gain access to higher education (HE) that is right for them irrespective of their personal

or social circumstances.

Relative to the rest of the UK, we have a good track record on this. Latest figures show that just over 50% of our young people are participating in higher education, and that compares very favourably with England, Wales and Scotland. However, we are not complacent. We know that there are some stubborn pockets of under-representation in socio-economic classification groups 5 and 7, and we want to do more to address that point. So, as you know, we have been developing a consultation paper, including a lot of engagement with the community. The result is that our future vision is to focus on people who are most able but least likely to participate in and achieve the necessary qualifications from higher education.

I will run through very quickly the key issues that we consulted on. We have proposed a new regional awareness campaign to improve understanding of the relevance and benefits of higher education for the individual. We want better outreach from HE institutions to local communities, including employers, workers and adult returners, as well as young people from areas with traditions of low participation. We also explored options for new systems that might take the challenges of different academic and personal contexts into account when considering applications to HE. The document also considered methodologies to help identify individuals in need of support during their course, to better track progress through the HE system and to help minimise the problems associated with non-progression.

The consultation broadly shared those views. Very few relatively new ideas emerged from the consultation process, and we now wish to take account of all those views and incorporate them into our higher education strategy so that we have a single strategy for higher education, including wider participation. The timing will be around autumn this year.

**Mr Douglas:**

My question is about our earlier discussion on the example of distance learning. It strikes me that, in Peace II, there were a number of initiatives, including a distance learning programme, which some councillors and community leaders went on. I say that because there have been discussions over the past while about a Peace IV fund for Northern Ireland that will go beyond 2013. I know for a fact that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have spoken to one of the commissioners and that Diane Dodds MEP raised that in Brussels, at one of the Committees that looked at potential funding for Northern Ireland. She highlighted the opportunities for young

people and mentioned the issue of NEETs — young people who are not in employment, education or training programmes. I suppose that you have not had an opportunity to try to influence the discussions on Peace IV. However, is there an opportunity for you and for the Committee?

**Mr Fergus Devitt (Department for Employment and Learning):**

Those discussions have not really taken place yet. I do not think that the nature of Peace IV, should it happen, has been sorted out yet, and I suppose it depends on what measures will apply. When I worked with the victims community, there was a measure to provide money for that area. However, I do not think there have been specific discussions around it. Kieran may know more.

**Mr Kieran Mannion (Department for Employment and Learning):**

There has not been a lot of discussion around this. Certainly, the idea of distance learning has been considered in further and higher education. We would want to incorporate any new and innovative ideas to see how they might impact on widening participation cohorts. However, one possible reservation I have is that widening participation tends to lead to people needing more support in their learning experience. They usually come in with a degree of disadvantage, not just social disadvantage but often some educational disadvantage. It is a little bit lonely in the world of distance learning. We would want to consider this, if possible, in order to help those possibly from rural locations, so we could look at that specific disadvantage, but, generally, I would have reservations about applying it on a broad basis.

**Mr Douglas:**

I asked that question because, although these discussions are at an early stage, if we saw an opportunity to come up with some sort of initiative, we could be first out of the blocks in many ways. I think we should keep an eye on this. I know that the British Government have to sign up to it, and have not done so, but everybody else seems to think that it is a good opportunity. There could be an opportunity for us to fit in to whatever the proposals suggest.

**Mr A Hamilton:**

If there are any opportunities for us to influence that through the Barroso task force, we would take them.

**Mr Douglas:**

That is a good idea.

**Mr McElduff:**

I hope this is a relevant question. It is again about rural communities. Have you any assessment of how big a disincentive poor broadband provision in rural areas is to widening participation? I staged a public meeting last week in Greencastle, County Tyrone. Well over 100 people showed up to discuss poor broadband provision in that part of mid-Tyrone. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) are involved. Is the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) involved in any attempt to improve broadband provision in rural areas?

**Mr A Hamilton:**

That is a good question. I am not sure that we are specifically involved in that.

**Mr McElduff:**

What we really want to do is encourage DEL to become involved.

**Mr A Hamilton:**

We would encourage that because it opens access to courses and so on that would not otherwise be available.

**The Chairperson:**

We will write to the Department and ask what the position is about encouraging broadband provision, and it can write back in the affirmative. That would put it on the radar.

**Mr McElduff:**

I have come across it as a huge hurdle. In the course of the recent election campaign, I kept hearing in that community about problems with coursework and learning opportunities. People were discouraged, and I can only imagine it contributes to the amount of people not in employment or education.

**Mr Mannion:**

Until about a year ago, I was the departmental representative on the Omagh development group

on the council there, and I liaised with the Department. I made the point that better broadband provision in that area would help in education.

**The Chairperson:**

I have a couple of points, and I will be fairly brief.

**Mr McElduff:**

Do you want one of us to chair this bit while you are talking? *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson:**

Barry, the way I see it, that is happening anyway; I have so little control over you. *[Laughter.]*

There is an issue about making people see the relevance of education, and I do not think it is just at the level of those people who might want to go into higher or further education. I think that we need to do more at this stage about the question of why people need to be educated. Perhaps for cultural or historic reasons, there is an almost anti-educational stance from some sections about why people would want to go into further education. That is from a very early age. It is different from going into schools and saying that you should do this, that and the other; we need to get to the core of it. I encourage you to consider that when you are coming up with policy, because it goes right down to the root.

**Mr Devitt:**

Kieran has been heavily involved in the detail, but certainly we have been working very closely with the Department of Education around aspiration raising. That may not necessarily lead to people going into further or higher education; it is about trying to get people to see the benefits of education for its own sake. If that leads to paths that, in turn, lead ultimately to qualifications, great. The Department of Education is involved in quite a bit of work on aspiration raising.

**The Chairperson:**

I note that your submission talks about summer schools. I think that we need summer schools that are not necessarily about education but about getting people to come along and look at the buildings. One of the really good things that the Assembly does is have an open access policy, through which we bring people up to the Assembly for all sorts of reasons not relating to politics or legislation. The fact is that those people get familiar with the surroundings and realise that the

Assembly is their place. Summer schools should be about having fun and using the facilities and resources to get out to people what a university or further education college looks like. You should not fight shy of having fun with people. The ultimate aim is that it becomes familiar. That is something that I am particularly interested in.

**Mr Mannion:**

I agree with you, and the document specifies that what we need is a wider regional awareness raising campaign that starts at a very early age. To some extent, we have that in the schools — I am thinking specifically about programmes such as Discovering Queen’s, which goes into primary schools. I agree that it would be very useful if we could have a more generic programme, even using the power of advertising with a strapline such as, “The more you know, the further you’ll go.” There are some communities in which education is not just on the back burner but is resisted.

**The Chairperson:**

Correct.

**Mr Mannion:**

We need to reach back and start changing attitudes in those communities and instil the idea of further and higher education in young people at an early age.

I take your point about fun. That is built into a lot of the existing programmes. I also take your point about the summer schools. Part of the summer school is about raising attainment, but quite a lot of it is about familiarisation. It is about showing people what the place looks like, that it is not scary and that is just rooms. A lot of that is taking place, but I think that we need to do more.

**The Chairperson:**

We are on the same page. This is what Sammy was talking about, and I want to give a wee bit of support to what he said. Take the issue of engagement. The possibility of civic disturbances, and dealing with people who we call NEETs, means that, if you were to come forward, you would find a cross-cutting and supportive approach from the Assembly and the Executive. That is something that you might be thinking about, given that funding is tight. This is fundamental to where we are going. We have got to get in and talk to people in areas that, as you say, resist

almost any offer of help. We have to do that in a creative way that allows those people to discover things for themselves. You would get general support from the Committee.

I will finish on my next point, because I want to rattle through the statutory rules session. In your submission, you deal with how the maximum student number (MaSN) might be modified to promote wider participation. We mentioned that in the previous session, but I really do think that MaSN, as a way of controlling expenditure, is in danger of having outlived its usefulness, in that we are sending loads of students across to the UK and they are paying £9,000. We need a different type of control mechanism. We have these resources. Although time does not permit us to do justice in this area, if I read the Committee right, I can say that it would be genuinely interested in participating. We may well take a thematic approach to the issue. Not everybody in the Assembly, for example, comes from a higher education background. However, I think that you have some experience, Barry.

**Mr McElduff:**

I boasted a bit. You said that Queen's attracted global talent. *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson:**

The Department and the Minister talked about getting the Committee involved in policy development. There is a wealth of experience, not just in the Committee, but the Assembly in general, and you need to tap into that. It would be a win-win. I encourage you to think about that. We want to see how we might deal with those early interventions across the board. We want to get people to say that the only competitive edge that we have is education. However, you do not want to tell them that, because then they think that that is something that they have to do. You want it to be fun.

I am happy that we have put our points across to you. Do you want to say anything in response to that?

**Mr A Hamilton:**

I welcome what you said, Basil. We certainly want to come back and talk about specific proposals that we are contemplating. Any ideas that the Committee has will be taken on board.



**The Chairperson:**

I will check with the Committee to see what is available in the next session. However, we will find time to give the matter our proper attention. We are grateful to you for coming along.

Are members agreed that we forward the Hansard transcript of this briefing session to the Department as the Committee's response to the consultation?

*Members indicated assent.*